The United States is not only a nation but an idea, rooted in a profound recognition of universal human equality, structured to balance interests and power to protect the vulnerable and contain the powerful, and focused on building an ever-widening circle of freedom. America’s public schools carry a similar promise and a similar challenge: to educate children to fulfill their obligations to be compassionate and caring citizens of a democracy while equipping them to compete for their individual well-being. The fabric of our democracy depends on students acquiring both, and for that they need academic, social, and emotional skills for life; they need to learn independence and interdependence; they need to learn to be productive but also compassionate, competitive but also collaborative. In short, they need to learn to be healthy, productive, and informed citizens.

Historically, this ideal has not materialized for students with intellectual disabilities and wasn’t until the 1960s that the concept of an appropriate (if not equal) education for children with intellectual disabilities was even part of the social justice conversation in the country. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first of several major pieces of legislation to open the doors of opportunity to children with intellectual disabilities and begin to move public education toward the ideal of education for all children.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was followed in 1975 by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), which in turn was later amended to become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 followed, as did the 2004 amendments to IDEA. Today, as a result of these laws and a result of a large body of evidence and decades of experience among educators, the gifts, abilities, and potential of children with intellectual disabilities—who once were barely on the margins of the educational community—are being welcomed into the important life experiences school provides. Generations of segregation and inequality are finally yielding to the hope of school communities, where every child learns and where one of the lessons is that every child can.

Because of this progress, students with intellectual disabilities today are more included than ever, but challenges that threaten their social and emotional well-being remain. Because of legislative mandates and policy requirements, the goal of inclusion has been sought through increases for services to people with intellectual disabilities.

Where once they were segregated into special schools, today’s policies offer transportation and counseling support to move them into inclusive schools. Where once they were in segregated classrooms within those schools, today’s policies offer learning specialists and educational aides to move them into inclusive classrooms. Where once these students were thought to be incapable of learning, advances in pedagogy, brain science, and learning theory now offer new practices that optimize learning and
offer the possibility of mastering content that was once thought beyond reach.

These changes have been dramatic, but too often the paradigm of inclusion they represent has been missing a critical element: the roles of those children who do not have disabilities as key players in creating a socially safe and supportive climate for all. The promise of inclusion is not only about academic learning and physical proximity: it is also—I daresay, even more importantly—about ending the age-old fear of difference and raising a generation of citizens who believe it is in their power to create communities where every human gift is welcomed and celebrated. The promise of inclusion is not a one-way offer of help to children with intellectual differences; it is instead a two-way offer to children with and without differences to learn how to live, work, and learn together in ways that elevate the aspirations, knowledge, and creativity of all. In this vision, inclusion is a call not to moving the location of various types of children to become physically closer to one another, but rather a call to unify all children in ways that optimize the learning of each while elevating the possibilities of all.

We're not there yet. The full participation and acceptance of students with intellectual disabilities into the social fabric of the school remains elusive. Even those students with intellectual disabilities who attend schools with policies and procedures designed to provide an inclusive educational experience are too often disengaged from participating in many school-based opportunities and remain isolated from their peers without disabilities.

Unfortunately, students with intellectual disabilities experience social isolation and rejection within many school settings, and are bullied at disproportionate rates, with one in 10 students with intellectual disabilities being bullied or victimized once a week or more. Overall, students with intellectual disabilities are two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their non-disabled peers. At the same time, one recent study reported that less than one-third of public school students acknowledge having a schoolmate or classmate with intellectual disabilities and only 10 percent report having a friend with intellectual disabilities. By the time most children with intellectual disabilities reach middle school, it is not surprising that the most commonly reported problem they face is a painful reminder of where we have failed: loneliness.

Indicators of disengagement and isolation are not, however, limited to children with disabilities. Disengagement among young people is prevalent for children with and without disabilities. A 2007 survey found that only 55 percent all of high school students feel they are important in their school community. Despite rising obesity, only 29 percent of students engage in regular physical activity, and nearly 16 percent of high school students say they have seriously considered suicide within the last year. High-risk behaviors such as tobacco use, drug use, violence, and early sexual activity remain at shockingly high levels. A review conducted in 2003 at the Wingspread Conference, sponsored by CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health and the Johnson Foundation, indicated a strong link between school connectedness and educational outcomes such as school attendance, staying in school longer, and higher grades and classroom test scores.

On the positive side, students—with and without disabilities—who feel more connected to their schools and friends are more likely to complete school and, in turn, are more likely to have satisfying and successful employment. According to one study, increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance. These naturally link to higher academic achievement and potentially greater success in the workplace. Research demonstrates that school connectedness—defined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals—is a particularly strong protective factor for a child’s well-being. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health examined the impact of protective factors, including school connectedness, on adolescent health and well-being among more than 36,000 students in grades 7-12. School connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence and risky behaviors, and had a strong influence on emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation and attempts.

A recent meta-analysis of high-quality social and emotional learning programs suggests that well-designed and well-implemented programs not only improve behavior, but also
improve academic achievement as measured by standardized tests. From multiple points of view, it is clear that increased attention to building positive and supportive relationships in schools is a long-awaited and important shift in the focus of school reform efforts and in the focus of inclusion activities, as well. Research suggests that when students don't have the chance to be engaged in inclusive activities, they are less likely to feel a part of that school.

This points to a powerful but often overlooked opportunity for the inclusion movement: to focus on the relationships between children with and without disabilities in a way that helps both. The progress we've made toward a more inclusive education system could be even more powerful if we engaged a group of potential leaders who are frequently overlooked: non-disabled students. By every indication, non-disabled students are willing, if asked, to be leaders in the inclusion movement but too frequently have been given few opportunities to help.

It is that connection that has led Special Olympics to promote the idea of “unity.” The word “unity” suggests roles and benefits for everyone. Unity invites students with and without disabilities to be proactive, not reactive. It requires all children to accept responsibility for building relationships, even though new relationships might create initial discomfort. The ideal of unity can inspire students to recognize the humanity in others and to set aside preconceived notions of merit or value. Unity demands the involvement of all members of a school community—students, teachers, administrators, and parents—to create supportive and inclusive environments for every student. Unity invites everyone in the school to accept an important definition of “success”: one where everyone succeeds.

In 2008, Special Olympics launched Project UNIFY to bring to schools many decades of experience using sports to promote a positive self-image for people with intellectual disabilities and meaningful relationships between them and their communities. Drawing on the latest research on creating and sustaining supportive school communities, Project UNIFY integrates Special Olympics programs into a youth-led model of student engagement and focuses on creating and sustaining classroom practices, school climate, and community participation that together can ensure that all students develop intellectual, physical, civic, and emotional competencies. At its core, Project UNIFY aims to create a paradigm shift in which young people become the architects of supportive relationships and community building rather than remaining passive recipients of the efforts of adults. In an unusual shift, Project UNIFY activities position young people with intellectual disabilities as a crucial resource in building a positive school climate rather than as a burdensome drain on that same climate. Young people with and without intellectual disabilities are invited to participate in sports activities together and to then join in developing their own strategies for bringing the lessons of playing unified to the larger school commu-
nity. The Project UNIFY activities offer multiple opportunities for student-led engagement: Special Olympics Unified Sports® (inclusive sports training and competitions for students with and without disabilities), service learning curricula, public awareness campaigns around the hurtful use of the word “retard” (also known as the “R-word campaign”), and youth volunteer and leadership training for young people with and without intellectual disabilities together. To date, Special Olympics Project UNIFY is active in 42 states and has launched five international pilot projects in Serbia, Austria, Italy, Romania, and India.

In Project UNIFY schools, 63 percent of teacher liaisons (faculty that support Special Olympics programming) observed increased opportunities for students with and without ID to work together and 52 percent saw opportunities for more school involvement for students with ID. Sixty percent of students said they felt they learned they had something in common with their peers with ID, and more than 75 percent felt they had gained the skills of patience and compromise. A stunning 74 percent said that Project UNIFY had been a positive turning point in their life. At a recent meeting of Project UNIFY interns during the summer of 2012, young people with and without intellectual disabilities from ages 17-20 reflected on their experiences and connection to one another and spoke passionately about how their role in Special Olympics Project UNIFY had played an important part in how they lived their lives and treat all people. They agreed that being exposed to and embracing the Special Olympics’ philosophy of unity, understanding, and accepting of differences, and the ability to see others who are different for their gifts and skills, made them more tolerant.

These anecdotal reports support the research gathered over a decade about the impact of Unified Sports as an intervention. Participants with intellectual disabilities in Unified Sports experienced improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and social relationships with their non-disabled peers. Numerous studies have also shown the positive impact of physical activity on brain health, on the ability to concentrate, and on the ability to pay attention and focus for students with disabilities. Adolescents and young adults without intellectual disabilities demonstrated improved attitudes toward understanding about peers with intellectual disabilities and had elevated expectations for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Providing opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to interact in meaningful ways that highlight their similarities rather than accentuate differences has also been shown to be valuable in promoting positive attitudes. As one of the 2,100 schools nationally participating in Project UNIFY, Grandview High School in Aurora, CO, established Special Olympics unified basketball teams and cheerleading squads; as a result, the principal told the New York Times, “Unified has transformed the culture of this school. It was almost as if these kids weren’t noticed before we began doing this. I don’t think anyone realized how powerful they are.”

**Conclusion**

Education experts and political leaders frequently agree that American schools remain in need of reforms that will expand the circle of opportunity for all children. Few such leaders, however, recognize young people themselves as a critical leadership constituency in effecting the needed reforms. Special Olympics Project UNIFY is attempting to reverse this long history of oversight with a first: not only is our goal to empower young people to lead reform efforts, but even more to empower those who are often wrongly seen as a burden and to unleash them to be leaders, too. Our premise is simple: all young people must become agents of change rather than passive actors in their learning environments. Creating positive, nurturing school communities begins with creating positive relationships among students and this is especially critical for students who are traditionally marginalized, at-risk, or alone.

Special Olympics Project UNIFY shows promise of becoming a powerful lever for empowering students to build friendships, foster welcoming communities, and create healthy learning environments for all students. The challenge for the inclusion movement in the coming years is to shift from a movement largely focused on support for children with disabilities to a movement focused on engaging all young people in promoting a unified culture and climate. As part of this shift, students with intellectual disabilities can become part of the fabric of the education community and be perceived as assets in their school.