



2020-21 Unified Champion Schools Partnership Overview

Promoting Inclusive Interscholastic Sports Opportunities and School Climate

School Districts and Special Olympics Pennsylvania: Collaborating on Inclusive School Climates

Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA) and school districts throughout the state desire to support environments in which all students feel welcome, are accepted, and reach their maximum potential through a positive climate in which they learn and interact. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities sometimes may feel excluded socially or may not have the same opportunities presented to them as their peers without disabilities.

Participation in interscholastic athletics benefits boys and girls in a variety of ways including character development, fitness, teamwork, leadership, life skills development, and self-esteem. Special Olympics Interscholastic Unified Sports (IUS) help produce these outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, highlighted IUS as an option for schools to provide students with disabilities equal access to athletics under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Special Olympics PA Unified Champion Schools Program

Special Olympics PA Unified Champion Schools is a fully-inclusive program which uses sports and youth leadership to successfully facilitate social inclusion and improve school climate. Students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and other disabilities come together as equal peers with students without disabilities to demonstrate and promote the values of acceptance, teamwork, and empowerment for all.



Special Olympics PA is providing funding, resources, and staff technical guidance and support to more than 230 partner schools located in more than 35 counties, including the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Unified Champion Schools Program Components

Improving School Climate, Promoting Inclusion, Developing Leadership, and Increasing Awareness

1. Interscholastic Unified Sports

Special Olympics Interscholastic Unified Sports® (IUS) is a fully-inclusive co-ed after-school high school sports program. It successfully facilitates social inclusion by bringing together students with intellectual disabilities, other disabilities, and without disabilities on teams for training and competition. By providing opportunities for students with and without disabilities to participate in sports ***meaningfully and as equal peers***, Interscholastic Unified Sports helps improve school climates, facilitates friendships and changes hearts and minds.

- a. **Sports offered:** Indoor Bocce and Track and Field. These sports offer students with different types and levels of disabilities, as well as those without disabilities, opportunities to participate together meaningfully and safely.
- b. An IUS team is co-ed and composed of a proportional number of students who are Special Olympics eligible (intellectual disability, developmental disability including most types of autism, or cognitive delay) **and** students without intellectual disabilities.
- c. The team is regarded just like every other interscholastic sports team at the school.
- d. This is an after-school program. 10-11 week long season with practices twice a week and at least three competitions.
- e. Team members represent their school by wearing uniforms with their school name and colors.
- f. Teams participate in regional championships with the opportunity to advance to state championships held in conjunction with PIAA state events.

2. Inclusive Youth Leadership

- a. Students with and without disabilities meet regularly as a structured inclusive club and work together as equal partners. They plan and conduct activities designed to improve their school's environment for everyone.
- b. This can be a Unified Club or expansion of an existing inclusive school club.
- c. Purposes of the club are to (1) promote co-leadership among students with and without disabilities; (2) conduct youth-led activities which promote acceptance, respect, and community throughout the school; and (3) give students with disabilities a voice in their school along with their peers without disabilities.

3. Whole School Engagement Activities

- a. Students come together to raise awareness, as well as show support for their IUS team.
- b. Spread the Word: Inclusion is a student-organized campaign which helps everyone understand the need for using respectful language. One of its outcomes is getting youth and adults to stop using the derogatory r-word ("retard" or "retarded") and promoting positive language which values diversity and inclusion.
- c. Fans in the Stands: Students show support for their IUS team by promoting attendance at the competition hosted by their school.

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools is Endorsed By

Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA)

Pennsylvania Department of Education / Bureau of Special Education

PROGRAM IMPACT

Interscholastic Unified Sports

- Fosters Social Inclusion: Teammates with and without disabilities become friends.
- Creates school climates that promote respect, acceptance, and diversity. Students are valued for their unique talents and skills.
- Reduces bullying through empowerment, awareness, and engagement.
- Improves health and fitness, especially for students with disabilities facing higher risks.
- Develops character, life skills, and enhanced self-esteem



Schoolwide Outcomes Reflected in National Research Surveys

- 94% of teachers/school staff said the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) program increases opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together.
- 92% of school staff credit UCS with reducing bullying, teasing, and offensive language.
- 94% of participants said involvement in Unified Sports made them healthier.

Funding and Resource Support Provided by Special Olympics Pennsylvania to School Districts

Special Olympics PA is committed to working with schools and students on continuing to build school communities which foster inclusion and acceptance.

Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA) provides the following types of support to a high school:

- Technical support and guidance by SOPA staff for all three program components
- Payment of a coach stipend
- Equipment
- Competition uniforms
- Coaches' trainings, resource guides, and ongoing support
- Supplies and materials for Spread the Word campaign and resources for youth leadership
- Opportunity for the school's IUS team to advance to an IUS state championship event (all on-site costs are covered by SOPA)

High Schools are asked to provide the following:

- Transportation to competitions
- Hosting and conducting one IUS regular season competition (SOPA staff will provide guidance)
- Engaging staff and students in support of the three UCS components.

To Learn More About the Special Olympics Pennsylvania UCS Program, Please Contact:

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