



Quick Guide for Developing Unified Sports in Schools



**Special
Olympics**
South Carolina



Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools is an education and sports based program started by Special Olympics designed to **build an inclusive environment among youth with and without intellectual disabilities, as well as empower them to become youth leaders and speak up for change in their community.** Through Unified Champion Schools, Unified Sports is offered to schools around the country and it is the main vehicle through which sports teams are started.

Unified Champion Schools is all about acceptance and the collaboration of all abilities working to create an inclusive environment. **EDUCATE! MOTIVATE! ACTIVATE!**

3 Components of Unified Champion Schools:

1. Inclusive Sports

- Unified Sports Takes the great thrill of competition that has fueled Special Olympics for many years, and allows student athletes with and without disabilities to compete on the same field together.

2. Inclusive Youth Leadership

- Unified Clubs
- Youth Leaders as Advocate & Planners
- Students Leading Activities & Practices

3. Whole-School Engagement & Awareness

- Unified Young Readers Club Lessons
- Respect & R-Word Campaigns
- Disability & Diversity Awareness



What is a Unified Partner?

A Unified partner is a student without an intellectual disability, who actively participates with the athletes in a fun and meaningful way for training and competition.

A valuable outcome of Unified Sports is that people with disabilities are given the chance to interact with their peers who do not have a disability. Unified Sports does however allow students with other types of disabilities (such as a physical or learning disability) to participate as Unified partners as long as it does not pose a health or safety risk.



Who is a Special Olympics Athlete?

Athletes are the heart of Special Olympics Unified Sports! A Special Olympics athlete can be a student or a member of the community. To qualify as a Special Olympics athlete, an individual must meet one of the following criteria:

1. The individual has been diagnosed with an intellectual disability by a medical professional or as determined by a government agency;
2. The person has a cognitive delay, as determined by standardized measures, including an intelligent quotient or "IQ" of 75 or lower;
3. The person has a significant developmental delay, as determined by standardized measures, including a minimum of a 2-year development delay.
4. The person has a closely related developmental disability. A "closely related developmental disability" means having functional limitations in both general learning (such as IQ) and in adaptive skills (such as in recreation, work, independent living, self-direction, or self-care).

Persons whose functional limitations are based solely on a physical, behavioral, or emotional disability, or a specific learning or sensory disability, are not eligible to participate as Special Olympics athletes, but may be eligible to volunteer for Special Olympics.



The Foundation of Unified Sports: The Principle of Meaningful Involvement

This is the most important concept of Unified Sports that the coach and all players must understand and implement. Fundamentally, the principle of meaningful involvement ensures that every player is given an opportunity to contribute to the success of his or her team through their unique skills and qualities.

Indicators of Meaningful Involvement:

- ✓ Teammates compete without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others.
- ✓ Teammates participate according to the rules of competition.
- ✓ Teammates have the ability and opportunity to contribute to the performance of the team.

Meaningful involvement is not achieved when certain team members:

- Display superior sports skills without involving their teammates.
- Serve predominantly as on-field coaches rather than teammates or mentors, except on more developmental teams
- Control most aspects of the game, especially during the most critical periods.
- Do not train or practice regularly and only show up on the day of competition.



Unified Sports® Sustainability Tips

- Integrate Unified Sports into the physical education curriculum.
- Ensure Unified Sports is recognized as an official school sport, activity and club on campus.
- Reduce costs by using the same uniforms across sports and grade levels, where appropriate. Purchase a single set of uniforms that can be used for multiple sports year after year, and share school equipment for Unified Sports teams when possible.
- Work with the Unified Youth Club and/or Athletics Boosters to raise funds for the Unified Sports program.
- Involve younger students in leadership roles to help ensure the program will continue after older students graduate.
- Start “Fans in the Stands” to share the excitement of Unified Sports with the entire school and local community.

Inclusion Tip!

Unified Sports brings new opportunities for students to be involved and recognized in their schools. In some schools, Unified Sports participants can earn the opportunity to “letter” in their sport. “Lettering” is when the school recognizes a student’s athletic and/or student activities achievements by awarding them a “letter” to display on a school “letter jacket”.



Getting Started; Things to Consider:

1. Have all Special Olympics athletes and Unified partners complete paperwork & other requirements including Special Olympics athletes medical release forms (good for 3 years), the Special Olympics Class-A Volunteer Application & online Protective Behaviors course for coaches/partners.
2. Hold a Unified partner orientation prior to the first practice.
 - a. Consider having a Special Olympics athlete or special education teacher help educate partners on people first language (“people with disabilities”, not “disabled people”. “I have autism”, not “I’m autistic”).
 - b. Recruit a teacher or specialist who is knowledgeable about working with students with disabilities to discuss proper ways to communicate and interact with Special Olympics athletes. This includes setting their own parameters for interactions, such as high-fives instead of hugs...this comes down to what they are comfortable with and what the school supports.
 - c. Clearly define the role of a Unified Partner; unified partners are there to be teammates and friends. They are not there to “serve” Special Olympics athletes. This is a critical concept for the partners to understand from the start so that true friendships can be made between teammates.
3. Consider hosting a Unified Sports event. This can be an excellent way to create greater awareness throughout the school as more students see what Unified Sports is, creates a great energy and pride around the school’s Unified Sports teams, and provides opportunities for many individuals and groups in the school to get involved (i.e. pep band, cheerleaders, ROTC, chorus, leadership groups, student council, etc.).



What can Unified Sports do...

...for your school?

Unified Sports allows all students, regardless of ability level, the opportunity to share their skills and talents with the school and community. On the court the partners and athletes learn the value of teamwork and the importance of inclusion in all aspects of life. Off the court, the students build friendships and lasting relationships that will impact their overall school experience. These feature stories highlight real-life examples of the impact of Unified Sports on all participants!

Education Tip!

Teachers and students can register on the Get Into It® website for free! Special Olympics Get Into It® program consists of online resources that include lessons, activities, videos, athlete stories and supplemental materials. This is a great way to educate the entire school or specific classes about Special Olympics and disabilities.

...for students with intellectual disabilities?

Unified Sports gives students with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to have a “typical” school experience. The program helps build confidence and important social skills while giving students with intellectual disabilities a chance to create new friendships.

...for Unified partners?

Unified Sports gives students an opportunity to be agents of change in their communities. It helps partners realize that everyone is more alike than different and encourages students to be accepting of others. It also allows Unified partners an opportunity to fit in to something at school, feel acceptance, be active and most importantly have fun!



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