



Special Olympics
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National Recognition Program | 2026 Certifying Body

Name	Organization	Title	Role
Molly McCloskey	Strategic Questions Consulting Member of NELN and Consultant	Executive Director Education Consultant	Chair
Steve Amaro	Freedom High School and NELN Member	Principal	Member
Zak Armstrong	SO Minnesota	Senior College & Transition Programs Manage	Member
Lindsey Atkinson	National Federation of State High School Associations	Director of Sports & Communications Associate	Member
Jennifer Cartland	JBSC Consulting	Executive Director	Member
Tami Jo Cook	South View Middle School, and NELN Member	Assistant Principal	Member
Kaleigh Gardner	Special Olympics Consultant	Consultant, Education Advisor, and Unified Classroom Content Creator	Member
Deirdra Hawkes	American School Counselor Association	Director of Programs and Advocacy	Member
Peg Hippen	Special Olympics Consultant and Former Educator	Consultant	Member
Torrie Lashley	Richmond City Public Schools	Instructional Specialist and UCS Coordinator	Member
Ashley Leidholt	Special Olympics Consultant and Former Educator	Consultant and Education Advisor	Member
Jennifer Paolantonio	Ponaganset High School and NELN Member	Special Education Teacher	Member
Elizabeth Price	Special Olympics Indiana	Former Youth Ambassador	Member
Laura Shively	Duke University	Director of Sports Programs	Member
Jeff Wooten	Kellis High School and Special Olympics Consultant	Principal and Consultant	Member



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Member Information

Molly McCloskey, Chair

Executive Director

Strategic Questions Consulting, LLC

Molly McCloskey, founder and executive director of Strategic Questions Consulting, has worked in every level of education from early childhood through graduate school and in non-profit leadership from association management to public – private coalition building. With extensive experience in leading strategic growth and whole child education initiatives, Ms. McCloskey's work is rooted in equity, inclusion and sustainable improvement. Her clients include national organizations seeking to build shared accountability and strengths-based capacity among their staff, coalitions of diverse public service organizations focused on board development, and education institutions building a shared vision across multiple constituencies.



Prior to founding her own company, Ms. McCloskey served as CEO of a non-profit which led anti-bullying efforts in the United States, Palestine, and Israel. Earlier, while co-chair of Governor Martin O'Malley's Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Maryland and Director of No Kid Hungry, Maryland, Molly increased access to federally funded meals for children in all 26 counties through a public-private partnership of state agencies and non-profit organizations. During her tenure as Managing Director, Whole Child Programs at ASCD, Molly co-developed and directed a multi-national education reform effort.

Her specialties include anti-bias and equity efforts in schools and other organizations, school/organizational climate and culture, social and emotional learning, a whole child approach to education, and evidence-based, strategic planning for sustainable change. Ms. McCloskey holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from The Catholic University of America and a Master of Education degree in school counseling from the University of Maryland (College Park.)



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Dr. Steve Amaro

Steve is Principal at Freedom High School in Oakley, CA. Prior to being named Principal, he served as the school's Athletic Director and was one of the first schools on the West Coast to bring Unified Sports to his school, district, and league. The model he created has been replicated by schools throughout the nation and helped propel the exponential growth of Unified Sports programs in California.

He earned his Educational Doctorate from St. Mary's College of California writing a dissertation that focused on the lasting benefits students experience due to high school sports participation and has been published in numerous educational magazines including the National Federation of High Schools' *High School Today*, Association of California School Administrators' *Leadership*, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals' *Principal Leadership*. He also is a National Faculty Instructor for the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrator Association where he shares best practices on creating positive high school athletic environments.

Dr. Amaro lives in Brentwood with his wife, Jennifer and they have two daughters, Lindsey who attends college at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, and Ashley who is a junior in high school. In his spare time he enjoys running, listening to all types of music and reading whatever he can get his hands on.





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Zak Armstrong

Special Olympics Minnesota – Senior College & Transition Program Manager

I have been working with Special Olympics Minnesota for over 8 years and am currently entering my 6th school year on our Unified Champion Schools team. My favorite part of the job is seeing students grow through the Unified Movement and watching them become confident leaders and advocates in their communities. When I'm not working, you can usually find me golfing, playing slow-pitch softball, or spending time on the North Shore of Lake Superior.



Lindsey Atkinson, CIC, RAA

Director of Sports- NFHS

Atkinson rejoined the NFHS staff in 2016 and was named to the administrative staff in her current position as director of sports in August of 2017. Among her duties, Atkinson serves as the staff liaison, rules interpreter and editor of rules publications in the sports of boys lacrosse, girls lacrosse and volleyball. She also serves as the staff liaison for tennis and inclusion of students with disabilities and serves on the internal Culture and Belonging and Women's Leadership Committees. Atkinson currently serves on various national boards and committees representing the NFHS.

Prior to rejoining the NFHS staff, Atkinson spent three years as an academic advisor while earning her master's degree in higher education leadership and spent five years as a jr. high and high school health teacher and coach. Atkinson started her career in sports administration at the NFHS in 2006 before transitioning to teaching.





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Jennifer Cartland, Ed D

Executive Director, JBSC Consulting

Jennifer Cartland, Ed D., Member Executive Director JBSC Consulting Dr. Jennifer Cartland is a career educator who focuses on leadership through service. Jennifer's career has focused on promoting the welfare of others, through work in schools, school districts and non-profit organizations. Most recently, Jennifer was responsible for management, and oversight of the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy. In this role, Jennifer oversaw all aspects of the program including adult learning, coaching and team development. Cartland managed four directors who delivered against a collaboratively developed strategic plan, providing a safe and effective set of experiences for youngsters during their 4-year tenure at the Academy. In 2020, Cartland orchestrated plans that resulted in intervention and support for families in Ward 7 and 8 during the health crisis.



Cartland was also responsible for shepherding the work of the board of directors (vetting and presenting new members) cultivating relationships with donors, fundraising and representing the organization in various media outlets. Formerly, Dr. Cartland has held positions as Managing Director of Program, Head of Schools and Senior Director of Program Growth at K-12 education and family engagement-oriented organizations. She has also headed key offices in DCPS and RIDE (Rhode Island State Department of Education), supporting the development of education leaders and overseeing the performance of public and public charter schools. She has trained teachers, school and district leaders to understand the critical need for clear accountability structures, rigorous instruction, quality content standards, aligned assignments and assessments.

Dr. Cartland was a Mentor Principal and Leadership Coach, Principal, and an elementary and middle school Assistant Principal and classroom teacher. She has also consulted, facilitated and taught as adjunct professor. She was a member of the Aspen Institute's "Commission on No Child Left Behind" - convened to gather information and make recommendations for potential reauthorization of the law. Dr. Cartland is actively involved with several local causes. She was a founding member of the governing Board of the Hill Center at the Old Naval Hospital and is now Vice President. Dr. Cartland also serves on the board of FRESHFARM, an organization



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committed to encouraging family nutrition, planning and health through outreach and public education about food access, equity and related environmental issues.

Dr. Cartland earned her Doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Pennsylvania, her Master's degree in education administration from The George Washington University and Bachelor's degree from The Catholic University of America in Elementary Education.

Dr. Tami Jo Cook

Assistant Principal, South View Middle School

31 years as an educator, currently serving as assistant principal of AMLE School of Distinction & Special Olympics National Banner School, South View Middle School in Edina, MN. Leadership Roles: MMSA Past President, MMSA Distinguished Service Award Recipient, AMLE Annual Conference Local Coordinator, SOMN Unified Champion Schools Admin Liaison, SONA National Education Leaders Network & National Banner Program Evaluator, AMLE Schools of Distinction Evaluator. Presenter at: MMSA State Conference, SONA Virtual Learning Summit 2020, Institute of

Personalized Learning Annual Convening 2019, SOMN Leadership Summit 2019, AMLE 2023/2024/2025 Annual Conference, AMLE 2024 & 2025 Leadership Institute





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Kaleigh Gardner

Classroom And Lesson Master, LLC
SONA UCS Education Advisor and Content
Manager

Kaleigh Gardner is an Education Advisor from Virginia Beach, Virginia. She originates from Western New York where she pursued a Bachelor's and Master's degree in General Education, Special Education, and Literacy Education.

Kaleigh developed a passion for working with and advocating for middle school students as a 6th grade Exceptional Children (EC) inclusion teacher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For 6

years, Kaleigh taught intensive reading classes, co-taught content classes, and led social skills groups for students with and without disabilities. She acted as the head of the EC Department, overseeing caseloads, support specialists, and assistants. She also represented and advocated for the department on the school leadership committee, equity team, and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) committee. Kaleigh was acknowledged as a teacher of excellence from the district Special Needs Advisory Committee for 3 years, was named Teacher of the Year in 2018, and was awarded the North Carolina Educator of Excellence in 2018.

From 2019-2020 Kaleigh taught 8th grade English Language Arts (ELA) and intensive reading in Panama City Beach, Florida. During this time, she served as an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) liaison and ELA liaison where she assisted with district curriculum development. She also served on the school's leadership committee.

In September 2020, Kaleigh left the classroom to pursue additional educational passions. She created her own consulting agency, Classroom And Lesson Master, LLC, and joined Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® as an education advisor where she helps curate and review school-based resources and support Special Olympics programs with quality and quantity middle-level growth. She has been a member of the Certifying Body for 5 years.





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Deirdra Hawkes

Director of Programs and Advocacy
American School Counselor Association

Prior to joining the ASCA staff as Director of Programs and Advocacy, Deirdra worked in education as a Dean of Counseling and Student Services in North Carolina for over 20 years. She has maintained comprehensive school counseling programs and earned national recognition for them. Deirdra says what's most important is that students get access to the learning strategies, self-management skills and social skills needed for their academic, career and social/emotional needs and they can utilize these skills well beyond high school. She worked closely with staff in special programs, spending additional time supporting students with special needs. Her personal interests include exercise, music and mentoring.



American School Counselor Association

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a nonprofit professional organization based in Alexandria, Va. ASCA promotes student success by expanding the image and influence of school counseling through leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. ASCA helps school counselors guide students toward academic achievement, career planning and social/emotional development to help them become tomorrow's productive, contributing members of society. ASCA provides professional development, publications, resources, research and advocacy to professional school counselors around the globe. ASCA administers the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP), the School Counselor of the Year awards and publishes the ASCA National Model.





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Peg Hippen

Elementary Education Consultant

Peg Hippen, a National Board Certified teacher, joined Special Olympics South Carolina after a long career teaching in elementary schools, both in the US and abroad. Unified Champion Schools, or “Project Unify” at the time, was in its second year when Peg started a unified program at her school, which eventually led to it being named the first National Banner Unified Champion Elementary school in South Carolina. Her job with SOSOC brings her into contact with teachers across the state, something she thoroughly enjoys. She also has been responsible for developing resources given to UCS schools, including the Unified Young Readers Club Guide. When not participating in SOSOC events, Peg spends as much time as possible in the north woods of Minnesota – reading, kayaking and listening to the loons.





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Torrie Lashley

Unified Champion Schools Coordinator
Special Olympics Virginia & Richmond Public
Schools
Instructional Specialist, Richmond Public
Schools

Torrie Lashley is a dedicated educational leader, instructional specialist, athletic administrator, and advocate for inclusive excellence with more than 25 years of experience in education and athletics.



She serves as the Unified Champion Schools (UCS) Coordinator for Richmond Public Schools in partnership with Special Olympics Virginia. In this role, she leads districtwide programming centered on Unified sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole-school engagement.

During her five years as UCS Coordinator, Lashley has expanded the program to 43 schools across the district. Under her leadership, seven schools have earned National Banner Recognition for sustained excellence in inclusion. Through professional development, community partnerships, districtwide events, and direct support to educators and school leaders, she creates meaningful opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to learn, lead, compete, and belong together.

In 2025, Lashley received the Rodney Robinson Equity in Education Award in recognition of her commitment to educational equity, access, and inclusive school communities.

A proud graduate of Virginia State University, Lashley earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Health, Physical Education and Recreation and a Master of Science degree in Sport Management. She currently serves as an Adjunct Professor at VSU. Her longstanding connection to the university also includes experience as a collegiate student-athlete and Head Softball Coach, earning Coach of the Year honors in 2008 and 2013.

Her K-12 leadership experience includes more than 25 years as a physical education teacher and eight years as a high school athletic director with Prince George's County



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Public Schools in Maryland. She also coached basketball and softball, emphasizing leadership, discipline, teamwork, wellness, and student development.

Beyond her professional responsibilities, Lashley serves as event coordinator for the JP Jumpers Foundation, supporting individuals with special needs and their families. She is also a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated.

Most importantly, Lashley is the proud mother of her daughter, Nylah. She treasures supporting Nylah's academic growth and athletic journey in softball, flag football, and track and field. She also enjoys traveling with Nylah and creating meaningful experiences and special memories together. Motherhood remains one of Lashley's greatest sources of pride and inspires her commitment to empowering young people. Through education, athletics, motherhood, community service, and inclusive leadership, Torrie Lashley remains committed to cultivating environments where every student feels valued, empowered, and inspired to succeed.

Ashley Leidholt

Elementary Education Consultant

Ashley is an educator with eight years of experience teaching at the elementary level in a variety of school communities and settings. Throughout her career, she has been passionate about creating welcoming, inclusive environments where every student feels known, valued, and able to participate.



In addition to her work in education, Ashley has volunteered with a variety of community and nonprofit organizations, with a particular focus on supporting children, individuals with disabilities, and families. She currently works with Special Olympics North America Unified Champion Schools® and serves as a member of the National Certifying Body. Ashley brings both classroom experience and a commitment to inclusion, connection, and community to her work.



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Jennifer Paolantonio

Special Education Teacher at Ponaganset High School

Jennifer Paolantonio is a Special Education teacher at Ponaganset High School in Rhode Island. She earned her degree in Special Education from Rhode Island College and holds a Certificate in Autism. Jennifer has spent the past 20 years working in special education with students with mild to moderate learning disabilities and has served as a Life Skills Special Education teacher at Ponaganset.



A passionate advocate for inclusion, Jennifer helped launch Ponaganset's Special Olympics Unified Sports program. What began as an opportunity to bring students together through sports has become one of the most meaningful aspects of her career. She currently helps coach the Unified Volleyball and Unified Basketball teams and leads school wide initiatives that promote inclusion, acceptance, and belonging through the pillars of a Unified Champion School.

In 2017, Ponaganset became the first high school in Rhode Island to receive national recognition as a Unified Champion School. Jennifer's commitment to inclusive education has also provided opportunities to represent her school and community beyond Rhode Island. She was selected by Special Olympics Rhode Island to participate in Capitol Hill Day in Washington, D.C., and was chosen by Special Olympics North America to represent the region at the Special Olympics East Asia Summit in Shanghai, China, alongside four students.

Jennifer has served on numerous building and state advisory committees such as a member of her district's Equity and Inclusion Committee. Her work has been recognized through several honors, including being named Foster-Glocester Regional Schools Teacher of the Year in 2012, selected as a District Educator-Leader by the Rhode Island Department of Education in 2019. She is also a proud recipient of the national Milken Educator Award.

Jennifer is especially passionate about creating opportunities for students of all abilities to feel valued, connected, and included. She enjoys collaborating with educators and advocates locally and around the world to share the impact of Unified Champion Schools and advance a culture where everyone has the opportunity to belong.



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Elizabeth Price

SO Volunteer, and former Youth Ambassador

Originally from Indianapolis and now based in New York City, Elizabeth is an Account Executive at FischTank PR, where she works with clients across B2B technology, climate tech, and mobility. Outside of her work in PR, Elizabeth has been involved with Special Olympics for more than 10 years as a Unified partner and volunteer. The lifelong friendships she's built through Special Olympics have shaped her passion for inclusion and her commitment to creating a world where everyone feels valued, heard, and empowered to make a difference.



Laura Shively

Director of Sports Programs

Duke University: Recreation & Physical Education

Laura started working with Special Olympics while in graduate school at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where she was a Unified partner in the program on campus. She also joined as a Unified partner on the flag football team that represented North Carolina for the 2018 USA Games in Seattle. Since then, Laura has worked with Unified sports on her campus at Duke University as the advisor to the Special Olympics club and organizing the Unified Intramural Sports program. The big event that they host every other year is a rivalry game between Duke's Unified and UNC's Unified basketball teams in Cameron Indoor Stadium. Laura has also been involved with Unified at the national collegiate recreation level, serving as Chair of the Unified Sports work team, Director of the Unified for both the NIRSA National basketball and flag football tournaments.





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Jeff Wooten

Consultant/Retired High School Principal

Jeff Wooten recently retired after serving as an educator for 30 years. He is currently a consultant for Special Olympics. He spent his last 10 years as the principal of Raymond S. Kellis High School in Glendale, Arizona. RSK is a Unified Champion School and has been recognized as a National Banner School. He grew up in central Iowa and attended Central College in Pella. He began his career as a math/computer programming teacher and coach in Yuma, AZ. He also taught and coached at North Canyon High School. He was an administrator for 17 years at Shadow Mountain, Ironwood and RSK. Jeff and his wife Lara have been married for 31 years and have 2 children, Paige and Blake.

