

# UNIFIED SPORTS®

# PLAYBOOK



**Special  
Olympics**  
Virginia



Special Olympics  
Unified Champion  
Schools®



Office of Special Education Programs  
U.S. Department of Education

# WHY DO WE NEED SCHOOLS TO BE SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE?

Team sports bring people together. Unified Sports® provide opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to participate in a variety of fitness and sports activities – on the same team.

Creating an inclusive, educational atmosphere that ensures every student becomes a healthy, productive and ethical individual is a central focus of education.

Accomplishing this requires intentional planning and implementation, strong collaborations and initiatives that provide equitable and quality opportunities for all.

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® shape a generation that welcomes everyone. With sports as the foundation, the program offers a unique combination of activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classroom and school climates of acceptance and inclusion.

84%

84% of students generally regard the experiences they've had with a Unified Champion School as a positive turning point in their lives.

87%

87% of students learn that standing up for something they believe is the right thing to do.

85%

The majority of schools report that students learn about helping others and how their emotions and attitudes can affect others.

82%

82% of students feel that they are able to change their schools for the better.

# UNIFIED SPORTS

## OVERVIEW

Unified Sports combine students with intellectual disabilities and students without intellectual disabilities on the same sports team. Unified Sports expand sports opportunities for students and dramatically increase inclusion in schools.

### **Unified Sports:**

- Integrate students with and without intellectual disabilities in a setting where all teammates are challenged to improve their skills.
- Provide valuable sports opportunities to students who may not have the skills to participate on a varsity team.
- Prepare students for participation in community sports.
- Increase public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities.
- Model genuine inclusion for the entire school community.





# UNIFIED SPORTS GOALS

- **Sport skill development** – Under the direction of trained coaches, students have the opportunity to develop sports skills in preparation for participation in community sports programs.
- **Competition experience** – Athletes and partners benefit from physical and mental challenges participating in a variety of competitions organized by schools and Special Olympics Virginia.
- **Meaningful inclusion** – Unified Sports rules and guidelines ensure all teammates play important, meaningful, and valued roles on the team.
- **Friendship and socialization** – Unified Sports facilitate positive social interactions among teammates.





# UNIFIED SPORTS CHECKLIST

- **Make contact** with your local Special Olympics Virginia office to start the process of launching Unified Sports at your school.
- **Choose the sport(s)** you will implement:
  - **Fall:** Unified Bocce, Unified Bowling, Unified Flag Football, Unified Soccer
  - **Winter:** Unified Basketball, Unified Cheerleading
  - **Spring:** Unified Bocce, Unified Track & Field
  - **Year Round:** Young Athletes for children ages 2 - 7, Unified fitness
- **Identify a minimum of two coaches**
  - Hold an interest meeting at the school to recruit coaches.
  - Look for "champions" who are passionate about inclusion and/or the sport. Consider school counselors, physical therapists, sport coaches, special education teachers, aides, general education teachers, and physical education teachers.
  - Coaches must complete the free one-hour Coaching Unified Sports course online prior to the start of the season.
- **Introduce Unified Sports to your school**
  - Hold an interest meeting to promote participation on the team.
  - Send a school-wide e-mail/flyer with details about the program and contact information.
  - Include information in the school's family newsletter and/or announcements.
- **Recruit Athletes**
  - Athletes are students who have an intellectual disability or closely related developmental disability.
  - Work with the special education staff at your school to help identify and recruit athletes. Send a parent flyer about the upcoming season home with students.
- **Recruit Unified Partners**
  - Partners are students without an intellectual disability.
  - Partners should not be varsity athletes in the same sport. For instance, a varsity basketball player would not be an appropriate partner for a Unified basketball team due to the student's high skill level in the sport. A varsity basketball player, however, would be a great Unified basketball assistant coach.
  - Recruit participants from your school's Unified Club, Key Club, NHS/NJHS Club, Student Council and/or Best Buddies Club.



# CHECKLIST CONTINUED

- **Collect participation forms** (if required) from students/parents before your first practice.
  - Athletes: VHSL Physical Form (middle & high school) or Special Olympics Virginia Registration, Release and Medical Form (upper elementary, middle and high school).
  - Partners: VHSL Physical Form or Special Olympics Virginia Class A Adult or Minor Form.
  - Preschool & K – 2nd Grade Students: Special Olympics Young Athletes Registration Form.
  - Coaches: Special Olympics Class A Adult Volunteer Form, background check, Protective Behaviors Training, Concussion Training and Unified Sports Training.
- **Secure a facility for practices/competitions** and set a schedule for the upcoming season
  - Work with the activities director or principal at your school to reserve facilities for practices/competitions and arrange transportation if needed.
- **Request sports equipment and uniforms** from Special Olympics Virginia
  - Schools launching Unified Sports for the first time can request up to \$1,500 for sports equipment, uniforms, coach stipends and other expenses.
  - Schools adding a second sport can request up to \$1,000 for sports equipment and uniforms.
  - Complete this [order form](#) to request sports equipment and uniforms.
- **Hold regular practices and competitions**
  - Practice once or twice a week for 1½ - 2 hours for eight weeks.
- **Ensure the Unified Sports team receives the same kind of support and recognition as other teams in the school** including pep rallies, fans during competitions, recognition in the yearbook, and varsity letters.

# MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT FOR TEAM SPORTS



The principle of **meaningful involvement** ensures that every player is given an opportunity to contribute to the success of his or her team through their unique skills and qualities.

This means that every teammate:

- Demonstrates sufficient sport skills and game understanding to meaningfully participate;
- Plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents;
- Has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury to himself/herself or others.





# INDICATORS OF MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

- Teammates compete without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others. For safety reasons, students who use devices such as wheelchairs, walkers or crutches cannot play team sports with students who do not use devices.
- Teammates participate according to the rules of competition.
- Teammates have the ability and opportunity to contribute to the performance of the team.
- Teammates adjust their skills according to those of other players, resulting in improved performance by team members with lesser ability. Highly skilled students in a given sport are not appropriate partners and could participate as assistant coaches.

# MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT IS NOT ACHIEVED WHEN CERTAIN TEAM MEMBERS:

- Display superior sports skills without involving their teammates.
- Serve predominantly as on-field or on-court coaches rather than teammates. All players should attempt to score and play defense throughout the game.
- Control most aspects of the game, especially during the most critical moments.
- Do not train or practice regularly and only show-up on the day of competition.
- Lower their ability level dramatically so that they do not hurt others or control the entire game.

# ALTERNATE ACTIVITIES

Alternative activities for students who do not have the skills or game understanding to safely participate on the team or who use mobility devices allow meaningful participation for all students. Below are some ideas to consider.

Work with Special Olympics staff to learn more about these and other opportunities:

- Individual skills competition
- Unified Sports Performance Challenge
- Modified games such as half-court 3-on-3 basketball, one-on-one assistance for all athletes on the court, or using an adjustable basketball stand
- Unified cheerleading squad





# PRACTICE TIPS #1

## **Before Practice Begins:**

- Create a written plan for every practice that includes the order and duration of activities to ensure smooth transitions and to maximize activity time.
- Determine practice group assignments in advance so that you can move quickly during the practice session.
- Set up equipment (e.g., cones, stations, nets) before practice starts.
- When possible, provide enough equipment so that multiple teammates can actively participate at one time.
- Teach the team routines for practice components like warm-up, transitions, basic drills, and cool-down.
- Plan practices that are physically demanding. Practices should challenge teammates and include appropriate breaks for rest and water.
- Encourage teammates to put forth their best effort in every activity.



## PRACTICE TIPS #2

### **During Practice:**

- Include a 10 – 15 minute conditioning component at the beginning or end of each practice.
- Progressively increase repetitions as teammates improve.
- Use timed circuits and/or stations. This helps to focus attention on one skill/activity, keeps teammates actively engaged in the task, and reduces equipment needs.
- If drills are done in lines, form multiple lines with fewer teammates in each to reduce waiting time.
- Avoid elimination games/activities that involve a teammate being “out” and inactive.
- Encourage teammates to jog or walk briskly during transitions and water breaks to decrease down time.
- Play small-sided games/scrimmages that increase activity time and maximize ball touches.
- Check sport websites for practice ideas. Many sport organizations focus on keeping athletes active at practice and have sample practice plans available.
- Decrease instruction time by condensing initial points into simple and brief directions.
- Provide positive and constructive feedback during activities.
- Provide teammates opportunities for choice to increase their motivation to actively engage.

# BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

Some teammates may display disruptive or noncompliant behavior during practice sessions that can detract from your efforts. Use behavioral strategies to engage athletes and deter disruptive behavior.

- Maintain a standard practice routine.
- Be clear and consistent with expectations and instructions.
- Praise/reinforce positive behaviors and active participation.
- Offer participants a leadership role to increase self-esteem.
- Reduce distractions when possible (extra equipment, noise, people).
- Track progress and praise improvements.
- Offer breaks to teammates who demonstrate disruptive behaviors.
- Use peer partners for support.
- Avoid using exercise as punishment.
- Keep practice session moving and reduce downtime.

Strenuous physical activity may feel uncomfortable or distressing to some teammates because of the increased heart rate, breathing rate, and perspiration that occurs. Help teammates to understand that these are normal responses to exercise and provide extra praise and encouragement when they train hard and exert themselves.





## BEYOND PRACTICE SESSIONS

- Increase the duration and/or frequency of your practice sessions. Consider adding 5 extra minutes onto each practice, increasing the frequency from 1 to 2 times/week, and/or extending the season by including a few more pre-season sessions to help promote fitness.
- Encourage teammates to be physically active on non-practice days. Check-in with teammates during practice to learn what they did outside of your organized sessions. Provide praise and reinforcement for fitness efforts. Use Special Olympics Virginia's Unified Fitness Challenge equipment and curriculum for fitness training at home.
- Encourage athletes and partners to participate in social activities together such as attending school functions as a group, eating lunch together at school, meeting at a local restaurant or bowling alley during non-school hours.
- Encourage teammates to participate in free local Special Olympics Virginia community sports programs and events.

# GO THE EXTRA MILE: ADD FITNESS TO YOUR SPORT SEASON

On average, people with intellectual disabilities are 2 times more likely to be obese, 2 times more likely to have cardiovascular disease, 2 – 4 times more likely to be less physically active, 5 times more likely to have diabetes, and their life expectancy is reduced by an average of 16 years! We can change these statistics by encouraging daily health and fitness activities for all students.

- Unified Fitness Challenge – This eight-week Fitness Challenge is designed to get students moving! Three turn-key lessons are available each week and can be done at school or at home. Free Individual student equipment kits are available.
- Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools - This Guide encourages students with and without intellectual disabilities to achieve optimal health and performance through adequate physical activity, nutrition, and hydration.
- Fit 5 – Encourage students to exercise 5 days per week, eat 5 total fruits and vegetables per day and drink 5 water bottles of water each day.
- Fitness for Sports Coaches – Lots of great resources including a Sample Fitness Practice, a Practice Organizer Template, and Injury Prevention Tips.
- Fitness Resources – Check-out our dynamic stretching, nutrition, and fitness workouts to supplement your sport practices.





# UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS





# UCS OVERVIEW & RESOURCES

Unified Sports is one component of Unified Champion Schools (UCS), a program focused on inclusive activities that empower students with and without intellectual disabilities to create school climates of acceptance and inclusion. The three components of UCS are: 1) inclusive sports, 2) inclusive leadership, and 3) school-wide awareness activities.

A school just beginning their involvement in UCS typically starts by launching Unified Sports. Schools can choose to launch inclusive student leadership opportunities and school-wide awareness activities in year one or add these components in subsequent years. By the third year, schools must offer at least one activity in each of the three components. Click on the links below to explore program opportunities under each component.

# UNIFIED SPORTS

- Young Athletes - Appropriate for pre-K - 2nd grades
- Unified Sports – Appropriate for 3rd – 12th grades
- Unified PE – Appropriate for middle and high schools
- Unified Fitness Challenge – Appropriate for 3rd – 12th grades
- Feet Meets – Culminating Young Athletes and track events for elementary schools
- Coaching Unified Sports - A free one-hour training to become a Unified Sports coach
- Sports Rules & Coaching Resources – Lots of great resources for coaches
- The Role of the Coach - Resource Playbook includes suggestions for organizing practices and a practice session template
- Unified Sports Equipment/Uniform Order Form – First year schools can request uniforms and sports equipment up to \$1,500 and schools launching a second sport can requires support up to \$1,000



# INCLUSIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

- Youth Leadership Resources – Empower students with and without ID to be leaders in your school
- Special Olympics Unified Club – A club for students with and without ID
- Whole School Engagement Activities – Lots of great ideas to engage all students
- Inclusion Tiles - Inclusion journeys look different for everyone and that's ok! Create your inclusion journey and think about the ways your journey may be different from a friend or a classmate.
- Cool School Penguin Plunge - Want to raise funds for your school? This unique event organized by Special Olympics Virginia is fun and easy to join.
- Feet Meet Volunteers – Students with and without ID staff the Feet Meet stations
- Youth Summit – Led by the Youth Leadership Committee, a Youth Summit seeks to educate students about the value of people with ID and the importance of inclusion

# SCHOOL-WIDE AWARENESS

- Choose to Include Campaign – Appropriate for elementary, middle and high schools. Free supplies available.
- Spread the Word: Inclusion Campaign - Appropriate for middle and high schools. Free supplies available.
- Disability Awareness Videos - Book readings for younger children and videos for older students explore the value of including everyone
- Unified Generation – A website geared to youth filled with inclusive activities and videos
- Unified Classroom - A resource for teachers that provides turn-key lessons for all age groups
- FanQuest – A Playbook that walks schools through how to pack the stands with cheering students for a Unified basketball game between two middle or high schools.
- Whole School Engagement for Elementary Schools
- Whole School Engagement for Middle Schools
- Whole School Engagement for High Schools

# UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS

- Unified Champion Schools Resources - Explore lots of great resources on Special Olympics Virginia's website
- National Banner School Recognition – Schools that meet ten criteria can apply to be officially recognized as a National Banner Unified Champion School.