“The Unified Sports programs implemented within school districts throughout the state of New York have had tremendous benefit upon students, schools and communities. The partnership between NYSPHSAA and Special Olympics New York has resulted in thousands of students learning valuable lifelong lessons.”

- Dr. Robert J. Zayas, NYSPHSAA Executive Director

“Becoming a Unified Champion School means so much more than expanding the athletic program and increasing opportunities for students to compete in sports. It is a commitment to providing an inclusive school community for future generations of students and their families as well as teachers and administrators. In taking this important step, you will join more than 6,400 schools across the country, and nearly 150 in our state, where students are experiencing the many benefits of playing unified. Congratulations and thank you on behalf of Special Olympics New York.”

- Stacey Hengsterman, Special Olympics New York President and CEO
Welcome to Special Olympics New York Unified Champion Schools programming, in partnership with the New York State Public High School Athletic Association. We are excited to have your school join us in what is truly a life changing opportunity!

In the summer of 2013, Special Olympics New York and NYSPHSAA launched a partnership to bring Unified Champion Schools (UCS) programming to NYSPHSAA member schools. The UCS approach incorporates Special Olympics Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement activities that empower youth to be agents of change in their schools and communities. Through the implementation of all three components, schools find the greatest impact on social inclusion and improved school climate.

The goal of this guide is to help provide an overview for school administrators who are new to the UCS program. It will provide a deeper look at each of the 3 components, outline program requirements and provide links to additional resources.

We look forward to working together to harness the power of sport to create a more inclusive world.

Sincerely,

Nathan Johnson
Senior Director of Program-Unified Sports
Special Olympics New York
In their own words... the impact of Playing Unified

“It was incredible to watch these athletes practice together, learn together, and grow together. They didn’t expect to win easily, but they attacked every game with the same enthusiasm. The team grew immensely together and I am so amazingly proud of what they accomplished this season...

...members of the unified team and members of Youth Activation Committee tie dyed T-shirts together, to create an identity as a group, and to help promote the first home game. Through our actions together, we were able to completely fill the stands with proud families and fellow classmates.

...this experience changed the lives of all those involved. I saw attitudes of the athletes change quickly. Also those athletes who were shy and quiet completely broke out of their shells. Every student contributed in their own way. This program brought the school together and the overall attitude became more positive throughout the hallways. I cannot wait to see what next season has to bring.”

Raechel Yost– Youth Activation Student Leader
Columbia HS

“...so proud of our community and was so moved by the support extended to our team.”

Colette Gallagher–Unified Coach
Guilderland HS

"I have coached all levels from the CYO to Varsity; and this has been the most rewarding and inspiring experience yet."

Ben Pierson–Unified Coach
Mohonasen HS

“Unified Sports allowed my students to focus and commit to a task like nothing I have ever tried in the classroom. Rearranging personal schedules to make practices, bringing healthy snacks to be ready for competition, walking just a bit more tall the day after a game (regardless of having won or lost)... these are specific benefits I couldn't help but notice!”

Susan Hartley– Special Educator
Mechanicville HS
What is Unified Champion Schools?

The Unified Champion Schools® approach incorporates the three components of Special Olympics Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement activities to ensure that all students can be involved and meaningfully contribute to their school culture.

**Interscholastic Unified Sports** joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.

**Inclusive youth leadership** is when young people of all abilities are given opportunities to be leaders in their schools and communities. These leadership activities help students find their voices and teach them to become change agents in their communities by promoting equity and acceptance.

**Whole School Engagement** activities positively impact school climate by including all students, teachers, staff, administrators. School-wide opportunities focused on social inclusion raise awareness and create an educational environment where respect and acceptance are the norm and all students feel included and engaged.

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® builds on Special Olympics’ values, principles, practices, experiences and impacts to shape a generation that welcomes everyone.

**Getting Started:**

**Establish Your Leadership Team**

Evaluation of the Unified Champion Schools program has revealed the positive impact of having a leadership team to guide the implementation. The leadership team will be responsible to guide early stages of implementation, establish the vision and overarching goals for the school, and ensure program fidelity through consistent monitoring and nurturing with an eye toward continuous improvement.

**Sample Leadership Team:**

Administrators: Principal, Athletic Director, Director of Special Education

Educators: Unified Sports Coach, YAC Advisor

Students: Student with ID, Student without ID

**Athlete Spotlight—Jacob Babcock**

Attended Brockport High School.

Competes in Special Olympics Unified Sports Basketball, Softball, Golf, and Floor Hockey.

Jacob’s time on the Unified basketball team gave him the confidence to grow as a leader and to continue playing competitive sports with Special Olympics after he graduated in 2014.

In 2018, Jacob was recognized as a youth leader by his peers and appointed to the Special Olympics New York Athlete Congress.

“Unified Sports positively affected my school by giving kids with intellectual disabilities the courage to play a sport. It helped my school understand the struggles some of us faced.” - Jacob Babcock

**Schools with Leadership Teams...**

⇒ Implement more robust program.

⇒ Have greater community involvement.

⇒ Increased general and special education teacher collaboration.

⇒ Are more confident about program sustainability
Interscholastic Unified Sports

Unified Sports are recognized as an official program of NYSPHSAA. Special Olympics New York and NYSPHSAA have a shared philosophy that authentic and credible athletics have the greatest impact on the student athlete and serve the greater purpose of destroying stigma and stereotypes of people with ID. Similar to the educational concept of Least Restrictive Environment, rule modifications are minimal to ensure integrity and a true interscholastic sports experience.

Offerings

- **Fall**—currently no sport offerings
- **Winter**—Unified Bowling (January-March)
- **Spring**—Unified Basketball Team and Skills*** (April-June)

***All schools must start with Unified Basketball.

Principle of Meaningful Involvement

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. This means that every teammate:

- demonstrates sufficient sport-specific skills and game understanding
- plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents
- has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury

In order to accommodate a diverse range of abilities, Unified Sports Skills activities have been developed for those that are unable to participate in team play.

It is important that all coaches and program leaders understand the Principle of Meaningful Involvement prior to the selection of team members.

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.
- Teammates adjust their skills according to those of other players, resulting in improved performance by team members with lesser ability.

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.
- 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.
- Lower their level of ability dramatically so that they do not hurt others or control the entire game.
Inclusive Youth Leadership

Inclusive youth leadership is when young people of all abilities are given opportunities to be leaders in their schools and communities. These leadership activities help students find their voices and teach them to become change agents in their communities by promoting equity and acceptance. Social inclusion is best fostered when activities within the classroom, school, and community are designed and implemented by a diverse group of students within a school.

There are many different ways to nurture youth leadership in the school setting. Some schools choose to work with an existing club or form a new one like a Youth Activation Committee (YAC). Ensuring that various leadership roles are inclusive to all students who have ranging skillsets, abilities, and perspectives will greatly enhance efforts to create and sustain change within the school and the community.

Youth Activation Committee (YAC)

A Youth Activation Committee (YAC) consists of youth leaders with and without intellectual disabilities who strategize and plan activities that promote and advocate for respect, inclusion and acceptance for all people. The YAC takes responsibility for the promotion and sustainability of the Unified Sports team, but also takes action to create a more socially inclusive school climate through various Whole School Engagement campaigns.

YAC Summits are sectional youth leadership gatherings. Students new to the program receive initial training on Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagements through student led sessions. School YACs learn from the sharing of best practices and leave the summit with a YAC Action Plan for the school year.

YAC Summit Sample Agenda

1. Welcome/Goals of the Day
2. UCS overview or veteran breakout session
3. Marketing and Cool School Challenge
5. Whole School Campaigns
6. Strategies and Sharing
7. School Planning Session

State YAC Leadership Academy

Special Olympics New York offers youth leaders (with and without ID) the opportunity to advance their understanding of the Special Olympics movement and further develop their leadership skills at a 3 day leadership academy at the annual Summer Games.

The Leadership Academy includes:
- Service Learning
- Team building activities
- Collaboration with SONY Athlete Congress
- Observation of SONY competitions
- Special Olympics College Club information session
- Unified Sports Experience
Whole School Engagement

Whole School Engagement activities positively impact school climate by including all students, teachers, staff, administrators. An inclusive school climate that fosters understanding and respect for all can influence how students think and act within and beyond the school.

School-wide opportunities focused on social inclusion raise awareness and create an educational environment where respect and acceptance are the norm and all students feel included and engaged. This welcoming community cultivates a positive school climate and enhances other school-wide efforts.

Whole school activities also offer a platform to demonstrate the power of young people to positively impact their school community by promoting social inclusion.

Spread The Word to End the Word / Respect Campaigns

Spread The Word to End the Word (STWTETW) / Respect Campaigns are whole school engagement campaigns that ask the school to pledge to stop using the R-word or the word ‘retard(ed)’ and promote embracing more respectful attitudes and actions. Why? Because the R-word is exclusive, offensive and derogatory. Pledging to stop using the R-word and be more respectful is a starting point towards creating more accepting attitudes and communities for all people.

STWTETW is the first Wednesday in March. Many schools will choose to host large scale STWTETW campaigns on this day. Other schools choose to host smaller scale on-going campaigns. Campaign materials and supplies are available.

Fans in the Stands

No one likes competing in front of empty bleachers. The Fans in the Stands campaign focuses on organizing groups to promote and attend Unified Sports games. Students have utilized flyers and posters, morning announcements, social media, and much more. Fans in the Stands is a great avenue for students to think outside the box on how to encourage attendance.

Cool School Challenge

The Cool School Challenge allows students to take on a leadership role in helping to raise funds to benefit our program. Students learn valuable skills while helping support programming for people with disabilities in their community.

Opportunities to engage with fundraising are present in each of section. Our Special Olympics New York team looks forward to working with students to get involved with these fun and impactful campaigns.

Fit 5

People with ID are twice as likely to be obese and twice as likely to die before the age of 50 as people without ID. The Fit 5 is a Special Olympics Health Initiative that gives athletes a plan for Improved physical activity, nutrition, and hydration. Student leaders can use the Fit 5 to plan a whole school fitness activity or campaigns. Unified sports teams can share their progress on social media, use it to start inclusive fitness classes, organize a health challenge based on or help promote wellness throughout the school.
Language Guidelines

Below are listed some of the frequently used terms (with definitions).

**Unified Sports Athlete or Athlete**—refers to a person with an intellectual disability who participates in Unified Sports

**Unified Sports Partner or Partner**—refers to a person without an intellectual disability who participates in Unified Sports

**Players**—refers to all members of the Unified Sports team or program

**YAC**—Inclusive youth leadership group focused on supporting the Unified Sports program and creating greater social inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Unified Sports**—Special Olympics sports programming that combines individuals with and without intellectual disabilities of teams for training and competition.

**Unified Champion School**—a school that offers Special Olympics Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement activities.

**Principle of Meaningful Involvement**—core philosophy of Unified Sports; players have sufficient skills and understanding of chosen sport to compete safely and contribute to the efforts of the team.

**Helpful tips:**

- Refer to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities, not intellectually disabled people or the intellectually disabled. This is “people first” language, in which the person comes first; their abilities – or disabilities – are considered second.

- Do not use pity language. A person has intellectual disabilities. That person is not suffering from, afflicted with or a victim of intellectual disabilities.

- A person uses a wheelchair, rather than is confined or restricted to a wheelchair.

- Be very cautious of over-sensationalizing the accomplishments of people with disabilities. While recognition for accomplishments is appropriate, being excessive in praise can be condescending, patronizing and damaging. Keep the recognition in context to the accomplishment, as it relates to the individual’s ability.

“In my over 30 years of high school athletics – this is far and away – they greatest sporting event I have ever been a part of!!”

-MP Dewey, Educator and YAC Advisor

"All of the kids involved are more socially aware and accepting. They have established genuine friendships that would not have been there otherwise. Their performance in school has improved and their confidence is through the roof."

-Kevin Flores, Ballston Spa YAC Advisor
Branding
Media/Marketing

We know that this is going to be a program that draws interest and that you will wish to share with your contacts. We are excited to partner and support these promotional efforts and have templated materials ready for use! It is important for the integrity of the program that media report on Unified Champion Schools, Unified Sports, inclusive programming, and students with and without intellectual disabilities with a solid understanding. We also want to ensure that the partnership of Special Olympics New York and the New York State Public High School Athletic Association is recognized.

We can offer …

Public Relations, Advertising & Communications Materials
- Talking points
- Press release template
- Poster templates
- Ad templates
- Unified logos

Marketing, Brand Assets and Guidelines
- Unified Sports Guidelines
- Photo and Video Guidelines

Digital Marketing Resources
- Social Media Activation Kit
- Unified Selfie Campaign Guide

Contact for materials: Darcie Henderson
Associate Director, Marketing and Communications
518-388-0790 Ext. 1106 or email dhenders@nyso.org
Next Steps ...

Below is a checklist of the steps to take to get your school’s Unified Champion Schools program up and running in the first year. If there are ever any questions or challenges, please reach out so that we can support you in your efforts.

☐ Attend information meeting
☐ Submit MOU and Application as commitment form
☐ Build leadership team
☐ Have leadership team watch program intro webinar
☐ Select Coach for team and Advisor for YAC
☐ Coach takes free online Coaching US course (https://nfhslearn.com/courses/61127/coaching-unified-sports)
☐ Recruit students to attend and register school for YAC Summit (check out the websites below for great videos)

  https://resources.specialolympics.org/unified-champion-schools-resources/
  https://www.generationunified.org/

☐ Attend YAC Summit
☐ Develop YAC plan for whole school engagement
☐ Recruit Unified Athletes and Partners
☐ Coach attend pre-season Coaches Meeting
☐ Submit Unified Sports roster/registration form
☐ Participate in Unified Sports Basketball Season

  _____ Preseason Scrimmage date
  _____ 6 game regular season
  _____ End of season tournament play

☐ Complete school year end survey and report form