Building Robust Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

National Athletic Directors Conference

Austin Texas

December 17, 2024

IDEAs that Work

U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Special Olympics

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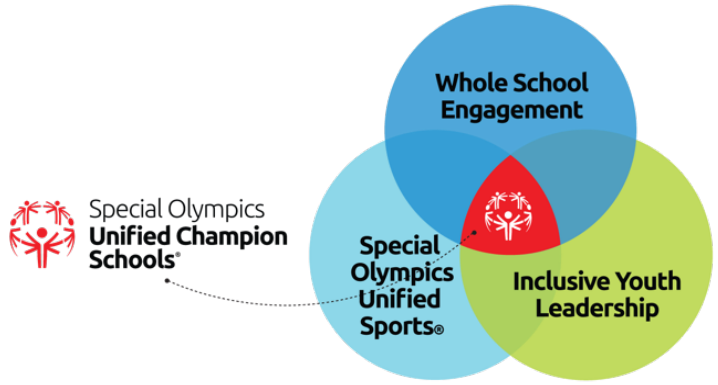
Agenda

- Introduction and Overview
- Unified Sports
- Impact and Data
- Partnerships
- Resources and Support
- Success and Conclusion

Sepp Shirley

SPECIAL OLYMPICS
UNIFIED SPORTS®

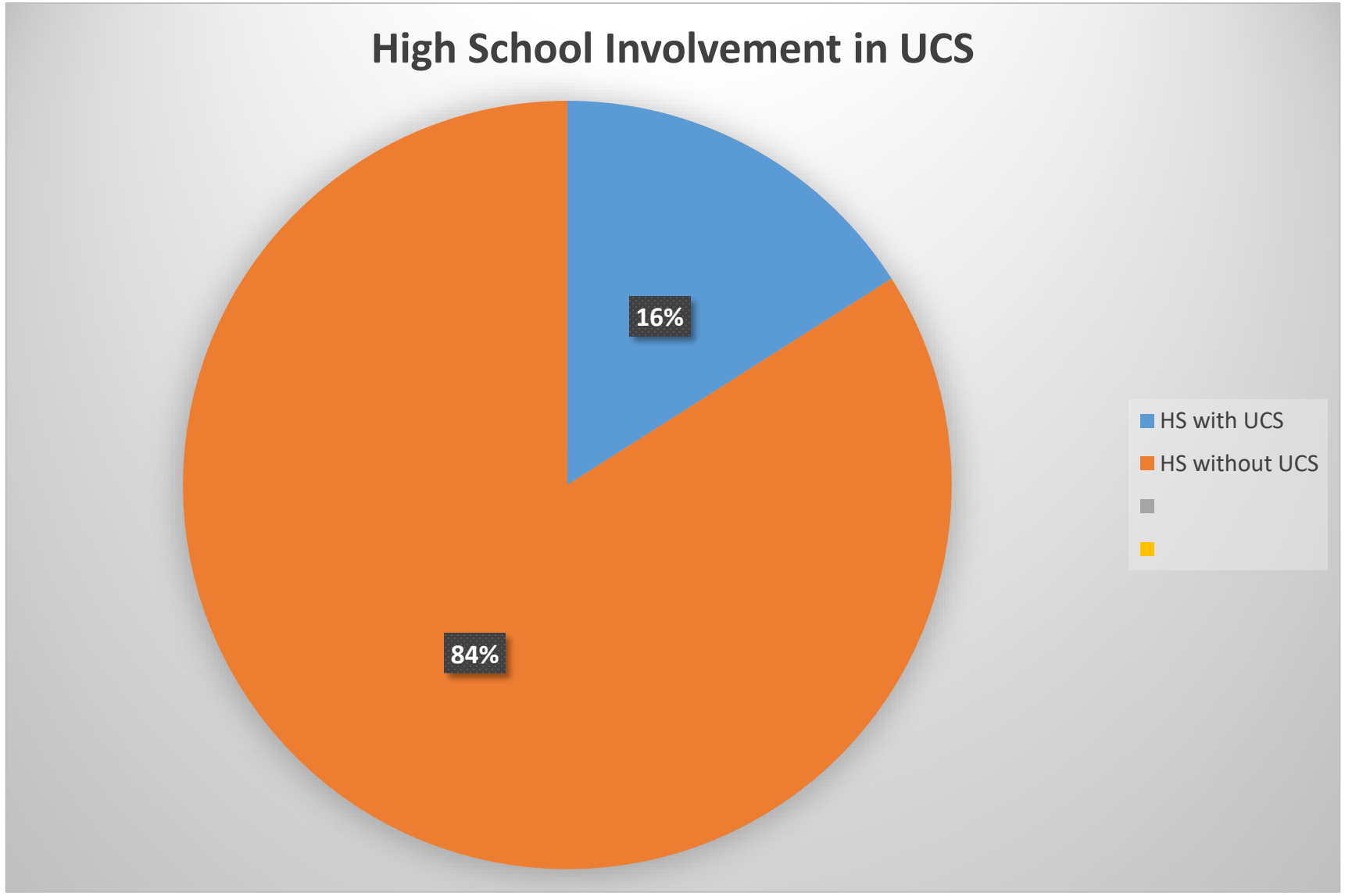
Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®



A *strategy* that engages schools in creating climates of social inclusion, acceptance, respect, and human dignity for all students with and without intellectual disabilities.

IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Special Olympics
Unified Champion Schools®


High School Involvement in UCS
16%
84%
HS with UCS
HS without UCS

Impact on Academic Outcomes

When schools implement UCS there are **positive impacts on academic outcomes:**

- High schools that implemented UCS had a 2.6% **increase in graduation rates** for students with ID, and 1.3% increase for students without ID (compared to schools without UCS)

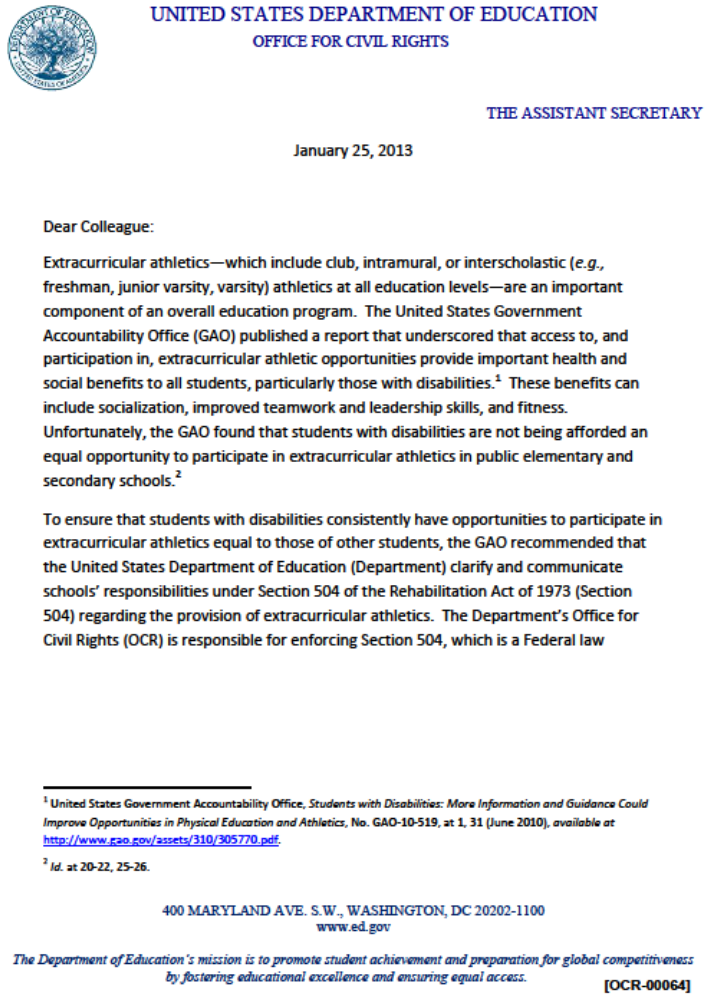
85% of liaisons indicated that UCS programming **increases the attendance of students with ID**, with 81% indicating an increased attendance of students without ID

Impact Data (via UMASS-Boston Evaluation)

92% of liaisons indicated that the Unified Champion Schools Program **reduces bullying, teasing, and use of offensive language** in the school

What are Unified Sports?

Office of Civil Rights Dear Colleague



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

January 25, 2013

Dear Colleague:

Extracurricular athletics—which include club, intramural, or interscholastic (*e.g.*, freshman, junior varsity, varsity) athletics at all education levels—are an important component of an overall education program. The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report that underscored that access to, and participation in, extracurricular athletic opportunities provide important health and social benefits to all students, particularly those with disabilities.[1] These benefits can include socialization, improved teamwork and leadership skills, and fitness. Unfortunately, the GAO found that students with disabilities are not being afforded an equal opportunity to participate in extracurricular athletics in public elementary and secondary schools.[2]

To ensure that students with disabilities consistently have opportunities to participate in extracurricular athletics equal to those of other students, the GAO recommended that the United States Department of Education (Department) clarify and communicate schools' responsibilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) regarding the provision of extracurricular athletics. The Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is responsible for enforcing Section 504, which is a Federal law

[1] United States Government Accountability Office, *Students with Disabilities: More Information and Guidance Could Improve Opportunities in Physical Education and Athletics*, No. GAO-10-519, at 1, 31 (June 2010), *available at* http://www.gao.gov/assets/310/305770.pdf.

[2] *Id.* at 20-22, 25-26.

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The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

[OCR-00064]

Rudy Nesbitt

NFHS – Special Olympics Partnership

- Collaboration started in **2011**, official partnership MOU since **2017**
- Partnership Goals:

1. Increase participation of students with disabilities through interscholastic Unified Sports and other inclusive school programs.
2. Support official partnerships between NFHS member state associations and/or local schools and Special Olympics State Programs.
3. Increase the quality of inclusion programs in schools nationwide by serving as a resource for NFHS state associations and SONA State Programs.

NFHS - Current State-level Partnerships

- Official State Partnerships: **(33 States)** a state-level partnership has been established between the Special Olympics Program and NFHS state association, and there are schools participating in interscholastic-style Unified Sports.

NIAAA – Special Olympics Partnership

- Official partnership MOU since **2024**
- Partnership Goals:

1. Increase participation of students with disabilities through the collaborative promotion of Unified Champion Schools, interscholastic Unified Sports and other inclusive school programs.
2. Support official partnerships between NIAAA member state associations and/or local schools and Special Olympics State Programs.
3. Increase the quality of inclusion programs in schools nationwide by serving jointly as a resource for NIAAA state associations, NIAAA members and Special Olympics Programs.

NIAAA - Current State-level Partnerships

- Official State Partnerships: **(20 States)** a state-level partnership has been established between the Special Olympics Program and NIAAA member state association

What is Interscholastic-style Unified Sports?

•Interscholastic Unified Sports is a school athletics/activities program that is co-supported by the State Special Olympics Program and the State High School Athletic/Activities Association

•Interscholastic Unified Sports…

- is treated as an officially sanctioned high school sport
- teams represent their school
- teams compete with other high schools
- function as any other interscholastic program

8 Guidelines of Administering Unified Sports

1. Teams are **administered** and **supported** in a **similar fashion** as other interscholastic sports teams.

2. Teams are comprised of **approximately equal numbers** of students with **AND** without intellectual disabilities.

3. ALL teammates and coaches are **accountable** to following the official Unified Sports rules, applicable state association rules and regulations, and training standards **PRIOR** to competition.

4. Coaches follow the **Unified Sports parameters** of team composition to help **minimize risk** and **ensure meaningful participation**

8 Guidelines of Administering Unified Sports cont.

5. In addition to participation, programs provide **genuine competition experiences** with place of finish results.

6. **ALL** teammates are **meaningfully involved** in training and competitions and have the **opportunity to contribute**.

7. Teams compete against other **Interscholastic Unified Sports** school teams using a **consistent set** of official Unified Sports rules

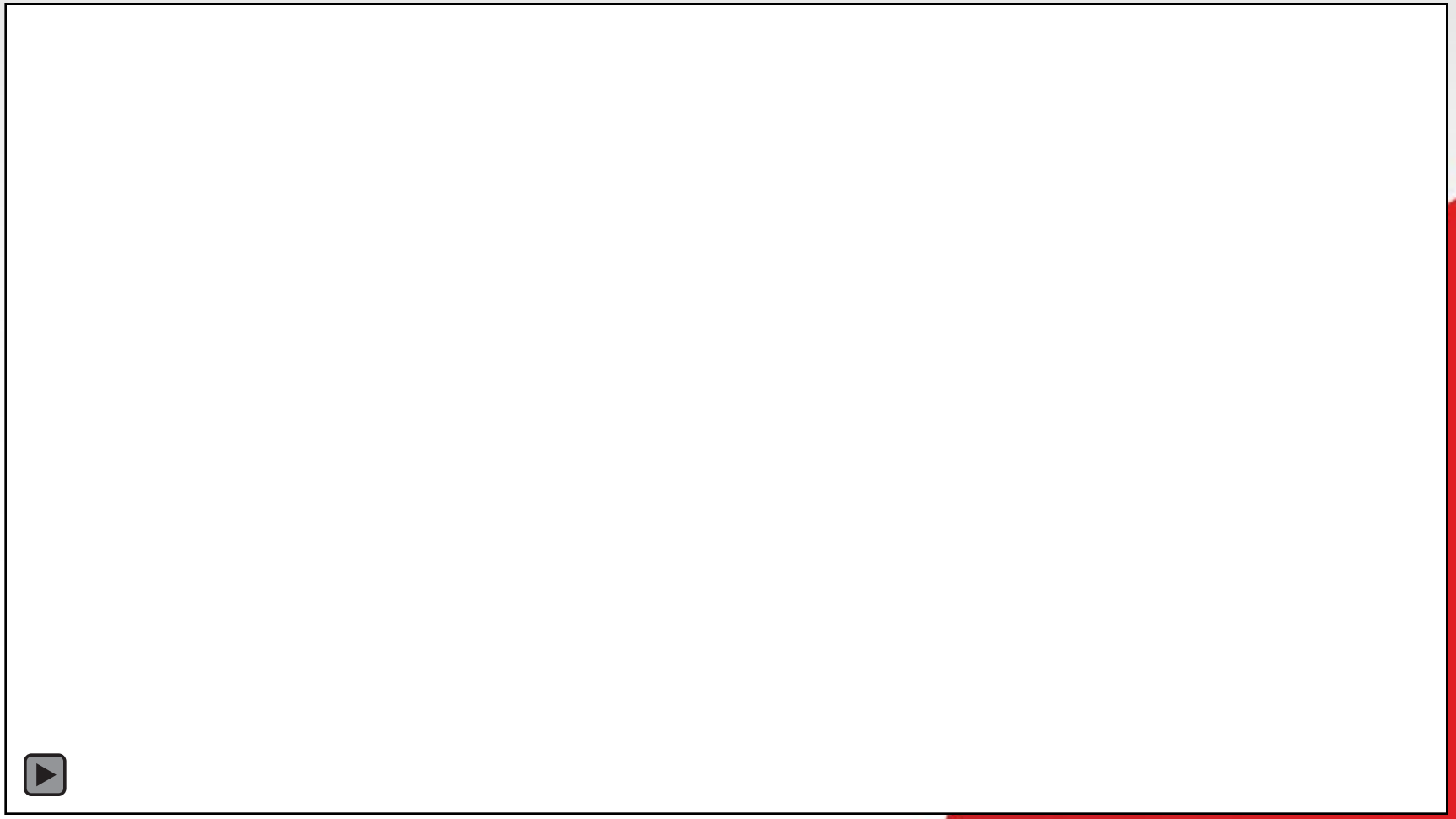
8. Interscholastic **league-play** and **competitions** are officiated by **sport-specific certified officials**.

Most common sports offered

- Special Olympics Unified Sports® at the HS interscholastic level:

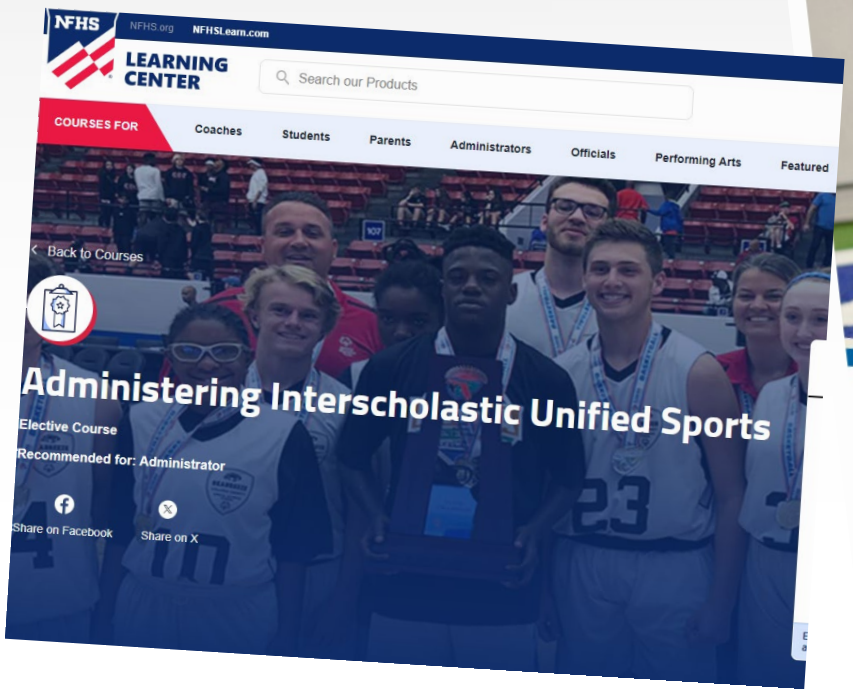
1. Track & Field
2. Basketball
3. Bowling
4. Soccer
5. Flag Football
6. Bocce
7. Competitive Cheer / Spirit
8. Volleyball

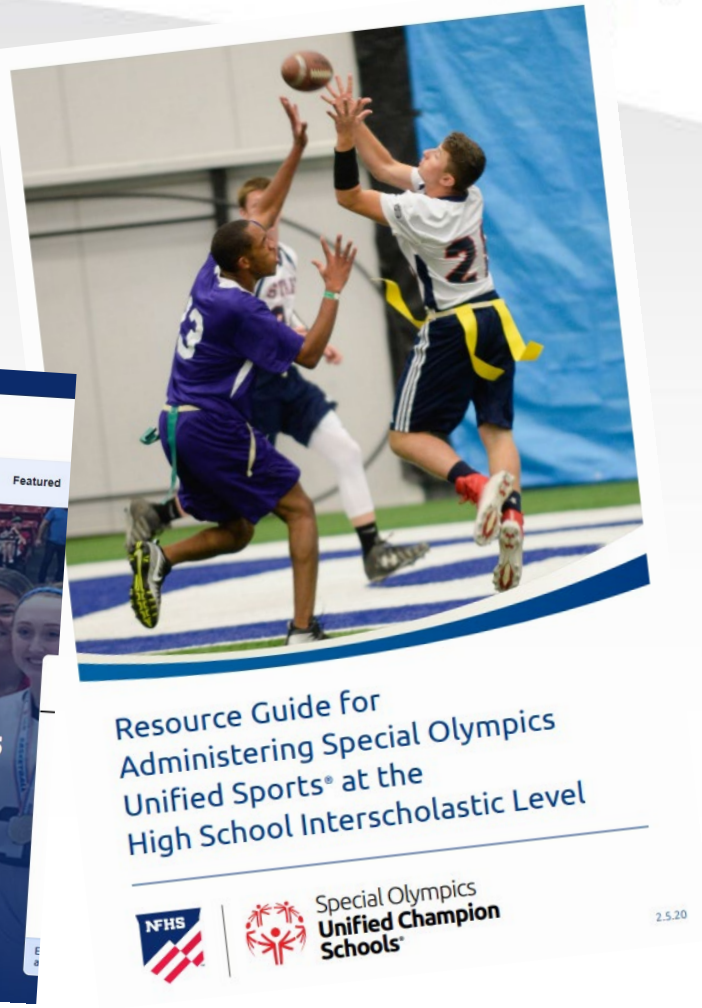
NFHS Support



Key Resources (at no cost!)

- Coaching Unified Sports Course
- Admin Resource Guide
- Online Admin Course



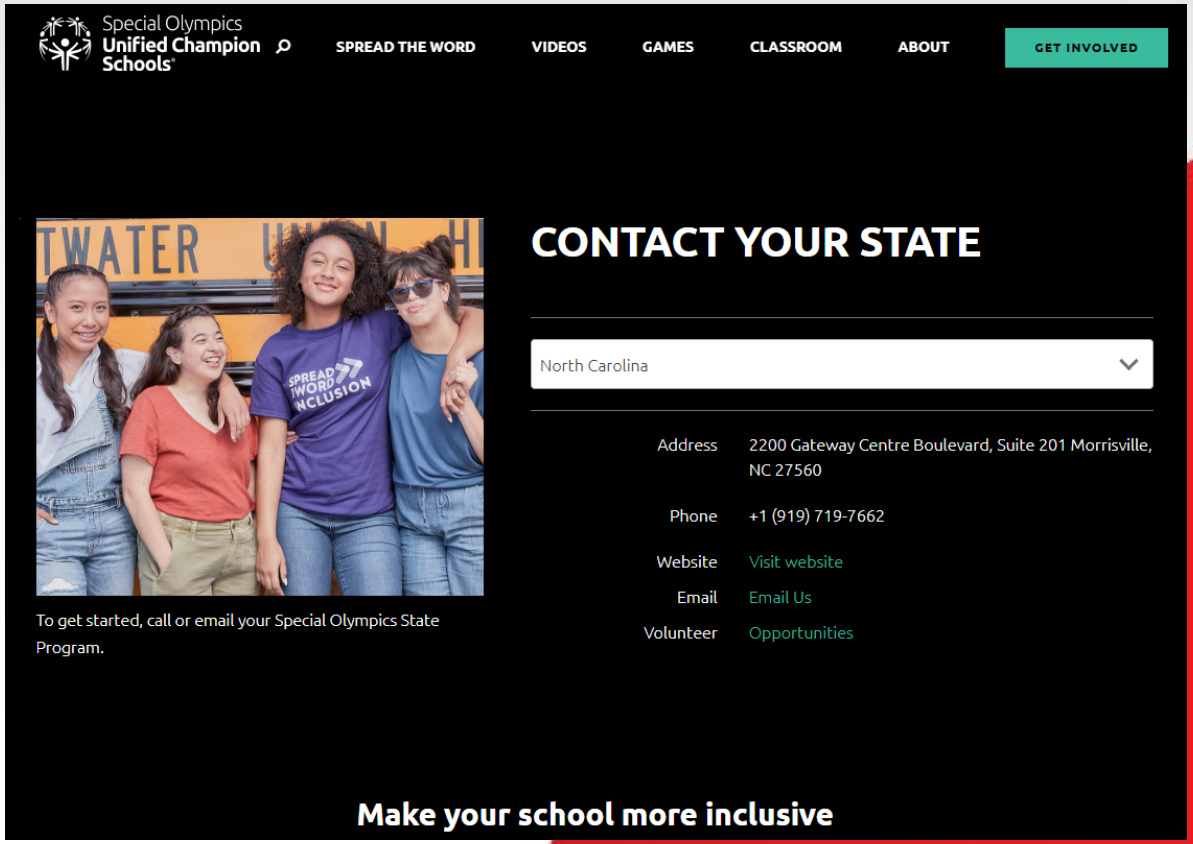


How Special Olympics Supports Schools

- **Training** & ongoing **local support** for: admin, coaches, staff, students
- Printed & electronic resources at **no cost**
- Seed funding may be available for startup costs such as:
  - Coach Stipends
  - Uniforms & equipment
  - Transportation
  - Competition & league play
  - Supplies for school-wide campaigns

How to get started

Scan me!



What does success look like?

What does success look like?

My Why

- https://www.generationunified.org/videos/derans-moment/

Thank you!

IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Special Olympics

Allied and Adaptive opportunities

Building robust programs for students with disabilities

Special Olympics

Fitness and Equity Act

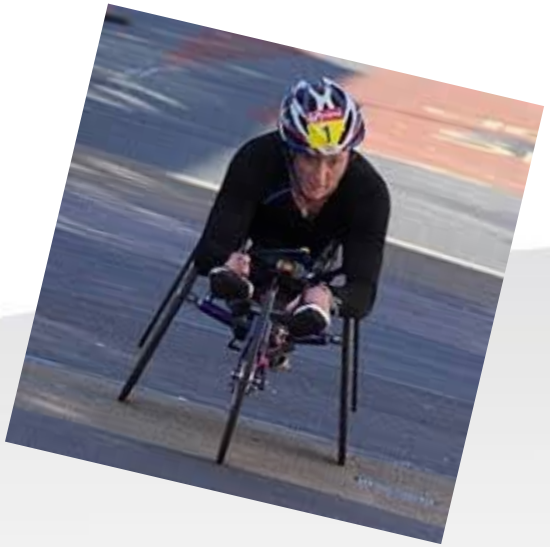
- In 2008, the Maryland legislature passed the Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Act.
- This landmark law requires boards of education to develop policies to include students with disabilities in their physical education classes and athletic activities. The law requires schools to provide students with reasonable accommodations to participate, the chance to try out for school teams, and access to alternative sports opportunities.
- The Maryland law is the only state law of its kind in the nation, and could be a model for other states, or for federal legislation.

Fitness and Equity Act

- In 2008 the landmark Maryland Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Law was passed. This law ensures students with disabilities are provided with equivalent opportunities in interscholastic sports, physical education, and intramural sports.
- provides a means which brings together students with and without disabilities in a fulfilling inclusive experience. Unified Sports teams are composed of a proportional number of students with intellectual disabilities, with other types of disabilities, and without disabilities who train and compete together on the same team.

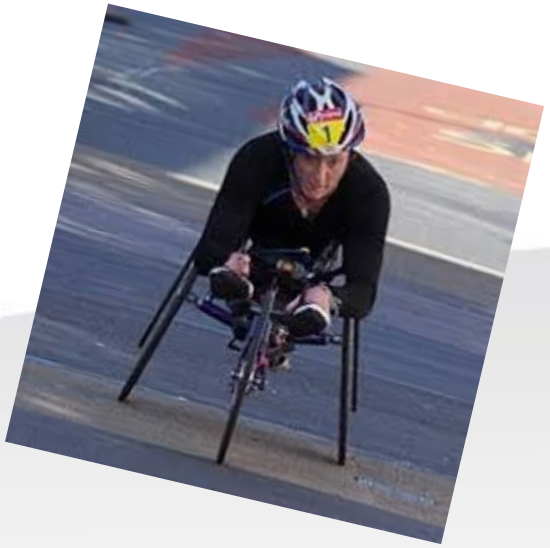
Fitness and Equity Act

- In 2009 Special Olympics Maryland hosted the inaugural State High School Unified Track and Field Invitational at Towson University – 242 students participated.
- During the 2023-2024 school year thousands of students from 21 of the 24 public school systems state-wide participated in Unified Team Tennis (824), Unified Indoor Bocce (1485), Unified Strength & Conditioning (294), Unified Team Track & Field (973), and Unified Outdoor Bocce (705) Unified flag football- new program (122) - 3957 student participation.



Tatyana Mcfadden

- **Athlete Sues for Right to Compete; State Passes Athletics Equity Law**
- Tatyana McFadden has spinal bifida and uses a wheelchair. As a high school freshman, Tatyana sued her school for the right to compete on the same track, at the same time, as her non-disabled teammates. Her high-profile case won hearts and led the Maryland General Assembly to pass a unique law — the Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Act.



Tatyana Mcfadden

21 paraolympic Medals – Winningest ParaOlympic Track and field athlete, 1 paraolympic medal in cross country skiing

20 world championship medals

21 wheelchair marathon wins

Laureus World Sportsperson with a Disability of the Year

https://youtu.be/DfWSE_1pSLg

Unified sports vs. Allied Sports

- 50/50 with students with disabilities and students without disabilities
- Endorsed by special Olympics
- Student-athletes Can compete in other jv or varsity sports
- Non-contact sports
- Student-athletes can compete for an ius state championship

- 50/50 with students with disabilities and students without disabilities
- Student-athletes Cannot compete in other jv or varsity sports
- Contact sports
- Inter-county play

How can having a unified or allied program change your school?

Teamwork

Friendships

Connections

Leadership

Recognition

Support

Community Involvement

Ways to give back

Fundraisers

Special Olympics

THE MARYLAND STATE POLICE
POLAR BEAR PLUNGE
A MARYLAND TRADITION
Aerotek
Special Olympics Maryland

RISE for Autism

Spread Inclusion

Volunteer

From the student-Athlete perspective… How has PARTICIPATION changed your life?

- Senior, Female—”Playing Unified Sports made me realize I wanted to change my major in college from music to special education”
- Junior, Male—”it allowed me to be able to play with one of my best friends who could no longer play the contact sports”
- Junior, Male—”It has helped me gain friends outside of my acc classroom”
- sophomore, Male—”everyone should have the opportunity to participate in a high school sport and compete at a high level. Playing unified sports has made me appreciate my abilities more and garner a better appreciation for those with disabilities.”
- Senior, female—”It is so good to see a person’s whole mood change because they are now involved and included”

Community/county impact

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
• Unified Tennis											
•	189	167	162	173	148	210	213	159	220	216	266
• Unified Bocce											
•	259	283	289	294	304	351	365	221	294	358	363
• Unified Bowling											
•	358	388	343	411	353	505	544	290	385	526	527

Factors to consider

- Sports selection
- What disabilities need to accommodate
- Contact vs. noncontact sports
- Complexity of the sport/rules/equipment
- Treating like all other sports: banquet, awards, uniforms, press releases, practice schedule, games
- Involvement with local special Olympics team
- If able, having a county specialist

Factors to consider

- Peer recognition
- #1 challenge students with disabilities have to overcome is “low expectations”. Sports allow the student athletes to rise to the occasion.
- Families able to watch and celebrate their child with others in the community
- College opportunities
- Independence

Adaptive opportunities

SOMD opportunities

leadership conferences; podcasts; participation in community sports program after high school graduation.

Potential Job Skills

Communication Skills
Leadership Skills – Certified Athletic Leader, Core Modules and Leadership Modules
Breaking of stereotypes
Setting Professional boundaries

Questions??

Contact us

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