Unified Sports® joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team.

Unified Sports was inspired by a simple principle: training and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. Having sport in common is just one more way that preconceptions and false ideas are swept away.

Young people with disabilities do not often get a chance to play on their school sports teams. Unified Sports® is a model pioneered by Special Olympics to change this.

The Utah High School Activities Association has a partnership with Special Olympics Utah to bring the Unified Sports model to Utah’s high schools. Schools need the support of school leaders like you to implement and sustain Unified Sports. Please read how Unified Sports® can make a difference in your schools.

Dear School Leaders,

As parents of special needs children, we encourage you to consider participation in, and support of, Unified Sports®.

Through Unified Sports® students develop athletic skills while forming friendships, fostering respect for each other and becoming leaders on and off the playing field. With sports as the catalyst, young people create a school climate of acceptance throughout the entire school. Unified Sports® enhances existing efforts to promote respect and a school culture where students with disabilities feel welcome, and are routinely included in and feel part of all activities and functions.

Every student merits the opportunity to be part of a team and develop all the skills that come with participating in a sport at the high school level. Read the stories inside and see what Unified Sports® can do for schools and students in Utah. Thank You!

Sincerely,

Parents of Students with Intellectual Disabilities
My daughter and I have shed thousands of tears and spent countless sleepless nights wondering how someone who does not have a filter or understand social etiquette can make friends, have a peer group, and be included.

At this age it’s hard enough for any teenager to make friends and fit in. When you add a disability into the mix it becomes even harder. Unified Sports has created more days where my daughter does not fight anxiety and depression. Through Unified Sports she is seen and has a voice!

Because of Unified Sports my daughter has the same opportunities as her peers, and the focus is on inclusion!

I encourage every school to have Unified Sports.

When competing with her Unified Team, Margaret forgets her disabilities and focuses on the sport and being part of a team. Instead of saying “I can’t” she says “I will try.” Unified Sports provides positive peer interactions and experiences. Margaret has learned how to interact with others and start conversations. She is happier now because she has friends from Unified Sports. In addition, the physical activity of training and competing stimulates her brain and makes her more alert.

Unified Sports has helped us understand that participation in sports will not stop when our daughter ages out of high school. Unified Sports has started our daughter on a lifetime journey of health and enjoying sport with friends.

Because of my son’s disability he is unable to qualify for the regular competitive high school sports. Unified Sports gives my son the opportunity to play soccer for his high school and gives him a sense of school pride.

There is great sportsmanship and camaraderie between schools. When our students arrive at another school for competition, the opposing team is outside with signs welcoming them to play!

Unified Sports has helped my son develop friendships with his peer tutors and a connection to other classmates, and provided us as parents a way to develop a better relationship with teachers through interaction outside the classroom.
Motivated to Study Because of Unified Sports

By Julie, mother of Tanner

Despite his height of six foot, eight inches, my son was cut from his high school basketball team. He was devastated until a peer invited him to come play Unified Sports. As his mother, I just wanted Tanner to be happy, but he experienced even more by participating in Unified Sports. Tanner learned to try hard on the field and work hard in school.

At our school, Unified Sports players are held to the same standard as every other sports team. If you are late, you run a lap. If your grades drop, you do not play. This made Tanner want to do better in school and make sure he remained eligible to play because he loved Unified Sports.

Unified Sports helps motivate special education students. This helps families keep special education students engaged in school. Being part of Unified Sports team helps special education students be part of the school community. Unified Sports is a win-win for everyone.

Unified Sports Develops Leaders

“The Unified Sports movement is improving the way young adults are thinking and engaging with each other. It creates relationships around common goals of competition, fair play, respect and engagement. The students who participate in Unified Sports become the leaders who practice diversity and inclusiveness.”

Greg, Parent of an Athlete and a Unified Coach

“Being involved with Unified Sports has helped me know that everyone should always do their best and be proud of what they do. As a member of my Unified Sports team I do not see myself as different, I see myself as part of something bigger than me. I am part of a team that is advocating for inclusion for those with disabilities. I am a leader.”

Natalie, Athlete and High School Diversity Officer

Everyone Learns

Very often it is those without disabilities, the Unified Partners on a Unified Sports team, that say, “I came to teach the athletes sport, and instead they taught me about acceptance, mutual respect and understanding.”

Unified Sports is a good way to learn empathy which is seeing experiences through someone else’s eyes. Through Unified Sports, students start to understand how each other view school, life and their future.

Empathy is important characteristic for leaders in our schools and our communities.

Breaking Down Barriers

“I love the positive energy of Unified Sports. With other sports there is so much tension. Unified Sports is the competition without the tension. I had more fun than I could imagine being a sports partner on my high school Unified Team, but I also learned a lot from my fellow teammates. I learned how to break down barriers and gained a new perspective on how people with intellectual disabilities face everyday life.

My experiences with Unified Sports motivated me to run for student body president of my high school on the platform of more inclusive opportunities for those with disabilities. I am grateful I had the opportunity to serve as Student Body President, and very proud of my fellow classmates for taking up the call for more inclusive activities.”

Boston, former High School Student Body President and football player, and now a University student
LAUNCH!

Launch Unified Sports with the help of Special Olympics Utah

Special Olympics Utah helps schools get started!

For two years, participating schools are eligible for athlete uniforms, transportation assistance to the State Championship and coaches stipends through Special Olympics Utah with partial support by the U.S. Department of Special Education. After two years, schools must be self-sustaining.

Once schools identify the coaches, Special Olympics Utah provides on-line training for coaches, and serves as a daily resource for questions and assistance.

SUSTAIN!

Assure Unified Sports are offered

Review the allocation of Special Education funds. Allocate funds to each high school to offer at least one unified sport team in track & field or soccer. $1,500 pays for 21 uniforms for coaches, athletes and unified partners, bus transportation to the State Championship and equipment.

Review the allocation for coaches stipends. Allocate funds to each high school offering a Unified Sports Team for a head coach and an assistant coach. Most head coaches receive $500, and assistant coaches $250 for a 10 week season.

EMPOWER!

Empower Students

Empower student led activities to involve more students and raise awareness about inclusion throughout the school. These can be a school club where those with and without intellectual disabilities meet quarterly and do activities together, and a school-wide awareness activity where students sign a banner pledging to end use of the “R-Word”. Student led activities create inclusive leadership opportunities with minimal teacher oversight.

RESULTS!

Through Unified Sports schools will:

- Reduce exclusion & bullying
- Overturn stereotypes and negative attitudes
- Promote healthy activities and interactions
- Eliminate hurtful language in schools and elsewhere
- Engage young people as leaders of a new, positive social movement
- See happier special education students and parents

10 Take-Aways ABOUT UNIFIED SPORTS®

1. Unified Sports joins individuals with intellectual disabilities, called athletes, and those without, called unified partners, to train and compete on the same team. The Unified Sports® model was pioneered by Special Olympics.

2. Unified Sports is sanctioned by the Utah High School Activities Association (UHSAA) as a varsity sport in track and field and soccer, which means participating schools can choose to offer their varsity school letter to students with and without disabilities that compete in Unified Sports.

3. Unified Sports Soccer is co-ed.

4. Unified Sports Track & Field can participate in scheduled track meets with the traditional track team.

5. Participating schools can participate in State Unified Competitions organized by UHSAA.

6. Medals and ribbons are provided by Special Olympics Utah for all participants, and trophies for the top three schools by the UHSAA.

7. The Unified Sports season runs March to May.

8. Registration for soccer due the Friday of the first full week back to school after the New Year.

9. Registration for track and field due the last school day in February.

10. Special Olympics Utah will help schools get started, and provide coaches training.

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UNIFIED SPORTS®

The Unified Effect

Special Olympics Utah extends it’s Heartfelt Thanks to the very thoughtful anonymous donor who made the first edition of “The Unified Effect” possible. THANK YOU! from the bottom to the top of our hearts!