

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Research

WHY UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS?

The typical school and social environment for young people today can be fraught with challenges. Intense social and academic pressures are worsened by widespread hostile behavior such as bullying. In the United States, **nearly 1 in 3 students ages 12 - 18 report being bullied during the school year** and 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.^{1,2} **Children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.**³ While bullying remains a prominent issue, students with intellectual disabilities also face challenges with isolation on school campuses. Students with intellectual disabilities are less likely than students with any other type of disability to spend time in a regular education environment.⁴ This is troubling given the strong relationship between school connectedness and several important outcomes including regular school attendance and staying in school.⁵ This research demonstrates a clear need to promote a school environment that addresses not only the academic needs of students with intellectual disabilities, but also their social need to make friends and feel welcome in the school community.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Special Olympics' Unified Strategy for schools, which includes Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, and whole school engagement, addresses many of the challenges faced by students with disabilities in schools today. Schools that implement this strategy (Unified Champion Schools) create communities where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in all school activities, opportunities and functions. As of 2014, over 3,000 elementary, middle and high schools across 45 states are employing the Unified

1 Robert, S., Kemp, J., Truman, & Snyder (2012). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011. Available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs11.pdf>

2 Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L., & O'Brennan, L.M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 361-382.

3 C. Marshall, E. Kendall, M. Banks & R. Gover (Eds.), (2009). *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* (Vol. 1-3). Westport, CT: Praeger Perspectives.

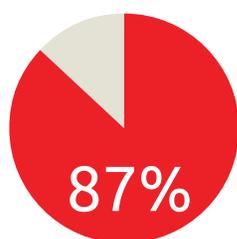
4 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved May 22, 2013, from <http://tadnet.public.tadnet.org/pages/712>

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

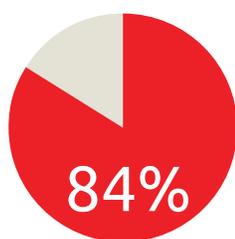
Strategy (formerly known as Project UNIFY), and as many as 1,700,000 youth with and without disabilities are experiencing messages of inclusion and acceptance. Evaluations of Unified Champion Schools found that these schools **provide students with and without disabilities opportunities to learn and play together and to create inclusive friendships.**

- 70% of school liaisons (generally teachers) and administrators say that the Unified Strategy gives students with and without disabilities more opportunities to work together.
- 75% of administrators observed that the Unified Strategy increases opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to get involved in school activities.
- Two thirds of students who participated in Unified Sports or in inclusive sports clubs (65%) said they learned they have things in common with their peers with disabilities.

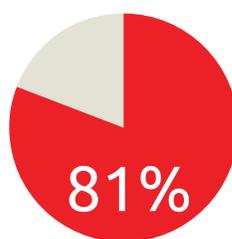
UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS ALSO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS



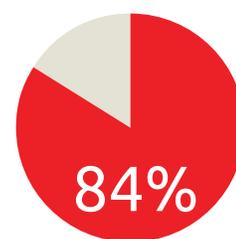
of students learn that standing up for something they believe is the right thing to do.



of students learn the skills of patience and compromise.



of students learn about the challenges of being a leader.



of students generally regard Special Olympics as a positive turning point in their lives.

These results demonstrate the profound impact that the Unified Strategy can have in schools. Importantly, it has been found that all elements of the strategy (Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, and whole school engagement) are essential to create this level of impact.

“He has improved his social skills...His world-view of ‘this is what I can do and this is how I have to do it’ has been expanded beyond the limitations of the educational program that he’s in. He looks for ways that he can meet society at his level and his way, rather than hiding from his peers that are not special needs. There’s nothing good enough I can say about this program. It’s a necessity.”

—Parent

CHANGING SCHOOL CLIMATES

Unified Champion Schools promote a socially inclusive school climate that **helps students with disabilities become a part of the school community:**

- 72% of Unified Champion School liaisons (generally teachers) observe that the Unified Strategy helps **raise awareness about students with disabilities** in the school.
- 63% of school liaisons and administrators feel that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has made a big impact in **creating a more inclusive school environment** in which students are open to and accepting of differences, and that it increases the sense of community in the school.
- 48% of school liaisons said that the Unified Strategy is providing more opportunities for general and special educators to work together.

These schools not only change the attitude of other students toward students with disabilities, the culture of the entire school shifts to one that is more welcoming and engaged.

- 58% of administrators feel the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has **made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing** in their schools.
- Preliminary evidence suggests that **Unified Champion schools perform better than other schools on most school climate dimensions** such as respect for diversity, social and civic learning, and school connectedness and engagement.

UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS

Staff of Unified Champion Schools perceived their school community to have higher levels of:



social and emotional security

Where students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion



social and civic learning

Where students feel supported in the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.



respect for diversity

Where there is mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.



school connectedness and engagement

Where there is positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.

These findings demonstrate how Unified Champion schools provide benefits to all students. In fact, 81% of students say that the Unified Strategy is **changing their school for the better** and 95% of students said that their school should continue the Special Olympics Unified Strategy.

For more research on the Unified Strategy, check out a [Case Statement](#) and the [full 2013-2014 evaluation report](#).

KEY FINDINGS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS RESEARCH



There is a **strong relationship** between school connectedness and important outcomes such as regular school attendance and staying in school.⁶



Children with disabilities are **two to three times** more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.⁷



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81% of students say that the Unified Strategy is changing their school for the better.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

⁷ C. Marshall, E. Kendall, M. Banks & R. Gover (Eds.), (2009). *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* (Vol. 1-3). Westport, CT: Praeger Perspectives.