



Special Olympics Unified Physical Education Playbook



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

THIRD EDITION

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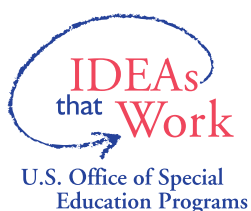
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All resources within the Unified Physical Education Playbook can be found at:

resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



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Resources, tools, and videos are identified by these icons and are available at the Unified PE Resources webpage: resources.specialolympics.org/UPE.



Educator Planning Tools



Fitness & Wellness Resources



Inclusive Youth Leadership & Reflection Tools



Visual & Sensory Supports



Assessment Tools



Marketing & Communication Tools

Use the chart below to navigate key sections based on your teaching goals and experience. Each part of the playbook is organized to provide clear strategies, practical examples, and tools that promote sustainable, inclusive physical education.

	When to Use	What You Will Find	Useful Content and Tools
Section 1 Overview	Just beginning and need foundational information.	Key definitions, student and staff roles, SOUCS alignment, and breakdowns of different PE models.	• Foundations of Unified PE • SHAPE America Standards alignment • Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (SOUCS) framework • Unified PE school-level progression
Section 2 7 Steps to Starting Unified PE	Starting Unified PE and seeking step-by-step guidance.	Launching tips, program checklists, and orientation prep.	• Getting started step-by-step • Unified PE roles at a glance • Unified PE models • Orientation and training tips
Section 3 Building an Inclusive Class Culture	Creating expectations and a welcoming environment that values every student.	Belonging strategies, equity tools, communication ideas, and inclusive leadership.	• Person-first language • Approaches for purpose-driven inclusion • Creating supportive and responsive environments • Leadership roles for all
Section 4 Access for All	Designing class flow and selecting supports that meet diverse student needs.	Modifications, visual aids, sensory supports, and adaptations by learning needs.	• Accommodations by need area • Equipment adaptations and modifications • Assessment strategies • Safety considerations • Visual support toolbox
Section 5 School Levels: Elementary, Middle, and High School	Teaching and need flexible, developmentally appropriate tools.	Implementation tools, leadership guidance, and school-level planning resources.	• Unit structure • Lesson plans • Growth tracking systems • Progress monitoring tools • Leadership roles • Grade-level getting started checklists
Section 6 Unified PE Resources	To print tools, templates, and visuals.	Access to full library of digital and printable resources sorted by category for easy grab-and-go.	• Categorized Unified PE resources • A general description of the Unified PE Resources webpage



SECTION 1: Overview

Unified Physical Education (Unified PE) Starts Here

The Unified Physical Education Playbook is a practical, educator-focused guide created to support inclusive physical education for every learner. It draws from years of real-world classroom experience and was developed in collaboration with educators, school leaders, and advocates committed to building environments where all students can thrive.

The Unified PE Playbook is designed as a flexible framework to help schools build even more inclusive programming opportunities across school levels. This playbook extends principles of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** into physical education by providing real-world strategies and structured tools that can be customized to meet the needs of students and diverse school communities. Educators can tailor the tools, examples, and resources to fit their unique context while staying rooted in best practices for inclusion. For wrap-around content and the most up-to-date resources, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).



What is Unified PE?

Unified PE is designed to intentionally bring a proportional number of students with and without intellectual disabilities together **as equals in a universally designed physical education setting** where all participants earn the same physical education credit. Unified PE is an **instructional strategy** supported by Special Olympics and is rooted in the belief that every student should have a meaningful way to participate, lead, and grow.

Inclusion is not about uniformity. It is about creating a space where students move and learn together in a way that supports their **individual strengths**. In a Unified class, inclusion comes to life through shared routines, flexible strategies, high standards, and a **class culture** where every voice matters and every role has value.

Grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning, this playbook emphasizes access, flexibility, and **purposeful participation** across all ability levels, backgrounds, and learning styles. By reducing barriers and creating multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and expression, the UDL framework ensures meaningful participation for every student. Unified PE lessons are built with flexibility from the start, offering options in equipment, communication, and roles so students with diverse strengths succeed together.

“Unified PE is more than exercise, it is leadership, connection, and belonging. We see students in Unified PE carry inclusion into the lunchroom, hallways, and school events.”

– Biju Padmanabhan, Principal
Buckeye Union High School

What Unified PE is Not

- ✗ The Unified Physical Education Playbook is **not** a curriculum.
- ✗ Unified PE is **not** meant to take the place of existing physical education requirements or adapted physical education but rather be an additional opportunity for students to reach their potential and have a positive general education PE experience.
- ✗ Unified PE is **not** a substitute or replacement for the special education processes required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- ✗ Unified PE is **not** automatically the most appropriate learning environment or least restrictive environment for every student with a disability. Placement and enrollment decisions should be made intentionally and collaboratively with the student, their parent or guardian, and the educational team. These decisions must align with the student's Section 504 Plan or Individualized Education Program (IEP), when applicable, and comply with federal, state, and local laws and policies governing special education and inclusive practices.
- ✗ Unified Physical Education is **not** intended to take the place of extra-curricular Special Olympics Unified Sports® teams other school-based adapted sports, or serve as a single sport training program.



What Unified PE Does Not look like

- ✗ **Students without disabilities primarily serving as helpers, volunteers, or aids.** Unified PE is about social and academic equity, with all students participating as peers and equals.
- ✗ **A student is placed on the sidelines to cheer because the teacher did not provide appropriate modifications, equipment, or support** to allow meaningful participation. This limits the student's opportunity for active engagement and reduces their role to a spectator. While cheering can be a positive and inclusive act in some contexts, Unified PE prioritizes ensuring that every student has access to active participation through thoughtful adaptation.
- ✗ **A student with limited mobility is told to sit out during a movement-based lesson.** Exclusion contradicts the goal of providing adapted ways for every student to join in.
- ✗ **Students with disabilities are grouped separately** for a simplified version of the game. Segregation undermines the Unified model.
- ✗ **A student is asked to take stats or manage equipment** instead of joining the game. Supportive tasks should not replace their right to be an active participant.
- ✗ **Verbal instructions are given once with no follow-up or visual support.** This creates barriers for students who need multiple modes of communication to succeed.
- ✗ **A few students consistently dominate while others are left out.** Unbalanced participation erodes the culture of shared responsibility and teamwork.
- ✗ **A student struggling with behavior is removed without support or follow-up.** Behavior challenges must be met with inclusive strategies, not removal or exclusion.
- ✗ **Unstructured free play without a lesson plan** or class objectives.

What Unified PE Does Look Like

- ✓ **Students use visual cues, equipment adaptations, or timing supports** while working toward the same movement goal as their classmates.
- ✓ **The student rotates through the circuit** with adapted exercises and works alongside peers with shared goals.
- ✓ **A student demonstrates two versions of a stretch side by side**, offering the class different ways to engage based on what feels best for their body.
- ✓ **A student leads a warm-up using a speech device or visual chart**, with the class listening, participating, and responding with encouragement.
- ✓ **The full class plays together** using flexible roles, equipment modifications, and inclusive strategies.
- ✓ **Every student has an active, meaningful role in the activity**, supported by peers and inclusive tools.
- ✓ **Games are structured for balanced participation, rotation, and teamwork** that values every student.



Foundations of Unified PE

The following principles anchor Unified PE and provide the lens through which all activities, lessons, and adaptations should be viewed. They ensure that every student is engaged, supported, and given the opportunity to succeed in an inclusive environment.

- **Shared participation:** Students have opportunities to learn and move together toward common goals.
- **Equal roles:** Every student is encouraged to contribute with purpose, voice, and responsibility.
- **Inclusive growth:** Classes are designed to provide space for physical, social, and personal development.
- **Community connection:** Students, families, and staff work together to create a sense of belonging and build connections into the community.
- **Active lifestyles:** Activities encourage fitness, confidence, and enjoyment of being active.
- **Leadership in action:** Students are supported to collaborate, take on roles, and practice advocacy in inclusive settings.

Supporting PE Standards

This playbook references **SHAPE America's National Physical Education Standards** as a guiding framework to help educators with achieving the highest level of quality and impact for their students. Schools are encouraged to align Unified PE with the physical education standards required by their state or district, while using the national standards to highlight connections to established best practices. The Unified PE Playbook was designed to provide resources and strategies to support educators with creating this alignment. For additional details on national standards, see the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#) and the [SHAPE America website](#).



Why Unified PE Matters

This page is based on the University of Virginia Study on Unified Physical Education (Ford & Block, 2025). Based on interviews with twelve teachers who oversee Unified PE in their schools, this one study helps to start to uncover the challenges in some traditional PE settings and the positive impact that Unified PE can have.

In many schools, students with disabilities experience inequities when placed in large PE classes without adaptations, are isolated in small peer groups, or placed in the general education environment without adequate supports. Teachers in the study described students being “thrown into large classes” where their needs went unmet, sometimes creating unsafe environments. They also observed that peers often wanted to connect but lacked the skills to do so, leading to unintentional isolation and missed opportunities for inclusion.

“ UPE provides an environment that accommodated the needs and abilities of their students, which led to positive experiences for both their students with and without disabilities.”

– Ford & Block, University of Virginia (2025)

Unified PE addresses these challenges by shifting the focus from limitations to strengths. It creates inclusive spaces where students learn, move, and lead together. Educators reported that students with disabilities gained consistent opportunities to practice skills, improve fitness, and participate alongside peers. One teacher noted how a student who had struggled for years “could finally make a basket, and now he never misses.” Another shared how a student who once needed to be pushed on a bike now pedals and steers independently. These stories illustrate progress that is both physical and personal, building confidence, independence, and persistence.

The study also showed that **Unified PE can help promote lifelong wellness** when programs incorporate health-focused instruction. Teachers described parents noticing changes at home, from children



Article

Examining Unified Physical Education from the Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

One of the greatest benefits of inclusion in general physical education (PE) is the opportunity for social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Unfortunately, interviews with students with disabilities who have participated in PE often find that social interactions with students without disabilities were limited. A model that promotes interaction between students with and without disabilities in PE is Special Olympics Unified Physical Education (UPE). In UPE, students with and without disabilities participate in activities together rather than the one-way focus on traditional peer tutoring. There have been anecdotal reports on the positive benefits of UPE for both students with and without disabilities. To date, there has been no published research on UPE. Additionally, some question how UPE has been implemented in schools, specifically questioning if UPE provided quality PE and whether students with disabilities were forced into UPE and denied opportunities to participate in general PE. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how UPE was developed and implemented in select U.S. schools and the impact on social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Interviews with twelve teachers who were directly involved in their UPE programs revealed the following four major themes: (1) our students were not being served appropriately, (2) a mix of PE standards and Special Olympics programming, (3) UPE is a choice, and (4) our students improved in many ways. The discussion examined the results in relation to the criticisms of UPE and how UPE proved to be a positive alternative to limited social interactions in general PE.

Keywords: unified physical education; disabilities; social interactions



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[Link to University of Virginia study](#)

(Accessible at the Unified PE Resources webpage.)

requesting healthier foods to carrying water bottles. **High 5 for Fitness**, when incorporated with Unified PE, reinforced nutrition, hydration, and endurance in ways students could understand and apply.

Perhaps most importantly, **Unified PE transformed school culture**. Students with disabilities gained visibility, friendships, and belonging, while peers developed empathy and advocacy. Teachers observed decreases in bullying, peers speaking up to defend classmates, and friendships continuing through group chats, weekend activities, and inclusive electives. As one educator put it, students carried themselves with new pride and confidence, while peers began to see them as “fun to be around.”

Overall, the study found that teachers feel **Unified PE provides them with a structured, equitable approach to reach every learner**. It embeds equity, belonging, and leadership into the school community, moving students from the margins to the center of school life. The result is healthier habits, stronger identities, and inclusive leadership that extend far beyond the classroom.

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (SOUCS) is a program that promotes social inclusion in schools (K–12 and college) by using sports and education to create a welcoming climate for all students, especially those with intellectual disabilities. The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools strategy is designed to be woven into the fabric of the school, enhancing current efforts and providing rich opportunities that lead to the creation of a socially inclusive school environment that supports and engages all learners.



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

A Unified Champion School implements 3 specific components:

1. **Special Olympics Unified Sports®**
2. **Inclusive Youth Leadership**
3. **Whole School Engagement**

Research on the Unified Champion Schools model has identified that schools in which all 3 components are interconnected and implemented become socially inclusive to a higher degree.¹



How Unified PE can support the 3 components:

1. **Special Olympics Unified Sports®**

- Hosting Unified Field Days for collaborative play
- Teaching and applying skills that can be applied to extra-curricular or community activities
- Integration of fitness, wellness, and lifetime activities
- Practicing teamwork, communication, and healthy lifestyles

2. **Inclusive Youth Leadership**

- Serving in Unified Clubs, leadership classes, student councils, National Junior Honor Society, or similar types of inclusive student groups
- Co-leading warm-ups, skill stations, or game rules in class
- Recognizing peers through weekly shout-outs for teamwork and inclusion
- Creating original games and teaching them to others

3. **Whole School Engagement**

- Promoting inclusive events such as pep rallies, awareness campaigns, or Fans in the Stands
- Hosting community days where families and local supporters join in on inclusive activities
- Recording student-led movement routines for school's morning announcements
- Inviting other classes to join Unified PE for special events and themed game days



Video: Join Tajha from Florida who introduces the core of a Special Olympics Unified Champion School.

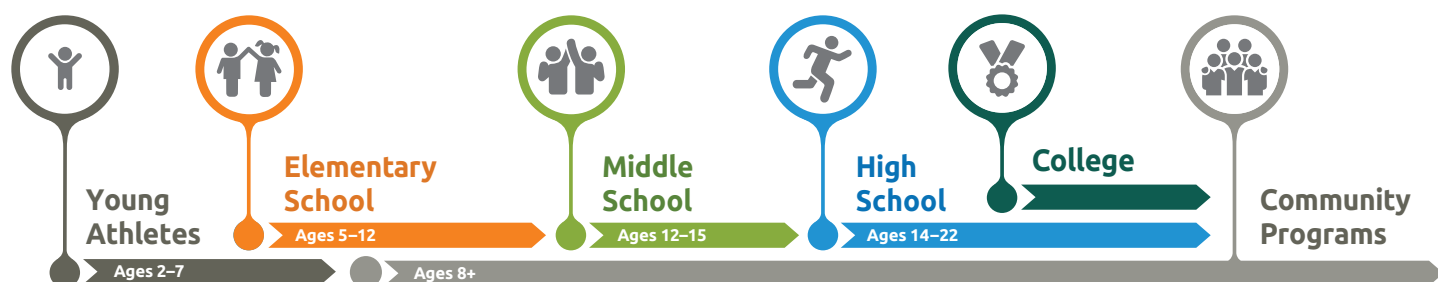
“ Unified PE is where achievement and recognition are for everyone.”

– Tajha, Unified PE Student



Watch all the Playbook videos at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE

Unified PE Progression Across School Levels



Unified Physical Education is a flexible model that *evolves with students as they grow*. At every school level, it reinforces the three core pillars of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®: **Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement**. Unified PE provides developmentally appropriate opportunities for students to learn, lead, and grow together.

Elementary School (Grades PreK–5)

Focus: *Exposure, Participation, Belonging*

- Introduces foundational motor skills and inclusive play using tools like **Special Olympics Young Athletes, Junior Athletes, High 5 for Fitness**.*
- Encourages peer modeling and partner activities to foster empathy and teamwork.
- Supports kindness campaigns and inclusive class rituals (e.g., greetings, peer shout-outs).
- Uses classroom visuals and other visual supports to create accessible routines.

Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Focus: *Exploration, Skill-Building, Identity*

- Expands sport-specific skills and collaborative group games with **Special Olympics' High 5 for Fitness** and **School of Strength**.*
- Introduces classroom leadership roles (e.g., motivator, station leader) and student-led warm-ups.
- Ties into Unified Clubs, spirit weeks, and campaigns advocating for kindness, belonging, and friendship.
- Uses **Unified Classroom** and student leadership resources to build identity and confidence.

“ Unified PE helps every student belong while creating leaders who influence the school beyond the gym.”

– Chad Williams, Educator and Unified Coach

High School (Grades 9–12)

Focus: *Empowerment, Leadership, Impact*

- Offers students real leadership roles (e.g., class facilitator, peer coach) and connections to Unified Sports.
- Provides fitness, strategy, and movement-based lessons that transfer to extracurriculars and career readiness.
- Encourages planning and leading school-wide inclusion events, assemblies, or wellness campaigns.
- Uses **Unified Classroom** modules, inclusive youth leadership guides, and **High 5 for Fitness** resources for deeper student involvement.*

Key Takeaway

Unified PE should not only be viewed as a standalone class, but also as a strategy that strengthens a school's overall commitment to equity and belonging. By bringing students together in meaningful physical education experiences, it creates opportunities for shared learning, leadership, and engagement across the student body. With the right support and resources, **Unified PE can help schools foster student growth, positive culture, and inclusive excellence.**

*See “Section 5: School Levels” for more detailed information of each level and available resources.





SECTION 2:

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

Steps to SUCCESS

Step 1: **Secure Support Networks**

Step 2: **Unify Around the Vision**

Step 3: **Clarify the Approach**

Step 4: **Construct the Class Structure**

Step 5: **Establish Inclusive Environments**

Step 6: **Strengthen through Training**

Step 7: **Sustain Growth**

Launching Unified PE takes more than excitement. It requires intentional planning, collaboration, and a willingness to rethink how we define success in physical education.

Whether you are piloting one class or building a district-wide program, the resources, research, and real-world examples already exist. You just need the roadmap.

“When we commit to Unified PE, we commit to a culture where every student belongs. This is not an add-on program; Unified reflects what we value as a district.”

— Dr. Steve Bebee, District Superintendent
Buckeye Union High School

Unified PE can create a space where leadership comes from empathy, success is measured in relationships, and movement is a vehicle for the community. According to national evaluations by the Center for Social Development and Education, school leaders report that Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® programs, including Unified PE, improve school climate and inclusion. Most students involved in Unified PE and other SOUCS activities reported feelings of belonging and positive identity development, increased the visibility of students with disabilities on campus, and improved social interactions campus wide².

Step 1: Secure Support Networks

Implementing a successful Unified Physical Education program requires a network of supporters who actively empower the educator, reduce administrative burdens, and create an environment where all students can thrive. **Unified PE works best when everyone contributes, from administrators to classmates.** The chart on the next page highlights how each group supports the program and where collaboration matters most. Use it as a quick reference during planning or kickoff meetings to clarify roles, share responsibility, and build shared ownership.



7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

ROLES AT A GLANCE

TASK	Educators	School Admin.	District Admin.	Support Staff	Parents & Guardians	Students
Program Oversight and Documentation	✓	✓		✓		
Secure Funding and Market Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Running Daily PE Class	✓			✓		✓
Providing Student Support and Modifications	✓			✓	✓	✓
Engaging Guardians and Community	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Engagement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Developing Leadership and Collaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Monitoring and Sustaining Program Success	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Unified PE Support System

Each role within Unified PE contributes to a cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable program. Clearly understanding individual responsibilities strengthens collaboration, promotes shared ownership, and prevents any one person from carrying the entire workload. These summaries outline how each group can contribute to a strong Unified PE environment.

“ Unified PE is not about having every answer in place before you start. It is about creating the conditions for students to move, learn, and lead together. With the right mindset and the right support, inclusion is possible in every school.”

– Allison Relyea, Physical Educator

EDUCATORS

- Serve as the main point of contact for Unified PE communication and coordination
- Connect with leadership for funding, scheduling, and policy support
- Manage documentation, communication, and program implementation
- Plan and deliver inclusive lessons, adapt equipment, and align with standards
- *Primary Focus:* Class expectations, inclusive teaching strategies, co-leadership with students, and adapted instruction
- *Ongoing Role:* Model inclusion, rotate student roles, lead class reflections, and collaborate with staff to adapt as needs change

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

ADMINISTRATORS

- Support scheduling, enrollment, and protected class time
- Allocate funding for equipment, transportation, and supplies
- Provide access to training and foster cross-department collaboration
- Assist with program visibility and long-term planning
- **Primary Focus:** Unified PE principles, staffing alignment, and inclusive school culture development
- **Ongoing Role:** Conduct regular check-ins, promote program visibility, and include Unified PE in strategic planning

SUPPORTERS

(PARENTS, GUARDIANS, VOLUNTEERS)

- Maintain communication with staff about student needs and progress
- Assist with transportation, classroom activities, and Unified PE events
- Reinforce inclusion and respect at home and in the community
- **Primary Focus:** Purpose of Unified PE, how to support inclusive behaviors, and ways to contribute to schoolwide efforts
- **Ongoing Role:** Stay engaged through communication, volunteer when available, and help strengthen the Unified message beyond the classroom

SUPPORT STAFF

- Provide in-class support, assist with routines, and manage student transitions
- Adapt lessons and equipment to ensure access for all students
- Help organize peer pairings and support behavior strategies
- **Primary Focus:** Inclusive communication, behavior support, activity modifications, and peer engagement
- **Ongoing Role:** Participate in planning sessions, attend refreshers, and adjust support based on evolving student needs

STUDENTS

- Serve as peer leaders and inclusion advocates
- Support classmates, co-leading activities, and modeling positive behavior
- Share feedback and help shape class routines and culture
- **Primary Focus:** Leadership development, communication, adaptability, conflict resolution, and mutual support
- **Ongoing Role:** Rotate through leadership roles, participate in class reflections, and remain active contributors to the class



Pro Tip

Avoid using Unified PE as a reward or behavioral incentive. Access to inclusion should never be conditional. It must be consistent, respected, and embedded into the culture of the school.

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

Step 2: Unify Around the Vision

Unified PE is more than just an inclusive setting; it reflects school values and an unwavering commitment to empowering students with connection, belonging, and purpose on campus. *Defining an unobstructed vision from the start ensures that Unified PE becomes a meaningful, sustainable part of your community, not an optional add-on or afterthought.* Be intentional about how Unified PE will operate and support your school’s goals for building social inclusion.

- **Prioritize Scheduling:** Unified PE merits a protected spot in the school’s master schedule during core instructional hours, not squeezed into gaps or relegated to optional periods.
- **Ensure Equal Access:** Students should have equal opportunity to participate, engage, and lead within the class.
- **Allocate Adequate Time:** Allow enough instructional time to meaningfully address **SHAPE America’s National Physical Education Standards** and to build real relationships.



- **Plan for Consistent Staffing:** Resolute, trained, supportive staff are critical to maintaining a high-quality Unified PE experience. Staffing should be intentional and aligned with other physical education classes, so it is recognized with curricular integrity.
- **Set Expectations Early:** Share your student-centered vision clearly. Ensure both students and colleagues see Unified PE as providing leadership and partnership experiences among students while they develop physical fitness and healthy lifestyle knowledge and skills.
- **Align with Key Unified PE Principles:** Unified PE fosters shared growth, leadership, and joy through movement. It prioritizes student experience while building fitness, motor skills, and lifelong wellness. Thoughtful enrollment strengthens friendships, leadership, and school culture. Every student is a full classmate, not a label, role, or category.

“Unified PE inspired me to lead as a Unified Club President, advocate for equity, and continue paving the way for others.”

– Chaad Jones, Unified PE Alumni

Step 3: Clarify the Approach

Unified PE resources and strategies can be implemented in a variety of ways, depending on a school’s schedule, staffing, and goals. *The chart below* outlines two of the more common approaches. One is the creation of a standalone Unified PE Class

and the other is utilizing Unified PE resources in an existing inclusive PE class. Regardless of the approach, success depends on intentional planning, strong collaboration, and a commitment to inclusion, leadership, and shared growth.

	Standalone Unified PE	Existing PE Class
Description	A dedicated PE class based on Unified PE principles. All students earn equal credit while building fitness, inclusion, and leadership skills.	Unified strategies embedded in general PE classes where students with and without disabilities participate using intentional inclusion practices.
Best For	Schools able to offer Unified PE as a credited course.	Schools with limited scheduling flexibility or those just getting started with Unified programming.
Benefits	• Consistent and sustainable structure • Clear data and progress tracking • Intentionally and universally designed content	• Scalable and accessible • Minimal schedule changes • Natural peer interaction • Promotes inclusive school culture

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

Step 4: Construct the Class Structure

Student participation is the foundation of a strong Unified PE program. *Building a well-balanced class starts with intentional outreach and thoughtful selection.* A diverse mix of students is key to fostering equity, connection, and meaningful participation. Unified PE thrives when students with disabilities learn and lead together. While a 1:1 ratio is ideal, the goal is to establish a group where everyone can connect, grow, and contribute. Prioritize students who bring leadership, empathy, and a positive presence to the class. If ratios are not exact, focus on creating a strong class culture, rotating roles to keep students engaged, and promoting flexible leadership opportunities for all students.

Recruitment Tips

- Collaborate to identify students who thrive in a Unified PE environment. This could include students, educators, counselors, and behavior specialists.
- Highlight leadership, camaraderie, and openness to new experiences during recruitment, not simply athletic ability, or availability.
- Use educator nominations, student interest surveys, and informational sessions to reach a broad and diverse group of potential participants.
- Offer QR code sign-ups, short presentations during advisory periods, morning announcements, lunch and passing periods, or distribute and post informational flyers to increase awareness and accessibility.

“Unified PE matters because it transforms PE from a class about physical strength into a movement about human strength.”

– Colleen Dickey, Character Coach

Step 5: Establish Inclusive Environments

Every Unified PE class looks different depending on available space, equipment, and student needs. Success starts with using what you have and adapting intentionally to support every learner. *Strong Unified PE programs are grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning*, using adapted equipment and sensory-friendly tools to ensure meaningful participation for all students.

A. Universal Design for Learning

Plan lessons with flexibility to ensure that every student has multiple entry points for success.

- Offer **diverse ways to participate**, such as throwing, kicking, rolling, or striking a ball.
- Provide **diverse ways to communicate**, including verbal prompts, visual signals, gestures, or choice boards.
- Recognize **diverse ways to demonstrate success**, such as completing a movement, showing leadership, leading a warm-up, or providing support to others.
- Rotate student leadership and support roles intentionally to engage students with a wide range of strengths and abilities.

B. Adapted Equipment

Adjust equipment to create safe, accessible opportunities for all students.

- Use **soft balls** to support catching, throwing, and kicking skills safely.
- Choose **textured grips** on equipment to assist with sensory needs and motor planning.
- Set up **color-coded zones** in activity spaces to provide clear visual organization.
- Introduce **lightweight or oversized equipment** such as beach balls, foam paddles, or extra-large targets to support success without reducing meaningful challenges.

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

C. Sensory-Friendly Tools

Design the class environment to support emotional regulation and sensory needs.

- Provide **visual support** such as First/Then boards, station visuals, and cue cards to structure activities clearly.
- Use **timers** that are visual or auditory to prepare students for smooth transitions.
- Establish **quiet spaces** or calming areas where students can take short breaks if needed.
- Offer **noise-canceling headphones**, fidget tools, or calming movement activities to assist students in regulating attention and engagement.



“Unified PE helped students build new skills and foster an inclusive environment across our school community through cooperative play, fitness activities, and shared sports skills.”

– Amber Burwell, School Psychologist
Agua Fria High School



Pro Tips

Building Your Inclusive Environment

- Collaborate with school staff across different departments to find creative support.
- Build and share a Wish List early each semester with families, booster clubs, local businesses, and community supporters. Simple donations such as foam balls, cones, clipboards, visual supports, or sensory tools can significantly enhance the class environment.
- Design in ways that support the whole group without singling out individual students.
- Remember to start small, adapt with intention, and continue evolving the environment based on student needs, feedback, and observed growth.
- Use the **Unified Champion Schools Social Inclusion Scale** for staff, students, and family to gauge the current impact and track growth of your program.

Download the PDF at
resources.specialolympics.org/UPE

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

Step 6: Strengthen through Training

A strong Unified PE program starts with *intentional orientation and ongoing training that prepares students, staff, and supporters to lead with confidence*. When everyone is equipped and involved, the result is a more connected, inclusive class culture that lasts.



“Once our students and staff were trained on what Unified PE looks like in practice, the class shifted from trial and error to confidence and collaboration. Everyone knew how to contribute, which made the experience meaningful for all.”

– Abigail Lyon, Unified PE Educator

A. Running an Effective Orientation

Orientation should build understanding, connection, and community from the start:

- It should be active, engaging, and rooted in real-life applications.
- Go beyond class rules and use stories, videos, or alumni voices to bring Unified PE to life.
- Introduce students to the core values of inclusion, respect, and shared leadership.
- Clarify that all participants are equal classmates, not helpers or observers, and set the tone for collaboration and growth. This foundation guides behavior, relationships, and expectations throughout the year.

B. Training Your Support System

Unified PE thrives when students, staff, and supporters understand their roles and feel equipped to lead. Effective training should build clarity, confidence, and shared responsibility. Focus on class expectations, inclusive communication, peer interaction, and leadership development. The goal is to ensure that every person involved knows how to contribute meaningfully to the classroom environment. Below are key areas to address during training and how each group can take action afterward to support an inclusive, student-centered Unified PE experience:

- **Staff** should be trained in supporting classroom routines, adapting equipment, modeling inclusive behavior, and encouraging peer leadership. After training, they can co-plan lessons, use consistent cues, rotate student roles, and troubleshoot barriers with the teaching staff.
- **Students** should learn how to be peer leaders, offer respectful support, communicate across abilities, and co-lead class tasks. After training, they can rotate leadership roles, give feedback to classmates, lead warm-ups, and help shape class culture.
- **Supporters** such as families, aides, and volunteers should understand the purpose of Unified PE, reinforce values at home, and support classroom or event coordination. Their ongoing role includes staying informed, modeling inclusive language, and participating when possible.

C. Sustaining a Unified Culture

Orientation and training should be revisited throughout the year. Reinforce expectations through classroom huddles, leadership meetings, and role rotation. *Use student feedback, class reflections, and informal check-ins to adapt and improve. Involve students in shaping the class experience so they feel ownership.* When training is ongoing and shared responsibility is clear, Unified PE becomes more than a class. It has become a lasting part of the school's culture.

7 Steps to Starting Unified PE

Step 7: Sustain Growth

Strong Unified Physical Education programs are not only built on great practices but *are sustained through intentional growth, strategic planning, and schoolwide integration*. Long-term success depends on expanding access, developing leadership, tracking meaningful impact, and ensuring the program can thrive through changes in staff, schedule, or structure.

- **Align with Standards:** Unified PE can stand on its own or align with a strong framework for physical education like **SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards**. National Standards-aligned guides are available at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE for those who wish to integrate standards.
- **Expand Your Program:** Grow your reach by adding class periods, looping students into multiple years, or connecting with Unified Sports and leadership pathways. Collaborate with general physical education staff and feeder schools to build lasting impact.
- **Build Leadership:** Train educators, support staff, and students to share responsibility. Strong programs are supported by a team of collaborators, not just one leader.
- **Use Data to Improve:** Track participation, reflections, and growth to guide instruction and advocate for support.
- **Celebrate and Share:** Use newsletters, social media, and events to highlight success and build community awareness.
- **Strengthen Partnerships:** Work with administrators, families, and community organizations to secure resources and long-term support.
- **Use Inclusion Scales:** Reflect on student, staff, and family experiences with Unified Inclusion Scales to identify strengths and areas for growth.
- **Plan for Continuity:** Prepare adaptable lessons and sub-ready materials to keep the program running through transitions. Sample lessons are available on the Unified PE Resources webpage.

“We have just naturally provided space for students to be themselves and to participate to the best of their ability regardless of whether or not they have a disability.”⁶

– David Dore, Special Education Director



VIDEO: U.S. Youth Ambassador Donzel from Illinois walks us through what Unified Physical Education looks like at his high school. There is a spark of connection when he steps into Unified PE. Peers with and without disabilities learn, move, and grow together in a setting built on joy and respect. Educators describe how simple games become moments of leadership and belonging. As one educator explains, “Students with and without disabilities participate together in physical activities that promote leadership skills, emotional learning, and empowerment.” The inclusive culture established in the gym prepares students to thrive in PE, in the classroom, and throughout their school community.



Watch all the Playbook videos at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Key Takeaway

Unified PE is not just a class, it is the starting line for inclusion. That first step creates opportunities for leadership, connection, and community that reach far beyond the gym or classroom. *Celebrate progress over perfection.* Unified PE is not about flawless instruction; it is about creating a place where every student can show up as themselves, take equal part in physical activity, build lasting relationships, and feel valued. *Getting started does not have to be perfect; it just must start.*



SECTION 3: Building an Inclusive Class Culture

Unified PE Language and Identification Guidance

Creating a welcoming class culture means more than inviting students into space. It requires consistent, intentional efforts to ensure that all students feel emotionally safe, physically comfortable, and socially empowered.

Unified PE creates a community where every participant is seen primarily as a valued individual, not defined by labels. Special Olympics strives for all people to use person-first language, recognizing each student's identity, strengths, and contributions beyond any disability or role designation. Use the following guidance when referring to people respectfully and inclusively:

- **Use names first.** Labels are secondary and should only be used when context, safety, or equitable participation requires clarification.
- **Respectfully ask** how a person prefers to be identified and use the language they choose.
- **Avoid defining** or introducing students by disability status unless it directly supports understanding, organization, or fairness. Always follow privacy laws and school policies.
- **Focus on strengths, skills, and contributions** rather than disability or differences.

“The goal of Unified PE on our campus is to connect, grow, and create a space where every student is seen, heard, and valued.”

– Brittany Meola, Educator and Unified Coach

ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE: Person-First and Inclusive Alternatives

Every student deserves to feel safe, supported, and part of the group. Some people may not always know what to say or how to encourage others. Use simple, plain language to guide meaningful interactions. The *diagram at the top right* shows person-first language prompts and inclusive responses that support participation, clarify expectations, and create a culture of belonging in Unified Physical Education.



Instead of Saying:

“The wheelchair-bound student”

“The kiddos”

“Why are you acting out?”

“Stop that right now!”

“He can’t do that”

Say Instead:

“The student” or
“the student who uses a wheelchair”

“The students”

“How can I help you right now?”

“Let’s pause and take a breath together”

“Let’s try it together”

“In Unified PE, people see me as a person first, not a label. That respect made me feel like I truly belonged.”

– Braydon Ayers, Unified PE Student

Unified PE Language and Identification Guidance

Approaches for Purpose-Driven Inclusion

A quality inclusive experience should result in students with disabilities feeling a sense of belonging, feeling accepted, and feeling valued.³

Use the chart below to guide responses when a student seems unsure, overwhelmed, or disconnected. These strategies are simple, effective, and supportive, helping all students feel seen and included.



Situation	What to Do	What You Can Say
Will not join an activity	Offer simple choices	"Should we toss the ball or roll the ball?"
Seems unsure what to do	Model, then invite	"Watch me first, then we'll try it together!"
Is not talking or seems shy	Ask a simple question or share a fact to build trust	"What's your favorite color?" or "Do you like dogs or cats better?"
Walks away or shuts down	Offer a break nearby, then rejoin group when ready	"It is okay. I will wait here with you until we are ready to join in again."
Talks too much or interrupts	Gently guide turn-taking	"Let's wait for our turn. You can go after me!"
Gets off-topic or distracted	Acknowledge, then redirect with a gentle prompt	"That is cool! Let's finish this first, then you can tell me more."
Does something well	Celebrating effort and success	"You rocked that! Want to show me how you did it?"
Gets upset or overwhelmed	Lower your energy, offer calm	"Let's take a quick break together." or "We can ask the teacher what to do."
Says something unkind	Gently redirect with kindness	"Let's be nice. It is okay if we make mistakes. Let's say kind words."



“Unified PE is not just a class. It is a mindset that empowers people to truly experience the power of inclusion and transforms the heart of a school community. The goal is not uniformity, but shared growth and belonging.”

– Travis Haley,
Educator and District Unified Coordinator

Creating Supportive and Inclusive Environments

This section offers educators practical tools and strategies to create environments rooted in trust, connection, and continuous growth. The approaches can be adapted for any school level or ability, with an emphasis on shared ownership and inclusive learning. The goal is to foster a space where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Daily Routines that Build Trust

Consistent routines help students feel secure and confident in their learning environment. When expectations are consistent and visible, students can anticipate what comes next, build independence, and focus on engaging with peers and content. Effective daily routines may include:

- **Emotional check-ins** using tools such as emoji cards, mood meters, or draw-a-face trackers
- **Visual schedules or First-Then boards** posted and reviewed regularly
- **Clearly displayed class roles** that rotate weekly to promote shared leadership
- **Established signals or cues** for transitions, breaks, and class wrap-ups



Pro Tip

Celebrating moments of kindness, persistence, and peer support helps shape positive behavior without relying on control or compliance. The goal is to guide students toward connections, not corrections.

Strategies for Building Responsive Classrooms

The physical and emotional environment of a class shapes how students engage, regulate, and connect with others. A truly responsive classroom is calm, consistent, and intentionally organized to meet a wide range of needs. When the environment supports predictability, safety, and dignity, students are more likely to succeed.

1. SENSORY SUPPORTS

Thoughtful sensory support can prevent distress and help students regulate in real time. Consider integrating the following into your class space:

- **Designated calm-down areas** with soft lighting, familiar comfort items, and clear visual supports
- **Optional sensory tools** such as noise-reducing headphones, sunglasses, or weighted objects
- **Labeled zones, floor markers, and consistent room layouts** to provide structure and orientation
- **Reduction of overstimulating input** such as loud sounds, flashing lights, or rapid transitions

2. SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES

Students thrive when adults model calm, consistent behaviors and anticipate moments of challenge or transition. Build regulation and readiness using:

- **A calm tone of voice, clear gestures, and body language** that reinforces emotional safety
- **Preview strategies** including countdowns, verbal cues, or visual prompts before transitions
- **Flexible, non-punitive options** for students to pause, reset, or step away when overwhelmed

3. VISUAL ENVIRONMENT TIPS

- **Keep displays clean and uncluttered** to minimize visual stress
- **Use calming colors and consistent signage** for cues and routines
- **Label frequently used areas** with both words and pictures to promote independence

4. INCLUSIVE SEATING AND MOVEMENT OPTIONS

- **Offer flexible seating choices** such as standing desks, wobble stools, or floor cushions
- **Provide opportunities for movement** throughout the class, not only during transitions
- **Allow for preferred seating locations** based on sensory, social, or focus needs without framing them as rewards

5. CONSISTENT ROUTINES THAT REDUCE ANXIETY

- **Display daily or class period schedules** with icons or photos
- **Include visual or verbal countdowns** before changes in activity or location
- **Start and end each class with a consistent ritual** such as a greeting, check-in, or debrief circle

6. RESTORATION AND RECONNECTION TOOLS

- **Peace Corners or Reset Zones:** Designate areas for reflection instead of punishment. Include fidgets, calming visuals, and positive affirmations
- **Repair Circles or Micro-Restorative Check-ins:** Use small group or one-on-one conversations to address harm and rebuild connection
- **Check-In and Check-Out Sheets:** Provide students with an effortless way to reflect on emotions, goals, or peer dynamics at the start and end of class

7. CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES

- **Teach students to name what they are feeling** using tools like emotion scales or mood meters
- **Pair students with calming partners** or use “regulation buddies” who can walk, breathe, or fidget together with adult support
- **Model breathing techniques or grounding strategies** during class transitions or high-stress moments



Adult Leadership in Unified PE

Support staff are essential in creating strong, inclusive PE environments. Their role is not limited to helping; they co-lead learning experiences, model relationships, and support students in building confidence and independence. To strengthen collaboration:

- **Hold regular team check-ins** to review student needs and adjust supports
- **Share tools** such as participation trackers or goal charts
- **Clarify staff roles visually** and rotate them periodically
- **Debrief at the end of class** to reflect and plan
- **Use shared hand signals or visual cues** to communicate during class

Vignette: Support Staff as Leaders

Ms. Lippy, an elementary support staff, noticed Billy withdrawing during group games. She offered him a visual choice board, but Billy stayed hesitant. A peer then gave Billy a Try Again Card, signaling he could pause and rejoin when ready. Billy accepted, took a short break, and later returned to the game. During the class debrief, Ms. Lippy highlighted how the Try Again Card created space for Billy's re-entry. The class agreed to adopt the cards as a shared strategy so every student could own inclusive supports.

MODELING AND SUPPORTING ADULT LEADERSHIP

- **Model inclusive practices** and collaborative problem-solving in real time
- **Use consistent visual supports** and consistent cues to foster a safe class environment
- **Reinforce staff contributions** and leadership through feedback and reflection
- **Adjust supports** based on observed student needs and class dynamics
- **Encourage co-leadership** with students to promote independence and voice

SUPPORT STAFF LEADERSHIP ROLES

- **Encourager:** Celebrates student effort and provides calm reassurance
- **Facilitator:** Guides transitions, activities, or peer support with visual tools
- **Safety Monitor:** Ensures equipment setup, spacing, and movement safety
- **Behavior Support:** Uses de-escalation tools and proactive prompts
- **Communication Partner:** Uses visuals, devices, or gestures to support participation
- **Environment Manager:** Helps organize materials, set up visuals, or manage sensory supports
- **Co-Teacher:** Joins instruction, models engagement, and supports classroom flow

Best Practices for Support Staff

- **Plan collaboratively** to review student needs and prepare adaptations.
- **Use shared tools** such as checklists or trackers to monitor engagement.
- **Float between stations** to provide responsive support.
- **Debrief at the end of class** to discuss successes and challenges.
- **Rotate staff roles** to match strengths and build new skills.
- **Scaffold student participation** with the goal of promoting independence.
- **Know and use basic de-escalation techniques** consistently.
- **Follow a clear communication chain** when issues arise.
- **Involve all staff** in classroom planning and goal setting.
- **Clarify daily responsibilities** using visual boards or clipboards.
- **Use silent cues or hand signals** during class to stay coordinated.
- **Be prepared to respond** to medical needs or emergencies.
- **Celebrate** student and staff success weekly.
- **Keep student goals at the center** of all support strategies.



Pro Tip

Unified PE programs are strongest when every adult understands their role, shares ownership of class success, and stays focused on empowering every student.



Student Leadership in Unified PE

In Unified PE, leadership is a shared responsibility. Every student can contribute meaningfully to the group.

Inclusive youth leadership is not about being perfect or taking charge. It is about showing effort, encouraging others, adapting to challenges, and helping the group stay connected. Students grow into leadership roles when they are given consistent opportunities to:

- **Build confidence** through peer modeling and participation
- **Develop empathy** by encouraging and supporting classmates
- **Practice communication** using words, visuals, or gestures
- **Reflect** on successes and challenges as a team



Pro Tip

Provide laminated role cards with visuals or emojis to support students who communicate nonverbally. Rotate roles weekly to give every student a chance to lead.

Vignette: Students as Leaders

During warm-ups, Jobin, a student who uses a speech device, led the class through his favorite stretches. He used visual icons on his device to cue each movement while the class followed. By the end, Jobin typed, “I led fitness!” on his device and the students clapped together. One peer said, “You crushed it, Jobin”, and another high-fived him. Leadership can thrive when every student is given space and support.

1. MODELING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT LEADERSHIP

- **Use simple gestures** or call-and-response cues to prompt peer modeling
- **Reinforce leadership traits** by naming them in real time: “That was kindness,” or “You used initiative”
- **Offer visual role cards** or icon-based reminders to guide student jobs
- **Encourage multiple leadership styles**, including quiet, supportive, and behind-the-scenes roles

2. STUDENT LEADERSHIP ROLES

- **Encourager:** Gives positive feedback and cheers on classmates
- **Demonstrator:** Models a movement, skill, or activity

- **Communicator:** Uses gestures or tools to lead transitions or cue routines
- **Support Buddy:** Checks in with peers or offers help and breaks
- **Problem Solver:** Finds creative adaptations or solutions during tasks
- **Equipment Captain:** Helps set up and clean up materials safely
- **Advocacy Liaison:** Shares highlights using voice, visuals, or assistive communication

3. BUILDING LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Leadership goes beyond classroom roles. It includes opportunities for reflection, responsibility, and recognition. Leadership in Unified PE means helping others feel included, respected, and ready

to participate. Every student can grow as a leader through structure, encouragement, and guided opportunities. These strategies help students build the skills needed for school, sports, and life.

4. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

- **Leadership Journals:** Students reflect using words, visuals, or assistive tools
- **Student-Led Events:** Plan Unified Field Days or class celebrations
- **Peer Mentorship:** Pair experienced students with new classmates
- **Recognition Systems:** Feature students in newsletters, assemblies, or announcements
- **Leadership Workshops:** Offer short sessions on teamwork, communication, and goal setting



Pro Tip

Adjust tools to match student age, ability level, and class culture. Developmentally aligned versions for elementary, middle, and high school students can be found on the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).



SECTION 4: Access for All

Accommodations by Need Area

Creating access to Unified PE means going beyond surface-level inclusion. The support listed below reflects shared areas of need and offers developmentally appropriate modifications that can be used across school levels. These examples are essential tools for engagement, not just optional add-ons. Each can be adjusted to fit the individual needs, abilities, and learning styles of students to increase access, independence, and participation.

1. Mobility Support

- Widen movement lanes, shorten travel distances, and avoid uneven or slippery surfaces.
- Provide adapted equipment like PVC walkers, scooter boards, lap trays, or chest-height targets.
- Allow participation on the floor or with peer assistance when needed.

2. Vision Support

- Use high-contrast visuals, bold colors, and tactile floor markers like Velcro strips or raised tape.
- Allow students to preview and manage equipment before beginning an activity.
- Offer verbal orientation and audio instructions and use peers for navigation when needed.

3. Hearing Support

- Use hand signals, symbol cue cards (e.g., “pause,” “switch”), and visual timers instead of music or verbal-only cues.
- Face students when speaking and reinforce directions with written or pictorial visuals.
- Pair students with peers for modeling and clarification.



Pro Tip

Do not ask “*Can they do this?*” Instead ask “*How can we make sure this works for them?*”

4. For Sensory-Avoiding Students

- Offer opt-out or break cards, noise-reducing headphones, and non-stimulating materials.
- Designate low-stimulation zones with fidgets, floor cushions, or calm visuals.
- Avoid unexpected loud sounds, strong smells, or touch-based tasks unless student-approved.



5. For Sensory-Seeking Students

- Incorporate textured materials, resistance-based tools (e.g., bands, weighted balls), and “heavy work” tasks.
- Use motivating sensory items like crunchy snacks (if allowed), scented lip balm, or pressure vests.
- Provide movement-rich roles or frequent movement breaks.

6. Communication Access

- Use low-tech supports like symbol boards, visual choice cards, or emoji charts.
- Offer mid- and high-tech tools such as laminated communication flips, speech buttons, or AAC apps (e.g., Proloquo2Go, LAMP, Snap Core First, CoughDrop, TouchChat HD, Go Talk NOW).
- Implement a total communication approach using movement, gesture, visual, and verbal responses.
- Use pairing systems for gesture modeling and student-to-student communication

Accommodations by Need Area

7. Cognitive Processing

- Break instructions into one- or two-step chunks using consistent, repeated language.
- Provide visual task sequences, storyboards, or station preview cards.
- Allow extra processing time and use peer mirroring for modeling.
- Build routine into class structure to increase predictability and reduce anxiety.

8. Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

- Provide calm-down visuals, scheduled or student-requested break options, and emotion check-ins at stations.
- Use breathing strategies or mirror modeling from adults or peers.
- Reinforce expected behavior with visual praise systems, token boards, or quiet recognition.
- Allow space without punishment during dysregulation and offer a restart plan when ready.

9. Executive Function and Attention

- Offer task preview cards, visual or auditory timers, and consistent transition cues across stations.
- Use “task done” cards or laminated checklists to support focus and task completion.
- Assign leads who offer gentle prompting and encouragement.

10. Peer and Social Interaction

- Assign structured student roles such as modeling leader, station leader, or visual cue leader.
- Use pre-taught small group norms and cooperative tasks to encourage interaction.
- Providing laminated conversation starters or gesture prompts to support communication.
- Celebrate collaboration through shared goals or small group-based encouragement routines.

11. Medical and Health Needs

- Ensure emergency plans are accessible to all staff and visible in the PE space.
- Include low-exertion or seating options in each rotation or station.
- Offer frequent hydration breaks, access to shade, and rest stations that do not remove students from participation.

12. Cultural and Language Inclusion

- Label equipment and stations in students’ home languages whenever possible.
- Utilize bilingual peer support and visual scaffolds for multilingual learners.
- Incorporate culturally relevant movement styles, games, or warm-up music into activities.

Inclusion is not one-size-fits-all, and effective practices must be culturally responsive and reflective of the communities they serve. The **Special Olympics Young Athletes American Indian/Alaska Native Implementation Guide** is designed for American Indian and Alaska Native communities, weaving foundational movement skills with traditional games, tribal languages, and local food traditions. This approach helps young children build physical confidence through play while honoring cultural identity. For additional guidance and implementation support, see the full *Special Olympics Young Athletes American Indian/Alaska Native Implementation Guide* at the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).



Equipment Adaptations and Modifications

Unified PE is about creating a culture where every student feels recognized, supported, and empowered to participate fully.

Adapted and modified practices create **space for all** students to learn, collaborate, and take ownership of their participation. **Adaptations** are intentional changes to equipment, rules, space, or instruction to promote safety, equity, and growth. Adaptations keep the target skill the same (i.e., lighter ball, lower rim, larger target, textured grip, brighter tape. Adaptations increase access without lowering expectations.) **Modifications** change the performance target so students can participate. Modifications change the target (i.e., oversized target that turns “near” into full credit, foam javelin with a much shorter required distance).

Adapted equipment can be essential for creating safe and successful PE experiences for all students. By adjusting equipment, educators can reduce injury risk, increase access, and support skill development. These changes ensure all students can participate meaningfully and confidently, regardless of their ability.



EQUIPMENT	Suggested Substitution
Balance beam	Tape or rope
Hula hoop	Bicycle tubes or old tires
Kickball	Deflated playground ball, soft foam ball, or beach ball
Kicking tee	Rolled-up towel or soft wedge-shaped object
Large PE mats	Carpet squares, yoga mats, or blankets
Medicine ball	Stuffed animal, wrapped towel with weight
Parachute	Large piece of fabric or a sheet
Relay baton	Paper towel tube, rolled-up paper, or foam noodle segment
Resistance band	Tights, pantyhose, or stretchable cloth
Ring toss set	Plastic bottles and rings made from pipe cleaners or paper plates
Speed ladder	Chalk or tape lines drawn on the ground
Sport cones	Boxes or plastic soda bottles filled with sand
Step ladder	Floor markers, tape levels, or stacked boxes
Weighted ball	Sock filled with rice, sand, or beans
Whistle	Hand clap signal, tambourine, or bell

“When we use adaptations and modifications, every student can join in safely and meaningfully. It not only supports participation but also builds acceptance and a stronger school climate.”

– Melissa Pang, Unified PE Educator



Pro Tips

- **Adapt and accommodate tasks and tools** so every student can take part and build physical, social, and emotional skills.
- **Plan with universal design** by offering multiple ways to see, hear, and do the skill, using visuals and timers, and providing leveled options for the same outcome.
- **Maximize active time** by duplicating equipment, running small-sided formats, and keeping layouts consistent so students always know where to go.
- **Make the environment readable** with high-contrast targets, taped zones, rotation cards, and clear light or clap starts.
- **Teach with short, repeatable routines** by modeling once, mirroring with a partner, and using timed work and rest intervals.
- **Adjust the task before the target** by starting with adaptations to rules, equipment, space, and prompts, using modifications only when needed, and fading them as skills improve.
- **Assess flexibly** by crediting attempts, personal bests, and cooperative metrics such as rally length or total team passes.

Effective Assessment Strategies

Successful assessments in Unified PE require a flexible, student-centered approach that honors individual strengths and needs.

Traditional assessments often overlook students with disabilities, language barriers, or diverse learning styles. By incorporating multiple methods such as observations, peer feedback, self-assessments, visual tools, and performance tasks, educators can better capture meaningful student growth. These strategies are adaptable across all school levels and should be tailored to each student. For expanded guidance, detailed examples, and printable tools, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).

1. Reflection and Self-Assessment

- **Implementation:** Use exit tickets, sentence starters, or check-in scales
- **Differentiation:** Allow verbal, movement-based, or pictorial reflections
- **IEP Integration:** Track progress toward individual IEP physical activity goals
- **Best for Students Who:** Need structured self-reflection, benefit from goal setting, or require simple participation tools

2. Visual Assessments

- **Implementation:** Use drawings, smiley face scales, or color-coded responses
- **Differentiation:** Provide options like stickers or verbal responses
- **IEP Integration:** Use custom visual boards aligned to communication needs
- **Best for Students Who:** Struggle with written or verbal expression



Explore adaptations, modifications, visuals, and planning tools for a wide range of activities and ability levels at the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).



Assessment Strategies

3. Performance-Based Assessments

- **Implementation:** Demonstrate skills through movement tasks, partner work, or sport drills
- **Differentiation:** Adjust task difficulty, cues, or equipment as needed
- **IEP Integration:** Aligns with motor, coordination, or endurance goals
- **Best for Students Who:** Learn best through hands-on demonstrations

4. Project-Based Assessments

- **Implementation:** Complete longer-term tasks like fitness plans, inclusive game designs, or progress logs
- **Differentiation:** Use templates, visuals, audio options, or guided checkpoints
- **IEP Integration:** Supports planning, communication, and reflection goals
- **Best for Students Who:** Benefit from structured, creative, or extended-time tasks

5. Student Feedback

- **Implementation:** Have partner and group discussions for communication practice
- **Differentiation:** Use sentence starters and visuals for support
- **IEP Integration:** Aligns with communication, self-advocacy, and participation goals
- **Best for Students Who:** Need structure or benefit from collaboration

6. Observation-Based Assessments

- **Implementation:** Use **SHAPE America National Standards** aligned tools for skills and participation 
- **Differentiation:** Track based on effort and engagement
- **IEP Integration:** Customize for incremental behavior or skill progress
- **Best for Students Who:** Benefit from qualitative rather than standardized data

7. Modified Written Assessments

- **Implementation:** Use visuals, multiple choice with pictures, or verbal tasks
- **Differentiation:** Offer speech-to-text or simplified formats
- **IEP Integration:** Reflect literacy or comprehension accommodations
- **Best for Students Who:** Have difficulty with traditional written formats

8. Technology-Based Assessments

- **Implementation:** Use videos, tracking apps, or QR-linked reviews
- **Differentiation:** Integrate assistive tools or self-assessment software
- **IEP Integration:** Use speech-to-text or digital progress tracking tools
- **Best for Students Who:** Need speech-to-text, visual feedback, or tech-assisted tracking



Unique Safety Considerations for Students with Disabilities

Ensuring safety in Unified PE is essential, particularly for students with disabilities, who may experience challenges with motor planning, sensory processing, and spatial awareness.

The strategies below outline key safety considerations and how to implement them effectively.

Safety Consideration	Implementation Guidance
Clear and Structured Routines	- Establish consistent class routines with visual schedules, consistent start/end signals, and structured transitions to help students anticipate what comes next. - Use visual timers, countdowns, and simple step-by-step instructions to reinforce expectations and reduce anxiety about changes in activities.
Environmental Modifications	- Keep play areas free of unnecessary obstacles and ensure clear, open movement spaces to prevent tripping or collisions. - Use contrasting colors for boundary markers to help students visually differentiate between activity zones. Minimize auditory and visual distractions by limiting background noise and avoiding flashing lights or overly stimulating environments.
Visual and Auditory Cues	- Implement floor markers, picture cues, and hand signals to assist students who process information better visually. - Use consistent auditory cues (e.g., whistles, chimes, or countdowns) to signal transitions between activities.
Supervision and Support	- Ensure support staff and students are actively engaged in monitoring student safety. - Assign students as Activity Leads to provide additional support and guidance. - Use small group rotations for activities that require more individualized attention.
Adapted Equipment and Space Use	- Use soft, foam-coated equipment to minimize impact and prevent injuries. - Offer stable seating options (e.g., adaptive benches, floor cushions, or supportive chairs) for students who need balance assistance. - Adjust playing fields, game rules, and participation areas based on student mobility and sensory needs.
Emergency Preparedness	- Train all staff and peer mentors on emergency procedures, modified evacuation plans, and individualized student safety needs. - Establish a pair system to ensure students are together throughout campus and in case of an emergency. - Create simple, easy-to-understand emergency drills that use visuals and verbal cues to explain safety procedures.
Behavioral and Sensory Support	- Offer sensory-friendly spaces for students who may become overwhelmed and need a quiet break. - Provide noise-canceling headphones, weighted vests, or fidget tools to regulate sensory input. - Use positive reinforcement strategies, such as reward charts or verbal encouragement, to motivate and reinforce safe behaviors.
Physical Support and Movement Adaptations	- Adapt movements for students with mobility challenges by offering seated or supported exercise alternatives (e.g., chair yoga, assisted stretching). - Provide gentle physical guidance only with consent and proper training to avoid discomfort. - Allow alternative participation options like hand-over-hand assistance, visual modeling, or adapted movements to ensure all students can engage safely.

Visual Support Toolbox

Visual support is not just for students with communication needs; they benefit all learners by making routines, transitions, and expectations clearer and more consistent. A strong Unified PE class uses a variety of visual strategies across settings and ability levels.

Category	Purpose	Examples	 Pro Tips
Routines & Structure Tools 	Help all students anticipate what is coming next and stay engaged	• Visual daily schedule (icons/photos) • First/Then boards • Task strips (e.g., “A. Get equipment; B. Stand on dot; C. Try 3 times”) • Transition timers (sand timers, countdowns)	Use magnets or Velcro strips to change activities or color code by day of the week.
Movement & Activity Tools 	Clarify motor patterns, expectations, and safe zones	• Action cue cards (jump, throw, rest) • Start/Stop paddles (e.g., “go feet”; “freeze hands”) • Boundary visuals (tape paths, colored dots) • Visual rule posters (with real student photos)	Create a “Visual Playbook” to preview routines with students.
Behavior & Regulation Tools 	Support emotional recognition and self-management strategies	• Self-regulation choice boards (Zones of Regulation) • Break cards (laminated or dry-erase) • Calm-down visual guides (e.g., “Breathe”; “Sit”) • Noise-level indicators (e.g., color-coded volumes)	Post a “What helps me feel calm” chart; use Zones of Regulation visuals.
Communication & Choice Boards 	Empower students to express their needs and preferences	• PE-specific symbol boards (help, start, break) • Portable choice boards (“Which game?”) • Wearable cue cards (lanyards, wristbands) • Whiteboard or tablet draw/speak options	Do not forget high-contrast versions for low-vision students.
Technology-Enhanced Visuals 	Bring flexibility and personalization to supports	• Visual timer apps (Time Timer, Choiceworks) • AAC apps (Proloquo2Go, LAMP, Snap Core First, CoughDrop, TouchChat HD, Go Talk NOW) • Interactive PE schedules – Digital modeling (videos of routines, class rules)	Assign a student “Technology Lead” to reset devices and check settings.
Meaningful Involvement 	Ensure every student can participate regardless of ability, background, or support needs	• Student role visuals, cue cards, participation menus (e.g., “Try, Watch, Lead”) • Modified scoring/rules visuals for equity in games • Highlighted class norms like “Same Game, Different Way”	Use guides and leadership visuals to reinforce inclusion across all school levels.



SECTION 5: School Levels

Elementary School

Middle School

High School

Elementary School Level Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)



Special Olympics
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Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

Elementary Unified Physical Education (Unified PE) creates a foundation for inclusive movement experiences where every student feels welcomed, supported, and motivated to participate.

At this school level, the focus is on blending skill-building with joy, establishing routines, supporting sensory needs, and introducing early opportunities for leadership. This stage of Unified PE emphasizes confidence, cooperation, and flexibility, meeting students where they are developmentally. Whether students are learning to walk in a line, greet their peers, or leading a stretching circle, they are given meaningful ways to contribute and connect.

“Starting Unified PE in elementary school establishes inclusion as the norm, not the exception. Students build social skills and confidence that carry across classrooms and playgrounds.”

– Lori Schmursal, Physical Education Educator

This section includes developmentally appropriate strategies, visuals, classroom tools, and instructional tips designed to help educators create structured, engaging, and inclusive learning environments for students in grades PreK through 5. For full access to lesson plans, printable visuals, and planning tools, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#). There you will find structured content from Special Olympics **Young Athletes**, **Junior Athletes**, **High 5 for Fitness**, **Strong Minds Activity Guide**, and **Unified Classroom**.



These resources offer detailed activities, sensory support, leadership development tools, and inclusive fitness materials to help you create a well-rounded Unified PE program.

Unit Structure

A class period may begin with a group warm-up using movement songs or simple routines from **Young Athletes**, such as “Follow the Leader” or circle-time greetings that encourage turn-taking and social interaction. The main activity may focus on core skills like jumping, balancing, or throwing, using visual supports, and cues from **Junior Athletes** skill cards to guide students through each task. Students can rotate through inclusive stations such as “Roll to the Target,” “Cone Stack Relay,” or “Catch and Step Back,” with peer partners and roles like line leader, cone helper, or cheer starter to promote active participation. Class ends with a calming cooldown using **Strong Minds** breathing visuals or stretch cards, followed by a quick student reflection through drawing a face, using an emotion icon, or sharing one word about how they felt. This routine reinforces classroom structure, builds self-awareness, and helps every student feel included and connected.



Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

Lesson Plans

To access resources that can help construct optimal lesson plans, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#). These age-appropriate resources promote movement, cooperation, leadership, and inclusion through physical activity, with flexible formats for classrooms, gyms, or outdoor spaces. Educators can also integrate leadership opportunities, sport education, sensory planning tools, and behavior tracking templates to ensure all students are engaged and supported.

Examples of turn-key resources available for this age-level include:

- **Young Athletes** (ages 2–7) and **Junior Athletes** (students, ages 6–12): These programs offer structured activities supported by tools like visual cards, motor planning guides, and sensory-friendly strategies.
- **High 5 for Fitness** (ages 8–21): A collection of resources and lesson plans designed to help youth take charge of their fitness by making healthy choices about physical activity, nutrition, and hydration
- **Strong Minds Activity Guide**: Activities that offer ways for students to reflect on mindset, emotional regulation, and wellness during or after class



These lessons can be adapted for classroom, gym, or outdoor settings, making inclusion accessible and engaging for all. Educators can also access the **Unified Classroom**, a free platform with detailed lesson plans, inclusion strategies, and leadership modules designed to support Unified PE and inclusive youth leadership. Together, these resources make it easier to build a welcoming, engaging, and developmentally appropriate Unified PE experience.

Visual Tools

Visual supports help students understand instructions, follow routines, and manage behavior. They add structure, reduce anxiety, and support both verbal and nonverbal communication. Use them daily, post them in consistent spots, and reference them during transitions. Examples include schedules, first-then boards, emotion charts, and visual movement cues. When used consistently, these tools make the classroom more inclusive and consistent for all learners.



Essential Visuals to Incorporate

- **Emotion Faces Chart**: For morning check-ins and behavior regulation
- **First/Then Boards**: Task sequencing (e.g., First Walk, Then Game)
- **Movement Cue Cards**: “Jump,” “Reach,” “Freeze,” “Throw”
- **Station Icons**: Visual instructions (e.g., Ball Toss, Crawl Path, Yoga Mat)
- **Routine Chart**: Flip icon after each class task is completed
- **Class Norm Posters**: “Kindness” and “Try Your Best” with photos of your students demonstrating



Pro Tips

- Add Velcro or magnetic boards to students’ visual supports to build flexibility and interaction.
- Encourage students to flip or point to visuals during transitions to promote independence, give them ownership, and support intrinsic motivation.

Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

Behavior Expectations

Behavior expectations in Elementary Unified PE should be simple, clear, and consistently reinforced. Young learners respond best to routines that are modeled, practiced, and supported with visual and verbal cues. These expectations help students feel safe, confident, and ready to participate. Visual supports such as anchor charts, lanyard cards, classroom posters, or color-coded behavior tools provide helpful reminders throughout the day.

Educators may choose to use an acronym such as PLAY (Participate, Listen, Act Safely, You Matter), or create a system that better matches their students' needs. These tools offer quick, familiar language that helps students remember what is expected and feel supported during activities.

Whether you use **PLAY** or another classroom-based system, the goal is to promote:

- **Participation** by being present, trying your best, and staying involved in the activity
- **Listening** by focusing attention, using kind words, and taking turns
- **Acting safely** by following directions, using equipment properly, and respecting personal space
- **You matter** and including others, offering encouragement, and being kind helps others feel included and accepted.

Use routines, visual schedules, and gentle prompts to reinforce these behaviors. When expectations are simple and consistent, students are more likely to succeed and enjoy participating in an inclusive class community.

Progress Monitoring Tools

Use visual monitoring tools to track student effort, behavior, and communication in a supportive way. Visual trackers provide clear, non-judgmental feedback that helps students understand expectations and reflect on their participation. Rather than relying on points-based or punitive systems, which can discourage students with varying ability levels, prioritize tools that celebrate progress, effort, and positive interactions. This approach reinforces the foundations of Unified PE by promoting persistence, safety, and kindness while building an environment where all students can grow together.

1. Draw-a-Face Check-In

At the end of each class, students can reflect on how they felt by drawing a face that represents their emotions. This simple, non-verbal tool supports emotional awareness and self-expression in a student-friendly way. Some students may prefer using emotion icons, writing a feeling word, or choosing another method that feels more natural to them. These approaches are just a starting point. The most effective reflection tools are flexible, personalized, and built around each student's needs.

Date	Name	My Face Drawing	Reflection
04/17	Brittany		She stated she felt "included and confident"
04/17	Travis		Rough start, regrouped with strategies, finished strong
04/17	Shaunna		Helped lead sensory zone activity today, earned reward from token board

Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

2. Sticker Participation Chart

Daily, at the end of the class period, award one sticker for effort. Use this chart daily to track participation and use weekly motivators to celebrate persistence and participation.



Name	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Weekly Notes	Working For:
Chad	★	★	★	★	★	Great peer interactions on Thursday	Positive parent call
Emma	★	★	★	★	★	Improved follow-through	Unified Prize Bin

3. Movement Meter

Helpful hint: You may color dots, move a clothespin or Velcro dot, or use laminated student-selected icons.



Date	Name	My Effort Color	Why I chose this
04/22	Taylor	★	I helped lead the station
04/22	Vanessa	★	I tried but felt distracted
04/22	Riley	★	I lead stretches for the first time



LEGEND:

Sticker Participation and Movement Meter

Students rate their participation on a scale:

RED = Tired/Frustrated

YELLOW = Gave it a try

GREEN = Full effort

Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

Building Inclusive Leaders

Leadership in Unified PE begins with consistent, intentional actions that foster connection, responsibility, and belonging. At the elementary level, inclusive leadership is rooted in simple habits such as helping others, encouraging peers, following directions, and modeling kindness. Every student can lead when routines are consistent, roles are clearly defined, and individual efforts are recognized.

Unified PE offers a meaningful setting to develop leadership through movement, teamwork, and peer connection. With supportive guidance and well-structured opportunities, students grow their confidence, strengthen their communication skills, and contribute to an inclusive classroom community.

“The progress in Unified PE is not just physical. We see students building friendships, gaining confidence, and learning how to collaborate and support one another.”

– Harry Dickey, School Psychologist



VIDEO: Welcome to Mary A. Otondo Elementary in Yuma, Arizona. When educator Amanda Evans saw Unified in action for the first time, she said, “I want to be a part of this.” and helped grow the inclusion revolution in Yuma. She went on to say, “Unified was a spark in this inclusion pathway and this journey that we are taking as a school.”⁷ This video highlights how schools can ignite Unified PE at the elementary level.



Watch all the Playbook videos at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



The Educator’s Role in Developing Leaders

Educators play a vital role in creating an environment where all students are supported in developing leadership skills. Rather than managing every detail, educators create consistent routines, introduce purposeful responsibilities, and offer flexible tools that encourage participation and self-advocacy. By embedding leadership into daily practice, educators help students recognize their ability to make a positive impact.

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

- Encourage student voice, choice, and shared responsibility throughout class
- Reinforce routines using clear verbal cues and visual supports
- Use consistent signals such as music, countdowns, or timers to guide transitions
- Model inclusive communication and respectful peer interactions
- Introduce leadership roles with visuals and rotate them regularly



Pro Tip

A visible leadership board or role chart helps reinforce routines and gives students a sense of ownership. These tools can be adapted to meet varying learning styles and support needs.

Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

What Leadership Looks Like for Elementary Students

In Unified PE, every student is viewed as a leader. Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about helping others feel safe, included, and encouraged. When students support their classmates, participate with effort, and model class expectations, they demonstrate leadership in action.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

- Greet classmates by name and make appropriate eye contact
- Offer encouragement through high-fives, clapping, or kind words
- Assist peers during transitions and support classroom routines
- Ask about the class plan and help with distributing materials
- Follow and model the same visual cues and expectations as the educator
- Provide quiet support to classmates who may need a moment of calm

Leadership Roles for Elementary Unified PE

Leadership roles should be simple, consistent, and clearly connected to classroom routines. These responsibilities can rotate daily or weekly and may be used during warm-ups, station activities, transitions, or closing routines. Each role can be introduced gradually, with modeling and practice to build understanding.



Pro Tip

Introduce roles gradually. Use modeling, role cards, and repetition to help all students feel confident and successful in their responsibilities.

Leadership Role	Responsibilities
Kindness Captains	Notice and recognize kind actions, add to a kindness display or inclusion jar
Welcome Leaders	Greet new or visiting classmates, explain class routines, and offer to partner with someone who needs support
Praise Peers	Lead class cheers, offer compliments during or after activities, and promote positive reinforcement
Unified Arts Crew	Create posters, kindness rocks, or hallway displays that reflect class identity and promote inclusion
Station Leaders	Demonstrate activities, explain directions, and assist with setup or clean-up at activity stations
Cool-Down Captains	Lead stretching, breathing, or quiet reflection during the closing portion of class
Music Monitors or Timekeepers	Help manage music and track time during transitions, giving clear signals when to rotate
Cleanup Crew	Return equipment, reset spaces, and assist with organizing materials at the end of class



Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

1. Routines and Tools to Support Leadership

Consistent routines allow students to lead with confidence and independence. When class expectations are clear and accessible, students are more likely to participate meaningfully and take the initiative. Unified PE classrooms benefit from structured tools that allow for visual learning, sensory regulation, and active engagement.

RECOMMENDED CLASSROOM TOOLS

- Visual leadership boards or charts to display and rotate student roles
- Posted visual schedules that outline the class structure
- Music, timers, or movement cues to support smooth transitions
- Defined responsibilities at stations to ensure participation and shared ownership
- Individualized support materials such as “I Can Help” cards or leadership lanyards
- Calm tasks or redirection options for students who may benefit from sensory regulation or movement break

2. Reinforcing Leadership and Positive Peer Support

Celebrating acts of leadership and kindness reinforces inclusive values and builds community. Recognition can be as simple as a high-five, a classroom shout-out, or a reflective question. These small moments help students feel seen, appreciated, and motivated to continue showing leadership.

IDEAS TO REINFORCE LEADERSHIP

- End class with a “shout-out” circle that highlights positive peer actions
- Use reflection prompts such as “Who helped someone today?” or “What went well?”

- Allow students to nominate peers for kindness or leadership recognition
- Share positive behaviors through classroom displays or individual notes
- Encourage students to name one thing they are proud of at the end of each session



3. Growing Leadership Across the School Community

Leadership in Unified PE creates a foundation that extends beyond the classroom. When students see how their leadership supports others across different learning environments, they begin to understand their lasting impact. Connections with younger students, homeschooled peers, and alumni help establish a broader, more inclusive school community.

FUTURE LEADERS: CONNECTING WITH YOUNGER STUDENTS

- Invite younger classrooms to visit Unified PE and participate in inclusive activities
- Host welcome events that highlight teamwork, creativity, and positive peer interaction
- Collaborate on shared projects such as murals, kindness campaigns, or classroom tours
- Display a welcome wall that introduces current students with photos and short messages
- Visit feeder campuses to introduce Unified PE and build relationships with future classmates

Elementary School Unified PE (Grades PreK–5)

PARTNERING WITH HOMESCHOOL AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

- Extend invitations to homeschool students or families for Unified PE events, family nights, or field days
- Share leadership opportunities through inclusive community projects, such as art displays or donation drives
- Offer flexible guest participation in class-based activities that support social interaction and leadership
- Maintain communication with local homeschool networks or districts to promote inclusion and awareness
- Encourage student-created content (such as welcome videos or postcards) to reach peers learning in different environments

ALUMNI AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

- Welcome former students to lead warm-ups or assist with games and activities
- Display a “Where Are They Now?” board featuring alumni stories and accomplishments
- Invite alumni to share their experiences with current students during classroom visits or recorded messages
- Celebrate transitioning students with leadership recognition events, such as signing walls or shout-out ceremonies

Elementary Unified PE Getting Started Checklist

Introducing Unified PE in an elementary setting does not require perfection. What matters is creating an environment where all students feel safe, valued, and involved. Use this checklist to begin with purpose and build momentum over time.

- ☐ Identify students who will participate and ensure a balanced, inclusive class
- ☐ Establish routines that are consistent, structured, and flexible enough to support diverse learning needs
- ☐ Choose three or four leadership roles to introduce during the first few weeks
- ☐ Create visual tools such as daily schedules, role cards, and class expectations
- ☐ Begin with small, manageable leadership opportunities such as passing out equipment or leading a warm-up
- ☐ Use praise, reflection, and peer recognition to reinforce leadership behaviors
- ☐ Build connections with future participants and alumni to support continuity and community
- ☐ Visit the Unified PE Resources webpage at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE for visuals, templates, and additional implementation supports



Resources, tools, and videos are identified by these icons and are available at the Unified PE Resources webpage: resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Educator Planning Tools



Fitness & Wellness Resources



Inclusive Youth Leadership & Reflection Tools



Visual & Sensory Supports



Assessment Tools



Marketing & Communication Tools

Middle School Level Unified PE (Grades 6–8)



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Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Middle school Unified Physical Education (Unified PE) is designed to help you create a class culture that encourages teamwork, inclusion, and growing independence. As students navigate this stage of development, they begin to take on more responsibility, explore leadership opportunities, and form stronger peer relationships.

Unified PE in middle school becomes more than just movement, building a space for students to learn social awareness, practice collaboration, and take initiative. This section offers developmentally aligned strategies, sample lessons, inclusive routines, and classroom tools that reflect the unique needs of students in grades 6 through 8. With a focus on deeper peer interaction, reflective thinking, and flexible leadership, Unified PE continues to grow alongside your students as they build the skills to support one another and themselves.

This section on middle school Unified PE offers strategies and tools to help you implement inclusive practices effectively. For expanded resources, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#) where you can access tools such as the **Unified Classroom**, **High 5 for Fitness**, **School of Strength**, and the **Strong Minds Activity Guide**.



These materials support physical development, inclusive leadership, social-emotional wellness, and personal goal setting for all students in your middle school Unified PE class.

“Unified PE proves that inclusion is not a lesson, it is a way of leading.”

– Amy Wardell
Physical Education and Health Coordinator

Unit Structure

A typical week in middle school Unified PE blends movement, peer connection, and leadership opportunities. The structure can be flexible, but each day should reinforce inclusion, student voice, and shared responsibility. Activities may include warm-ups, group games, conflict resolution tasks, rotating leadership roles, or mindfulness breaks. These are sample ideas, and educators should always adapt activities based on the needs of their students, available resources, and overall school structure. A sample class period may start with a brief emotional check-in, followed by a warm-up using **High 5 for Fitness** resources. The day's focus might include motor skills, fitness concepts, or a cooperative game with clear visual supports and adapted strategies. Students can rotate through skill-based or leadership-focused stations, using tools like **Inclusion Tiles**, peer feedback forms, or group challenge cards to promote engagement. The class can end with a cooldown stretch, a short reflection activity, or a student-led shout-out, encouraging social growth and reinforcing positive interactions.



Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

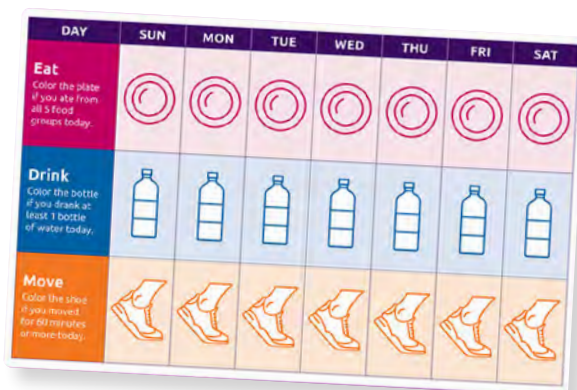
Lesson Plans

To access resources that can help construct optimal lesson plans, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#). These age-appropriate resources promote movement, cooperation, leadership, and inclusion through physical activity, with flexible formats for classrooms, gyms, or outdoor spaces. Educators can also integrate leadership opportunities, sport education, sensory planning tools, and behavior tracking templates to ensure all students are engaged and supported.

Examples of turn-key resources available for this age-level include:

- **High 5 for Fitness:** A collection of resources and lesson plans designed to help youth ages 8–21 take charge of their fitness by making healthy choices about physical activity, nutrition, and hydration
- **School of Strength:** A video-based strength and conditioning program featuring Special Olympics athletes.

In addition, **Unified Classroom** offers ready-to-use lesson plans, videos, activities, and assessments tailored for inclusive settings, making it a one-stop hub for classroom-ready materials.



Visual Tools



Use visuals daily to support routines, guide transitions, and help all students understand what is next. These tools should be used daily, posted clearly, and referenced in every transition.

Essential Visuals to Incorporate

- **Emotion Emoji Check-In Chart:** Labeled emoji scale for students to identify emotions with corresponding color zones.
- **Inclusion Tiles Fun Easy Emotion Lessons (F.E.E.L.S.):** Use these tiles to reflect on how you are feeling during various times of your day. Use the F.E.E.L.S Tracker to identify how and why your feelings change. 
- **Fitness and Skill Cards:** Use High 5 for Fitness, School of Strength, and Strong Minds visuals
- **Student Role Cards:** “Student Leader,” “Zone Captain,” “Reflection Representative”
- **Conflict Repair Prompts:** Flowcharts and sentence stems for peer debrief
- **Station Posters:** Icons and goals posted for each task
- **Weekly Goal Charts:** Visual trackers with daily checkpoints

Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Behavior Expectations

Behavior expectations in middle school should be clear, consistent, and developmentally appropriate. Students at this age respond well to positively framed expectations that allow for autonomy, fairness, and inclusion. These expectations can be supported visually through posters, digital displays, or locker-sized printouts, and reinforced with modeling and peer engagement.

Educators may choose to use an acronym such as RISE (Respect, Inclusion, Support, Effort), or they may create a system that better reflects the unique culture of their class. These tools provide simple, memorable cues that reinforce positive behavior and help students stay engaged throughout the day.

Whether you use **RISE** or another approach, the goal is to promote:

- **Respect** by encouraging positive communication, personal boundaries, and awareness of others
- **Inclusion** by ensuring everyone has access to participate and feel welcome
- **Support** through kindness, encouragement, and peer connection
- **Effort** by showing up, trying new things, and staying involved in the activity



Pro Tip

Use routines, visual schedules, and gentle prompts to reinforce these behaviors. When expectations are simple and consistent, students are more likely to succeed and enjoy participating in an inclusive class community.

“When students feel connected, they thrive. Unified PE turns inclusion into daily routines that build confidence and reduce isolation.”

– Matthew Dunkin, Adapted PE Educator

Unified PE Sample Station-Based Activities

Station-based learning can be a valuable structure in middle school Unified PE, particularly for supporting students with diverse academic levels, functional needs, or transition goals. Stations allow for flexible groupings, differentiated pacing, and opportunities to build leadership, fitness, and real-world readiness. They can also promote independence and personal growth, especially when students are given ownership of roles or responsibilities within each station.



Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Special Olympics resources such as **School of Strength**, **High 5 for Fitness**, and support age-appropriate personal wellness and fitness goals related to physical activity, hydration, and nutrition, while programs like the **Unified Fitness Challenge**, **Strong Minds**, and **Lessons in Social Inclusion** extend learning into social, emotional, and transition-focused skill development. *The chart below* includes sample station ideas that allow for movement, regulation, communication, and life readiness. Educators are encouraged to adapt these examples based on student needs, class structure, and overall goals. To explore these and additional materials, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#).



STATION	Activity	Key Resources	Adaptations
Leadership Circuit	Students lead a warm-up with peers	High 5 for Fitness, School of Strength	Visual cue cards, shared leadership, co-leaders
Strength Station	Rotate through strength-building movements	School of Strength training videos, timers	Use models, movement swaps, tactile visuals
Challenge Circuit	Timed movement tasks (e.g., ladder drills, cone weaves)	Unified Fitness Challenge Toolkit, High 5 for Fitness progression challenges	Use visual stations, partner pacing
Scenario Role Play	Practice inclusive responses to real-life situations	Inclusion Tiles, Unified Classroom, Lessons on Social Inclusion	Guided scripts, sentence starters, choice boards
Mindset Reset	Breathing, stretching, or calming music	Strong Minds Activity Guide	Seated options, fidget visuals, quiet space

Tracking Student Growth

Middle school students benefit from tools that support self-awareness, goal setting, and reflection. Visual trackers offer structure while honoring each student’s pace and ability. Focus on progress over perfection. Avoid competitive or punitive systems, and instead highlight persistence, kindness, and teamwork. Stickers, color zones, or self-rating tools can all support a student’s sense of growth, identity, and agency.

1. Private Effort Journals

Each student keeps a small journal or folded “effort log” in their backpack or class bin. After class, they respond to 1–2 sentence starters or circle their perceived effort level. This keeps reflection private and gives more personal ownership. Examples:

- “Today I helped with...”
- “I gave ____% effort.”
- “One thing I did well today was...”

2. Weekly Check-In Charts (with optional digital version)

Students check in once a week using digital forms or a class QR code. For non-writers, a staff member can transcribe or offer simple visuals. Questions can include:

- “Rate your effort this week (1–5)”
- “What helped you participate the most?”
- “Is there anything you want help with next week?”

3. Reflection Slips with Peer Feedback

Students complete short exit slips with a section to give positive peer feedback. This builds social recognition and middle school maturity. Example:

- “One thing I saw a classmate do well today was...”

Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Developing Inclusive Leaders

Inclusive leadership in middle school starts with responsibility and voice, as students grow through movement, peer support, and reflection. Middle school students are ready for more complex roles and can help shape classroom culture in ways that feel authentic and empowering. Educators lay the foundation by creating routines that include leadership from day one. Leadership is not just an “extra” but a core part of daily activities. Highlighting strengths, offering structured choices, and modeling inclusive behavior helps every student find their voice.

The Educator’s Role in Developing Leaders

Educators set the tone by creating structure, building trust, and giving students meaningful ways to lead. Leadership opportunities should feel realistic and age-appropriate, allowing students to try new roles, take initiative, and reflect on their impact. When leadership is part of the daily routine, it becomes a natural part of the class culture.

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

- Create routines that allow for shared responsibility
- Rotate roles so all students try leading in different ways
- Use partner models for students who benefit from co-leading
- Offer leadership visuals and simple cues
- Normalize mistakes and emphasize learning from them



Pro Tip

Use a leadership board with student photos, names, and rotating responsibilities. This helps build visibility and pride.

What Leadership Looks Like for Middle School Students

Leadership in Unified PE means helping others feel supported and included. Middle school students can lead by modeling expectations, encouraging classmates, and guiding activities in ways that feel comfortable to them. Leadership is not about being in charge or being the best. It is about showing consistency, respect, and connection in everyday moments.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

- Lead warm-ups using **High 5 for Fitness** 
- Model movements or demonstrate stations
- Help peers join activities using visuals or encouragement
- Use countdowns, music, or movement cues during transitions
- Give shout-outs to classmates showing teamwork or growth
- Act as a buddy for students who need extra support

“I thought leadership belonged to certain people. Unified PE taught me that leadership is found in everyday actions that help others belong.”

– Brian Diaz Beattie, Unified PE Student



Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Generation Unified: Your Moment. Our Movement.



VIDEO: We are turning the volume up on inclusion with our anthem that celebrates every student's unique voice. One student said, "Whoever said we're too young, too different, too weak to make a difference never met us, because we know our value and our worth. And guess what, we see the value in others too."⁸ Are you ready to be a part of something bigger? *This is your moment to make a difference.*



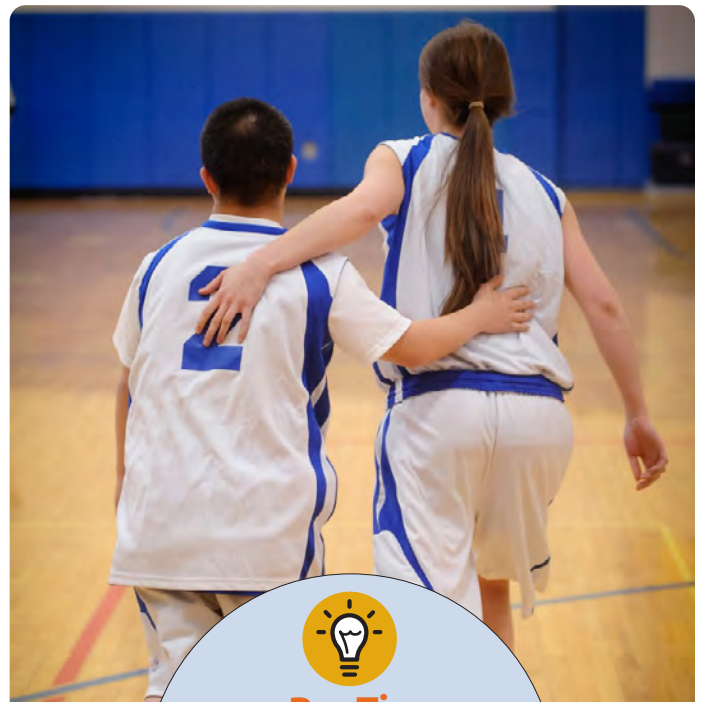
Watch all the Playbook videos at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Leadership Roles in Middle School Unified PE

Leadership in middle school should feel purposeful and authentic. Students are more likely to engage when roles match their interests, build responsibility, and give them visible ways to contribute. The roles in the chart to the right are designed to support confidence and connection while keeping the class running smoothly. Start by introducing just a few roles, then rotate them so every student gets a chance to lead and support their peers in different ways.

ROLE	Responsibilities
Fit Leader	Lead 2–3 movements from High 5 for Fitness, or School of Strength
Music Monitor	Select or cue music during transitions or workouts
Station Leader	Demonstrate a movement and guide peers
Reflection Captain	Ask the end-of-class question and lead group share
Kindness Coach	Notice kind actions and offer positive feedback
Timekeeper	Use a timer or countdown to rotate stations or signal wrap-up
Cleanup Crew	Return equipment and reset stations



Pro Tip

Practice roles together before assigning them independently. Co-leading builds confidence.

Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

1. Routines and Tools to Support Leadership

Middle school students grow when they understand expectations, feel supported, and see themselves as valued contributors. Established routines, paired with tools that support independence and collaboration, help students take ownership of their learning and leadership. Tools should be visible, easy to follow, and give students room to step into responsibility without pressure.

RECOMMENDED CLASSROOM TOOLS

- Leadership boards with rotating roles and photos
- Visual schedules outlining the class routine
- Timers, music cues, or transition prompts
- Station signs with instructions and visuals
- Peer pairing systems for modeling and shared tasks
- Reflection slips, journals, or sentence starters for exit routines

2. Reinforcing Leadership and Positive Peer Support

Celebrating leadership and peer support helps shape a positive classroom culture. Recognition does not need to be formal or time-consuming. Small, consistent moments of acknowledgement, especially those led by peers, build student confidence and motivation.

IDEAS TO REINFORCE LEADERSHIP

- Close class with a shout-out circle or quick peer nomination
- Highlight a “Leader of the Week” with a brief note or photo
- Let students lead cheers or end-of-class acknowledgements
- Ask reflection prompts like “What did you contribute today?” or “Who supported a teammate?”
- Use hallway boards, journals, or peer notes to spotlight leadership moments

3. Growing Leadership Across the School Community

Leadership in Unified PE builds a foundation for inclusion beyond the gym. When students apply their leadership in schoolwide projects, connect with younger peers, or engage with alumni, they deepen their sense of purpose and community.

FUTURE LEADERS: CONNECTING WITH YOUNGER STUDENTS

- Host a Unified Welcome Day for incoming 5th or 6th grade students
- Create videos, welcome notes, or visual guides for new students
- Plan collaborative events with elementary schools or partner classes
- Invite younger students to class for a peer-led field day or activity station

PARTNERING WITH HOMESCHOOL AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

- Offer guest spots in Unified PE events, family nights, or field days
- Run a Spread the Word: Inclusion campaign, community spirit week, host a donation drive, or develop community-based art
- Use virtual tools to connect across settings
- Involve homeschool peers in cooperative leadership projects or social sessions

ALUMNI AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

- Invite former students to lead warm-ups, games, or closing circles
- Create a “Where Are They Now?” leadership display
- Collect recorded messages from alumni about their experience in Unified PE
- Celebrate graduates with leadership send-offs or legacy boards

Middle School Unified PE (Grades 6–8)

Middle School Unified PE Getting Started Checklist

Launching Unified PE in middle school requires intentional planning, but it does not have to be overwhelming. Focus on building connections, routines, and leadership from the start. Use this checklist to lay a solid foundation and grow your program with confidence.

☐ **Create a balanced class roster**

Ensure a mix of students with and without disabilities. Consider personalities, communication styles, support needs, and leadership potential when building pairs or groups.

☐ **Establish consistent routines and expectations**

Use a consistent structure (e.g., warm-up, activity, cool-down, reflection) that reinforces inclusion and teamwork. Post visual schedules and norms in student-friendly language.

☐ **Introduce 3–5 rotating leadership roles**

Start with roles like Fit Leader, Station Guide, and Kindness Captain. Use visuals and model responsibilities clearly. Build reflection and feedback opportunities.

☐ **Use flexible tracking tools**

Incorporate sticker charts, effort meters, reflection prompts, or check-in visuals to support student ownership and growth. Avoid competitive systems.

☐ **Implement peer partnerships intentionally**

Create consistent pairs or trios with defined roles. Provide sentence starters, visuals, or shared tasks to promote positive interactions.

☐ **Incorporate Special Olympics resources**

Use middle school-appropriate tools such as **High 5 for Fitness**, **School of Strength**, or **Unified Classroom** lesson plans. Rotate them into weekly activities.



☐ **Reinforce effort, growth, and inclusion daily**

Celebrate student leadership and progress with shout-outs, peer recognition, and reflection questions. Build a positive culture around teamwork.

☐ **Strengthen school and community connections**

Coordinate with other educators, invite feeder school students or families to events, and display student work or kindness campaigns to grow visibility.



Resources, tools, and videos are identified by these icons and are available at the Unified PE Resources webpage: resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Educator Planning Tools



Visual & Sensory Supports



Fitness & Wellness Resources



Assessment Tools



Inclusive Youth Leadership & Reflection Tools



Marketing & Communication Tools

High School Level Unified PE (Grades 9–12)



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Unified Physical Education (Unified PE) at the high school level connects movement with real-world preparation. Students are not only building physical skills; they are learning how to lead, communicate, and contribute to a team. This is a time when students begin to take greater ownership of their learning, their choices, and their role in the class community.

Leadership opportunities in Unified PE may help students strengthen workplace readiness skills such as time management, collaboration, problem solving, and accountability; it also supports sport-specific growth, and lifelong fitness habits. Students have opportunities to lead warm-ups, manage group tasks, support peers, and reflect on their progress. Whether students are preparing to join a Special Olympics Unified Sports® team, explore career interests, or take on leadership roles in their school, this section provides adaptable, appropriate strategies to guide the way.

This Unified PE playbook offers a framework, but full access to lessons, visuals, and leadership modules can be found on the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#). There you will find high school-level supports such as **Unified Classroom**, **High 5 for Fitness**, **School of Strength**, the **Unified Student Leadership Playbook**, **Inclusion Tiles**, and **Unified Talks**.



These tools help students build personal wellness and fitness goals, inclusive culture, communication skills, and transferable leadership experience that extends beyond the gym and into their future communities.

“High school Unified PE prepares students for the world they are about to enter. Inclusion, leadership, and teamwork become real skills for life before and after graduation.”

– Emma Hull, PE Educator and Unified Coach

Unit Structure

A typical week in high school Unified PE focuses on movement, leadership, and preparing students for success beyond the classroom. While the structure can be flexible, each class should reinforce inclusion, personal responsibility, and student voice. Activities may include fitness circuits, peer-led challenges, real-life scenario practice, self-reflection, or teamwork-based games. Educators are encouraged to adapt each day based on the needs of their students, available resources, and school structure. A sample class period might begin with a short check-in or leadership prompt, followed by a warm-up using **High 5 for Fitness**. The main activity could involve practicing workplace readiness through partner planning, rotating through **School of Strength** stations, or working on communication using **Lessons in Social Inclusion** or **Inclusion Tiles**. To close, students may cool down using **High 5 for Fitness**, and participate in a guided reflection, goal-setting task, or a youth-led peer recognition activity to build confidence and reinforce progress toward both physical and social-emotional goals.

DAY	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
Eat Color the plate if you ate from all 5 food groups today.							
Drink Color the bottle if you drank at least 1 bottle of water today.							
Move Color the shoe if you moved for 60 minutes or more today.							

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Lesson Plans

To access resources that can help construct optimal lesson plans, visit the [Unified PE Resources webpage](#). These age-appropriate resources promote movement, cooperation, leadership, and inclusion through physical activity, with flexible formats for classrooms, gyms, or outdoor spaces. Educators can also integrate leadership opportunities, sport education, sensory planning tools, and behavior tracking templates to ensure all students are engaged and supported.

Examples of turn-key resources available for this age-level include:

- **High 5 for Fitness:** A collection of resources and lesson plans designed to help youth ages 8–21 take charge of their fitness by making healthy choices about physical activity, nutrition, and hydration
- **School of Strength:** Offers video-based workouts led by Special Olympics athletes, promoting strength training and confidence.
- **Unified Classroom:** Serves as a central hub for high school-appropriate content including instructional videos, inclusive fitness plans, classroom-ready lesson documents, and student-led project ideas.

Additional resources like **Unified Talks**, **Strong Minds**, and **Inclusion Tiles** can also be used to promote inclusive culture, goal setting, and advocacy among high school students in both classroom and extracurricular settings.



Visual Tools



Essential Visuals to Incorporate

Use visual supports every day to reinforce routines, guide transitions, and help all students understand what comes next. These tools should be clearly posted, consistently referenced, and part of every transition. When students help create visuals, they are more likely to feel ownership of the space and stay engaged throughout the class.

- **Emotion Emoji Check-In Chart:** Labeled emoji scale for students to identify emotions with corresponding color zones.
- **Inclusion Tiles Fun Easy Emotion Lessons (F.E.E.L.S.):** Use these tiles to reflect on how you are feeling during various times of your day. Use the F.E.E.L.S Tracker to identify how and why your feelings change.
- **Fitness and Skill Cards:** Use High 5 for Fitness, School of Strength, and Strong Minds visuals
- **Student Role Cards:** “Student Leader,” “Zone Captain,” “Reflection Representative”
- **Conflict Repair Prompts:** Flowcharts and sentence stems for peer debrief
- **Station Posters:** Icons and goals posted for each task
- **Weekly Goal Charts:** Visual trackers with daily checkpoints

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Behavior Expectations

In high school, behavior expectations should reflect maturity, responsibility, and preparation for life beyond the classroom. These expectations work best when presented as shared values or class agreements. Students should feel a sense of ownership in the environment and understand how their behavior affects others.

Educators may choose to use an acronym such as LEAD (Listening, Encouragement, Action, Doing your best), or they may create a system that better reflects the goals and values of their students. The format can be customized to fit the group, but the purpose remains the same: to support an inclusive, respectful, and engaged learning space.

Whether you use **LEAD** or another framework, the goal is to promote:

- **Listening** by staying present, giving attention to others, and respecting different viewpoints
- **Encouragement** by uplifting classmates, welcoming diverse abilities, and creating a space where everyone belongs
- **Action** through kind words, helpful choices, and a willingness to lead by example
- **Doing your best** by setting personal goals, putting in effort, and contributing meaningfully to class activities



Pro Tip

Use class discussions, student-led reflections, and visible agreements to keep expectations active. When students help define and uphold the standards, they become more than rules, they become part of the culture.

“Unified PE leads to improved social interaction, sense of belonging, and self-confidence when students are included in meaningful ways. It’s within that culture that real learning and connection take root.”

– Scott Acton, Special Education Director

Unified PE Sample Station-Based Activities

Station-based learning can be an effective strategy in High School Unified PE to support students with a wide range of academic abilities, functional needs, and transition goals. Stations offer flexible groupings, promote differentiated pacing, and provide opportunities for students to practice leadership, build fitness, and develop real-world skills. This structure also encourages independence, decision-making, and peer interaction, especially when students take on roles or responsibilities within each station.



High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Special Olympics resources such as **School of Strength** and **High 5 for Fitness** offer age-appropriate tools for building physical wellness. In addition, programs like the **Unified Fitness Challenge**, **Strong Minds**, and **Lessons in Social Inclusion** help students strengthen communication, regulation, and workplace readiness skills. *The chart below* includes sample station ideas designed to support inclusive movement, personal growth, and practical life preparation. Educators are encouraged to adjust these examples based on their students' needs, interests, and classroom structure.



STATION	Activity	Resources	Adaptations
Leadership Circuit	Lead a warm-up or fitness set with peers	High 5 for Fitness , School of Strength	Visual cue cards, co-leads, written leader scripts
School of Strength	Follow video-led strength movements	School of Strength training videos, timers	Models, movement swaps, visual support
Unified Fitness Circuit	Timed or task-based circuit activities	Unified Fitness Challenge Toolkit	Timer goals, movement swaps, visual cues
Job Talk Role-Play	Practice job interviews and communication scenarios	Lessons in Social Inclusion , Inclusion Tiles	Guided scripts, sentence starters, visual supports
Mindful Reset	Choose a self-regulation activity, journal, stretch, breathing	Strong Minds Activity Guide	Seated or standing options, calming visuals, tools

Tracking Student Growth

Tracking student growth in Unified PE helps build independence, leadership, and real-world readiness. At the high school level, progress should be measured through reflection, peer collaboration, and consistent effort, rather than perfection or performance alone. These strategies should be easy to implement, built into daily routines, and adaptable for different learning styles and classroom needs.

Simple tools such as journal prompts, peer feedback, visual check-ins, or group celebrations can help students recognize how they are contributing, improving, and leading. Whether students are reflecting on a leadership role, completing a movement goal, or supporting a classmate, the goal is to make growth visible, celebrated, and connected to life beyond the gym. Several featured tools at the

[Unified PE Resources webpage](#) include opportunities for tracking progress:

- **High 5 for Fitness** support goal setting and wellness tracking related to fitness, nutrition, and hydration.
- **School of Strength** encourages students to reflect on strength-building and personal challenge through structured workouts led by Special Olympics athletes.
- **Unified Classroom** and **Lessons in Social Inclusion** include leadership reflections, project prompts, and tools for tracking communication and advocacy growth.
- **Strong Minds** activities offer ways for students to reflect on mindset, emotional regulation, and wellness during or after class.

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Developing Inclusive Leaders

Inclusive leadership at the high school level should feel meaningful and aligned with students' emerging identities, goals, and interests. Students can take on real responsibility and learn how their actions impact the larger group. Leadership is not about popularity or perfection, but instead building a culture where everyone can participate, contribute, and grow.

“Being a leader in Unified PE does not mean being the best at sports. It means showing up for your classmates, making sure no one is left out, and finding ways to make everyone feel like they belong.”

– Caleila Kaluna, Unified PE Student

The Educator's Role in Developing Leaders

Educators play a critical role in developing student leaders. The key is to provide structure, model inclusive leadership, and gradually release responsibility to students in ways that match their interests and abilities. Leadership should be embedded in class routines and linked to workplace readiness and future goals.

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

- Use rotating leadership roles with clear expectations
- Introduce leadership contracts outlining responsibilities and personal goals
- Coach students through giving and receiving feedback
- Connect classroom roles to real-world job descriptions
- Encourage reflection on leadership actions and decisions

What Leadership Looks Like for High School Students

In Unified PE, leadership is about creating a positive, inclusive class environment where all students feel seen, supported, and valued. For high schoolers, leadership goes beyond participation. It includes taking initiative, being dependable, and using communication skills that reflect maturity and empathy. Leadership is not about being in charge or the most athletic. It is about setting a tone of respect, consistency, and teamwork.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

- Lead warm-ups using **High 5 for Fitness**, yoga flows, or personalized playlists 
- Demonstrate or model activity stations with visual aids or modifications
- Use encouraging language to invite peers into activities
- Manage transitions using timers, music, or classroom routines
- Give peer shout-outs that highlight growth, effort, or inclusion
- Take on class jobs like Equipment Manager, Wellness Tracker, or Team Assistant
- Help organize or lead inclusive events, such as a Unified Sports® showcase or field day
- Reflect with peers during cool-down or closing circles to promote class connection



Pro Tip

Start or end class with a quick “Leadership Shout-Out,” where students recognize a classmate for showing effort, kindness, or teamwork. Keep a stack of sticky notes or a shared digital space for submissions. Reading one or two aloud builds a culture of appreciation and reinforces real-world habits like giving feedback and acknowledging others.

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

“When I was in Unified PE, I realized leadership could be simple, like helping with warm-ups, equipment, or cheering for a classmate.”

– Iliana Brown, Unified PE Alumni

Leadership Roles and Workplace Readiness Connections

Every classroom leadership opportunity can reflect real-world job skills. Naming these connections helps students see themselves as contributors and future professionals. High School Unified PE is an ideal space to model, practice, and build workplace readiness through inclusive leadership.



Pro Tip

The **School of Strength** fitness series and **High 5 for Fitness** program from Special Olympics offers engaging warm-ups, movements, and personal goal tools for high school students. Use them to structure leadership roles like “Student Leader,” “Zone Captain,” “Reflection Representative.”

Leadership Role	Example Responsibilities	Workplace Readiness Connection
Peer Coach	Demonstrate movements, offer guidance, help track peer goals	Builds communication, instructional, and mentoring skills for roles like Physical Therapy Aide, Youth Mentor, Paraprofessional, or Assistant Coach
Culture Leader	Lead cheers, model inclusive language, recognize kindness or teamwork	Develops team leadership and peer influence, useful for roles in Human Services or Team Lead positions
Reflection Facilitator	Lead end-of-class reflection, journaling, or group debriefs	Prepares students for Counseling, Teaching, and Life Coaching by guiding thoughtful conversation
Equipment Manager	Set up stations, check equipment, support organization and safety	Builds reliability, task follow-through, and technical awareness for jobs like Gym Tech or Facility Assistant
Co-Teacher	Help deliver instructions, manage group pacing, offer sensory or task support	Strengthens planning, co-leadership, and student support skills needed for Teaching Assistant or Support Staff roles
Logistics Leader	Manage music, lead timers, hold shared supplies, assist with materials	Practices scheduling, multitasking, and coordination aligned with Event Planner or Office Manager roles
Wellness Captain	Lead breathing or stretch routines, model regulation strategies, offer peer support	Encourages mental health awareness and peer regulation skills for Peer Advocate, Wellness Coordinator, or Head Coach
Activity Host	Welcome students, introduce games, lead group engagement and inclusion	Grows confidence in public speaking and group facilitation tied to Recreation Leader or Program Assistant careers

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

Real-World Integration Ideas

- Post mock job descriptions alongside leadership boards
- Conduct quarterly exit interviews to reflect on growth
- Use a resume builder to document leadership tasks and transferable skills
- Invite guest speakers from Special Olympics, fitness industries, or healthcare careers
- Create and display student portfolios with reflections, visuals, and photos of leadership in action

“Playing Unified in high school inspired me to lead others in the inclusion revolution. The experience sparked a passion that continues to drive me today.”

– Emma Cattermole,
Support Staff and Unified PE Alumni



Pro Tip

Use Special Olympics’ **High 5 for Fitness** or **Unified Generation Classroom** videos as visual supports and examples for peer-led warm-ups or reflection activities.

Approaches to Student-Led Routines

Student-led warm-ups and closing activities give students the opportunity to practice leadership, build confidence, and foster class ownership.

Warm-Up Formats to Try

- **Mirror Modeling:** One student leads movement while others mirror
- **Lead and Echo:** The leader calls out counts while modeling the motion
- **Rotating Captains:** Students take turns leading at different stations
- **Design Your Own:** Student creates a short warm-up and instructs the group

Cool-Down Reflections

- Deep breathing with a student-selected visual or audio guide
- Sentence starters or journaling prompts
- Group shout-outs or highlights
- Closing cheers or gratitude circles

Reflection and Conflict Tools

Self-reflection builds accountability and emotional growth. In Unified Physical Education, students benefit from learning how to process experiences, repair conflict, and recognize how their behavior impacts others.

1. Reflection Options

- Digital journals using shared drives or the **Unified Classroom**
- Peer praise notes and appreciation slips
- Emoji scales or color-coded check-ins
- Partner reflection prompts
- Quick exit slips with questions about participation, inclusion, or effort

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

2. Conflict Tools

Conflict is a natural part of teamwork and social learning. In a Unified PE setting, students benefit from having simple, respectful tools they can use when challenges arise. These tools should be visible, easy to access, and used consistently by both students and staff. Consider including them in class reset spaces, posting them on visuals, or keeping copies in student folders, journals, or leadership kits.

TOOL	Purpose	Example
Try Again Cards	Promote a respectful do-over when things go wrong	"Can we try that again in a better way?"
Repair Sentence Starters	Support communication and self-advocacy	"I felt ___ when ___. I'd like to ___ moving forward."
Conflict Reflection Prompts	Build insight, responsibility, and regulation	"What happened? What was my part? What could I do differently?"
Calm Corner Tools	Offer sensory or breathing tools for self-regulation	Stress ball, breathing prompts, "Reset with 5 deep breaths"
Respect Reminder Cards	Provide non-verbal cues to encourage respectful behavior	A small, laminated card that says "Let's be kind" or "Team

3. Growing Leadership Across the School Community

High school students should see their leadership and impact reaching beyond the four walls of the class. Help students build connections to future students, alumni, and their larger community.

FUTURE STUDENTS: FEEDER SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

- Host field days for incoming first-year students.
- Create welcome videos from current Unified Physical Education students
- Pair student leaders with visitors from partner programs
- Lead transition activities during freshman orientation or summer bridge events

PARTNERING WITH HOMESCHOOL AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

- Offer guest spots in Unified PE events, family nights, or field days
- Run a Unified kindness campaign, community spirit week, host a donation drive, or develop community-based art
- Use virtual tools to connect across settings
- Involve homeschool peers in cooperative leadership projects or social sessions

ALUMNI AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

- Feature a "Where Are They Now?" wall with stories from past leaders
- Invite former students to co-lead warm-ups
- Coordinate alumni panels, mentorship lunches, or job shadow days
- Celebrate senior commitments to Unified roles with signing ceremonies or showcases

High School Unified PE (Grades 9–12)

“Unified PE is where inclusion becomes real. It creates a place for every student to feel seen, to lead with empathy, and to build something bigger than themselves. This is where the culture of a school can ignite change.”

– Benjamin Meola, School Support Staff

High School Unified PE Getting Started Checklist

- ☐ **Review Your Class List** – Know students’ strengths, needs, and support tools
- ☐ **Build a Leadership Wall** – Assign rotating roles and post job descriptions
- ☐ **Design a Visual Class Schedule** – Keep routines visible and consistent
- ☐ **Select Reflection Tools** – Journals, check-ins, or exit tickets
- ☐ **Choose Warm-Up Formats** – Student-led or station-based models
- ☐ **Prepare Cool-Down Routines** – Include breathing, stretching, or reflection
- ☐ **Hold a Class Orientation** – Set expectations and build class culture
- ☐ **Introduce Workplace Roles** – Tie leadership to real-life applications
- ☐ **Engage Alumni or Community Partners** – Extend learning beyond class
- ☐ **Track Growth and Celebrate Effort** – Use visuals, portfolios, or goal boards



Resources, tools, and videos are identified by these icons and are available at the Unified PE Resources webpage: resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Educator Planning Tools



Visual & Sensory Supports



Fitness & Wellness Resources



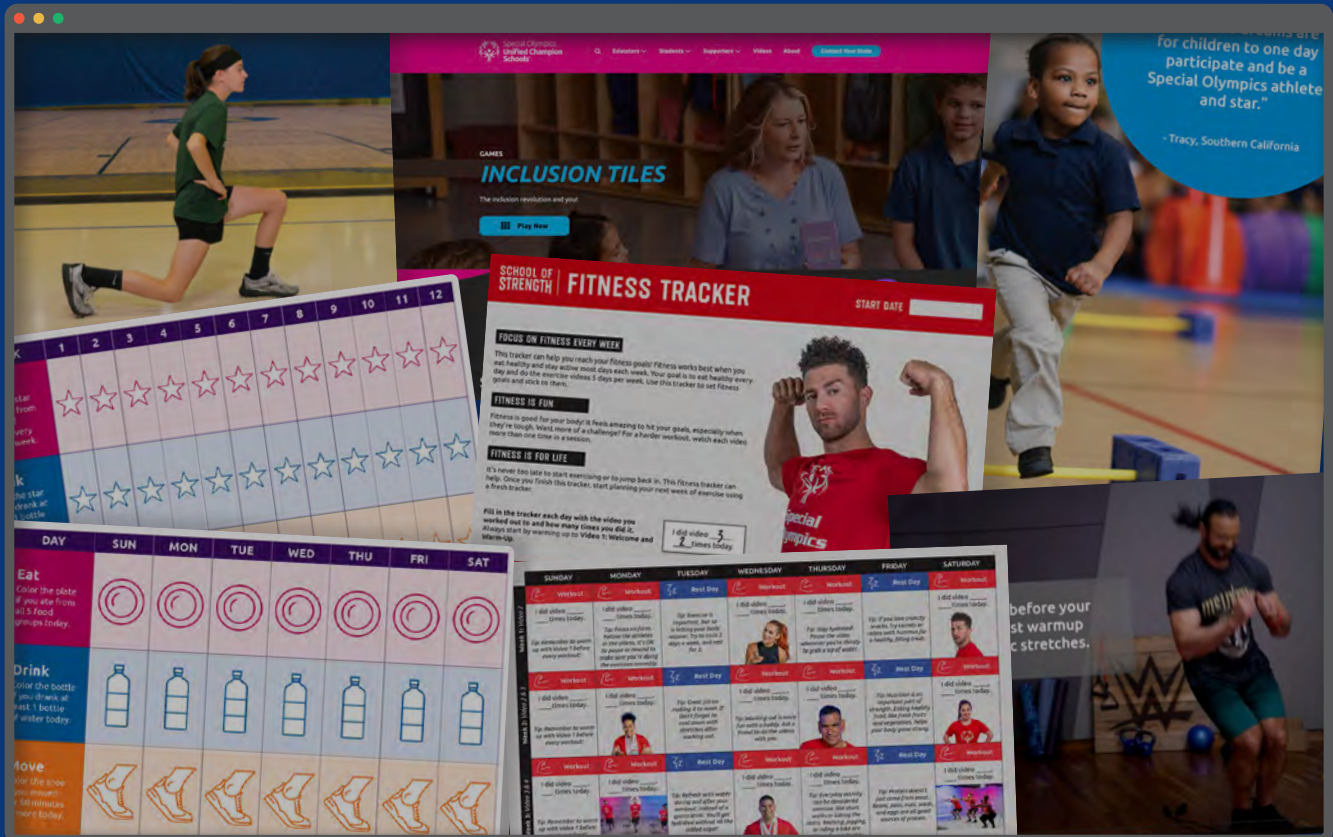
Assessment Tools



Inclusive Youth Leadership & Reflection Tools



Marketing & Communication Tools



SECTION 6: Unified PE Resources



Unified PE Resources Webpage

The Unified PE Resources webpage connects you to all the editable templates, printable tools, activity guides, and videos referenced throughout the Unified PE playbook. Whether you are reading from a printed copy or online, this approach offers quick, direct access to real-world resources you can customize and use right away.

All resources are downloadable or viewable from the Unified PE Resources webpage and updated regularly to reflect new tools and field-tested strategies.

Resources, tools, and videos are identified by these icons throughout the Playbook and are available at the webpage at resources.specialolympics.org/UPE



Educator Planning Tools



Fitness & Wellness Resources



Inclusive Youth Leadership & Reflection Tools



Visual & Sensory Supports



Assessment Tools



Marketing & Communication Tools



Pro Tips

- If using a printed copy, type in “resources.specialolympics.org/UPE” in your web browser, then bookmark or save it as a tab to quickly find it for future reference.
- If using a digital version, click on: resources.specialolympics.org/UPE
- **Download:** Save copies to your device, drive, or folder for easy editing and sharing

Citations

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