

Inclusion for ALL through Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®

Topline Messaging

THE CURRENT SITUATION:

The United States is going through a period of unrest due to extreme racial injustice. This is not only due to the unfairness that black citizens face every single day, but the perpetuation of systems built upon injustice that continue to serve communities in unequal ways. There is direct action taking place in response to this inequity. But people are also asking, “What can I do to make a lasting impact, an actual change?” In particular, the youth of America want to learn and to be heard.

Racism has no single “solution”; it must be a mix of listening, learning, re-learning, hard conversations, engagement, and action. While these actions must take place everywhere, it is essential that they take place in schools, where young people are impressionable, forming attitudes that will influence their values, and the way they interact with and impact their communities for the long term.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION:

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® strongly opposes acts of exclusion of all types and that includes acts of racism. The Unified Champion Schools (UCS) program is profoundly relevant because it enhances the lives of students as they grow and learn in an inclusive environment. Sustained interaction in inclusive schools improves the quality of instruction when students **learn from one another**. This applies to students of all abilities, genders, races, identities, and more. Unified Champion Schools promotes personal development at every level and is a proven program for delivering excellence in student engagement.¹

LEARNING ABOUT DIFFERENCES:

In a Unified Champion School, students have the opportunity to learn not only from their peers with intellectual disabilities (ID), but from all students who may have different perspectives or come from different backgrounds. Middle and high school students without ID who participate in UCS feel they develop in the social emotional learning competencies of relationship skills and social awareness. Relationship skills are defined as “the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with diverse individuals.”² Social awareness is defined as the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from different backgrounds.”³ These skills can lend themselves well to having meaningful relationships with their peers, within or outside of the classroom setting.

While students must learn from one another, it can also be more impactful when it occurs at a younger age. Middle school students who participated in UCS reported that they learned about

¹ Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® Urban District Strategy, [Building Relevance in Urban Districts](#), 2019

² The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Program: [Year 10 Evaluation Report 2017 – 2018](#); Center for social Development and education, University of Massachusetts, Boston

³ Ibid

working with others (64%), helping others (68%), becoming more patient (64%), and standing up for something they believe in (66%)⁴.

MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS:

Young people need meaningful interaction to learn from those who have different perspectives and backgrounds. According to annual evaluation and research, students feel that their participation in UCS has helped them to be more inclusive of others, be more respectful, and become more understanding⁵. Additionally, students without ID who choose to get involved in UCS report significantly higher levels of empathy/compassion than students who are not involved⁶.

As an example, Unified programming encourages the friendships of those with and without ID to promote meaningful interactions. Two-thirds (65%) of high school students stated that the strong relationships they developed with their peers with ID was one of the best parts of participating in the UCS program⁷. Without these strong relationships, students may feel less supported and more alone than if they had not participated. Just by working together in an inclusive environment, these students have more perspective on standing up to exclusion and fostering inclusion now than they may have without the program.

LASTING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS:

To ensure young people truly feel supported, friendships must move beyond created situations and school walls and extend into everyday life. More students without ID who participated in the UCS program believed they had a friend at school to help them through a hard time (78%) compared to students not in the UCS program (71%)⁸. Additionally, students without ID who participate in the UCS program feel more supported by their teachers and peers and have higher levels of grit than those who do not participate⁹.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Schools take an important first step toward ensuring that every single student is appreciated, understood, and valued equally by committing to activities and spaces of inclusion of all kinds. There is no one quick solution to addressing racism in the systems across America, but the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program provides a simple and evidence-based strategy for any school. Said best in the words of Special Olympics U.S. Youth Ambassador Tajha Ilerant, "If everyone was committed to making the world a more equal place, remembering that inclusion is the key like in Special Olympics, we could reach these goals."

⁴ The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Program: [Year 9 Evaluation Report 2016 – 2017](#); Center for social Development and education, University of Massachusetts, Boston

⁵ Ibid

⁶ The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Program: Year [10 Evaluation Report 2017 – 2018](#); Center for social Development and education, University of Massachusetts, Boston

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid