

Unified Champion Schools® Inclusive Youth Leadership

Special Olympics New Hampshire aims to build a society of acceptance and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and, by extension, everyone. Students – with their energy, idealism, intelligence and creativity – are the leaders and change makers for creating a society of acceptance and inclusion.

Special Olympics New Hampshire's Unified Champion Schools® (UCS) Program consists of four interrelated parts:

- 1) **INCLUSIVE SPORTS AND FITNESS:** The concept of Unified combines an approximately equal number of students with ID (athletes) and without ID (partners). In Unified Sports® athletes and partners participate together as teammates. In Unified fitness classmates with and without ID share fitness experiences together.
- 2) **INCLUSIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP:** Everyone wants their voice heard. Inclusive Youth Leadership provides the skills and opportunities for students with and without ID to take on leadership roles.
- 3) **WHOLE SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT:** Through Whole School Engagement, the entire school community is made aware of or participates in UCS activities.
- 4) **SUSTAINABILITY:** We want the UCS program to become part of the school's programming and continue forever.

UNIQUENESS AND IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® offer opportunities for young people of all abilities to be leaders inside and outside the classroom. They can design and implement activities that promote equality and acceptance and, ultimately, foster social inclusion. To begin, you may want to start with an already existing club.

Transforming existing school clubs refers to existing school clubs that develop into inclusive clubs by including youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) in club leadership positions.

Benefits:

- Is a great first step to bring inclusive youth leadership to a school.
- Works well with students of all grade levels.
- Is useful when existing clubs focus on leadership or service.

Unified Clubs refer to new school clubs focused on Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools that are recognized by the school administration. They emphasize friendships and working together on projects.

Benefits:

- Creates new structure at the school that allows more freedom than the current school model.

- Puts emphasis on the friendship aspect of Unified Champion Schools. This creates tight bonds between students with and without ID.
- Valuable in a school with limited options for engagement.

Youth Activation Committees (YACs) refer to youth leaders with and without intellectual disabilities from the same school or community that form a committee to plan activation events and strategies for other youth. Anyone can participate in a school or community-based YAC.

Benefits:

- Within a school, a YAC can function as a club (similar to an inclusive student council). Within a community, a YAC can function as its own entity, bringing leaders from multiple schools together.
- While Unified Clubs focus on building friendships, the YAC focuses on community and/or whole school engagement to actively transform attitudes and pursue social justice.
- Can work well in all grade levels but is especially effective at the high school (and upper middle school) level where youth can develop involved plans and strategies.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUTH LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES

Below is a quick look at each initiative:

- **Transforming existing school clubs** are existing school clubs that develop into inclusive clubs by including youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) in club leadership positions.
- **Unified Clubs** are led by youth with and without ID; these new school clubs focus on friendships and working together on projects toward a common goal.
- **Youth Activation Committee** is a school or community-based committee made up of youth leaders with and without ID focusing on advocacy, planning and executing activation events and strategies for whole school engagement to actively transform attitudes and pursue social justice.

Two examples of Inclusive Youth Leadership include the following:

- Alvirne High School's **W.A.T.S. Program** (We're All the Same) is led by advisor Joanne Curry. Back in 2009, the Hudson School District was awarded a grant for Teens Mentoring Teens (TMT) which led to the formation of an Introduction to Human Services class at Alvirne High School. This award is given out each year by the NH Transition Community of Practice to a student organization "that engages youth in the organization's leadership and promotes the development of self-determination and interpersonal relationships." The club's motto states that its focus is on "the acceptance of all, making friends, and being good role models and contributing members to society." Another one of its mottos is "a place where you can make a friend or be a friend." You don't have to have any special skills or talents to be a part of the W.A.T.S. Club; everyone is welcome. Many students with disabilities who may struggle with social skills and peer interactions participate in the club because it is a place where they feel comfortable.
- Dover High School's Unified Club is led by adaptive physical education teacher and Unified coach MJ Hippenn. One of their projects is making a **sensory box** for each elementary school. Each sensory box is created by the students and consists of a coloring book, sensory balls, rain stick, ribbon pull, fidget spinners, sensory bags (filled with gel and assorted buttons), stress balls with painted smiley faces, sensory chairs with half tennis balls glued to the chairs, and Pringles tins with foil and rice.