The challenges facing today’s youth are many, from achieving personal and academic success to feeling emotionally and physically healthy and safe. These challenges are even greater for some students due to the presence of a disability. Specifically, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) must contend with both academic and social challenges beyond those normally faced by their typically developing peers.

Increasingly, children with ID, who once were on the margins of the educational community, are being provided the opportunity to engage in the important life experiences school provides. Previously taught primarily in separate schools and classrooms, today these students are more and more often placed in inclusive classrooms to learn alongside their non-disabled peers. Despite this progress, students with ID still face challenges that compromise their social and emotional well-being. In fact, despite legislative mandates and changes in policy, the promise of inclusion has not
fully been realized, especially as the full participation and acceptance of students with ID into the social fabric of the school remains elusive.\(^1\) Even those students with ID who attend schools with policies and procedures that provide an inclusive educational experience are too often disengaged from many school-based opportunities and remain isolated from their peers without disabilities. Unfortunately, students with ID experience social isolation and rejection within the school setting, as well as victimization in the form of bullying.\(^2\) It has been reported that students with disabilities, particularly students with ID, face an increased rate of bullying compared to students without disabilities.\(^3\)

These barriers to social success may be due in part to the nature of the mechanisms necessary to support the physical and academic inclusion of students with ID: specialized transportation, instruction taking place outside of the regular classroom setting, presence of an aide, etc., which may not only isolate students from their peers but also emphasize their differences from students without disabilities. A lack of understanding and
awareness of the competence and range of accomplishments achievable by people with ID may also play a role.

Unfortunately, teachers, staff, and students often underestimate the capabilities of individuals with ID and share a common misinterpretation that all people with ID are alike, unable to learn to live or to work as contributing members of the community. To combat these misconceptions, ensuring that students with ID are physically included in the school and classroom is not enough. It is not the mere coexistence of students with and without disabilities in the same space, but rather a sense of true social inclusion and acceptance that will allow students with ID to feel a part of the school community, to engage with their peers, and to develop relationships and friendships.

Over the years, numerous programs and interventions have been developed to address the issues of isolation and rejection that are the reality for many students with ID. While these interventions have shown varying levels of success, similar themes have emerged over the years in the identification of best practices to promote inclusion and acceptance. For instance, creating opportunities for shared participation in activities that are cooperative in nature has been shown to be effective in promoting the social acceptance of students with ID, perhaps because they allow all students the opportunity to contribute equally to a task while working toward achieving common goals. Extracurricular and sport and recreation activities, in particular, provide an ideal opportunity for students with and without ID to come together in meaningful ways. Participation in these types of activities not only provides students the opportunity to learn new skills, but also has been shown to improve students’ sense of connectedness to each other and to the school.

This is particularly important for students with ID, as a strong relationship has been established between school connectedness and a variety of positive educational and health outcomes. Moreover, these types of activities provide students with ID the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and similarity to their peers without disabilities, as opposed to highlighting their differences, something that is not always possible with the classroom. These perceptions of similarity have been found to be an important factor in the development of positive social relationships between students with and without ID.

Unfortunately, students with ID are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities than their peers without disabilities, whether due to difficulty accessing activities or more personal issues such as the negative attitudes of others. One organization that has operated with the mission of providing individuals with ID opportunities to participate in sports and recreation activities is Special Olympics International (SOI). Using sports as a vehicle, Special Olympics aids people with ID in developing skills and friendships, gaining competency, and demonstrating their ability to contribute to society.

After years of operating traditional Special Olympics sports programs in which athletes with ID play together on teams and interact with people without disabilities who serve in the capacities of coaches and volunteers, SOI developed Unified Sports® in 1988 as a more inclusive sports experience. Unified Sports brings together individuals with and without ID of similar age and ability to compete together as equals where each member of the team, regardless of disability, contributes to its success. This inclusive program was developed in part as a way to align with and support the newly developed policies and legislation supporting the inclusion of students with ID in regular education schools and classroom taking place during that time. Through Unified Sports, children and youth both with and without ID have reported the formation of positive peer relationships and friendships as a result of their involvement in the program.

The observed experiences and testimonials of youth with and without ID involved in Unified Sports through the years served as the impetus for SOI to further engage in the development and implementation of school-based programming for promoting the social acceptance and inclusion of children and youth. In 2008, SOI used what it had learned to create Project UNIFY, designed to address the problem of negative attitudes toward and social exclusion of students with ID, as well as to promote the engagement of students with ID in school-based opportunities available to students without disabilities. Project UNIFY’s stated purpose is to activate youth to develop school communities where all young people are agents of change: fostering respect, dignity, and advo-
create and sustain school communities that promote acceptance, respect, and human dignity for all students. Today, approximately 2,100 schools across the country are engaged with Special Olympics Project UNIFY.

With sports as the bedrock, SOI has combined its existing initiatives with a number of complementary initiatives, which together provide programming for children and youth with ID that promotes their inclusion in school and society (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unified Sports®</th>
<th>A program that places athletes with ID and “partners” (athletes without ID) on the same team to compete in team sports;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner’s Clubs</td>
<td>Non-academic, school-based clubs that bring students with and without ID together for planning and participating in sports, recreation, social and community activities that foster understanding and acceptance and promote leadership and collaborative skill building;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Into It® Educational Resources</td>
<td>A number of lessons, activities, and resources that teach students of all ages about respect and acceptance of differences while providing them with the tools to serve as active agents for change in not only their school, but the community as well;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Word Campaign</td>
<td>A prescribed set of resources and tools to help students eradicate the hurtful and harmful use of language that demeans and diminishes others;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Leadership Training</td>
<td>Trainings to give students with and without ID the tools and confidence needed to be leaders;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Rallies/Forums/Assemblies</td>
<td>Events where young people educate each other on issues, motivate each other, and activate on a set of agreed upon engagement practices;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fans in the Stands</td>
<td>A way for students of all ages to engage with persons with ID when direct interaction is not possible, where entire student bodies cheer their athlete peers with ID and support SO athletes at events.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is the “unification” of these initiatives in purposeful combinations that is at the core of Project UNIFY. In addition to Unified Sports, SOI expanded, for instance, Get Into It® educational resources, which teach students about inclusion, acceptance, and respect for individual differences, and the existing Athlete Leadership Programs (ALPS), which foster and support the development of leadership skills in youth with ID as a way to build self-confidence and prepare them for roles previously not considered within their reach. Through a framework of educate, motivate, and activate, students with and without ID are given opportunities to learn and work together toward goals of acceptance (See Figure 1).

With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, SOI has used existing State Special Olympics Programs to bring Project UNIFY to schools for the past three years. State programs are expected to partner with schools to implement Project UNIFY programming at the school level. The state programs receive Department of Education funding from SOI to carry out a proposed set of Project UNIFY activities that will occur in the participating schools recruited in their state. Through Project UNIFY, SOI has challenged the state programs to become partners for schools, serving as a valuable resource to the education community as they focus on issues of social inclusion and youth activation.

Generally, state Special Olympics programs have been given autonomy to work with schools to create unique programming that best fits the goals and existing programming of each school and best fits the population of students they serve.

Playing an integral role in the continued evaluation and refinement of Project UNIFY, the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston has been conducting an evaluation of Project UNIFY since its inception. The evaluation has contributed to the continued success of the program as it has provided valuable information about the implementation of Project UNIFY in schools and the collaboration between state Special Olympics programs and school staff as they engage youth with and without ID at all levels.

Early on, the evaluation provided information about the development of partnerships between state programs and the schools, as well as more general information on how Project UNIFY was being implemented in the schools. As anticipated, during the start-up years there was extensive variation both across and within states in terms of the level of collaboration among
Because of the nature of Project UNIFY and the differences with regard to not only the types of initiatives implemented across schools, the number of activities implemented, and the frequency with which they were implemented, there was great variability in the reports of students participating in Project UNIFY. For some students, participation meant ongoing involvement over time (e.g., participation in a Partner’s Club or Unified Sports), while for others it represented attendance at a single event (e.g., a school-wide Project UNIFY rally). Therefore the evaluation focused not only on the types of activities students were participating in, but also on what they took away from their participation.

Most students reported positive Project UNIFY experiences that provided them opportunities to meet new people and learn new things. Among the students who participated in at least one Project UNIFY initiative, approximately two-thirds had the opportunity to interact with a fellow student with ID. Nearly the same amount of students reported making friends with a student with ID.

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Project UNIFY also provided an opportunity for self-reflection, as most students reported that their participation made them more aware of how their emotions and attitudes can affect their classmates. Moreover, participating in Project UNIFY also appeared to influence
the ways in which students thought about their peer relationships, as many students reported learning that they have things in common with students with ID. Finally, students also learned techniques for positive social interactions, such as being more patient with classmates and learning that working together requires compromise. Generally, students regarded Project UNIFY as a positive occurrence in their lives, as nearly all believed that their schools should continue with the program in the coming years.

In addition, participating teachers and school staff members echoed students’ sentiments, as most recognized its value and supported its continued presence in their schools. Moreover, most reported seeing changes in their schools as a result of Project UNIFY. Approximately two-thirds of teachers and staff surveyed stated that Project UNIFY made a difference by helping raise awareness about students with ID and increasing opportunities for students with and without ID to work together. Importantly, the majority also believed that Project UNIFY increases opportunities for students with ID to get involved in school activities.

Clearly, innovative programs like Project UNIFY can enhance opportunities for promoting the key values of acceptance and inclusion in schools. Anecdotal feedback gathered through site visits, student and teacher testimonials, youth-created products including videos, essays, blogs, slide shows, and Facebook posts, along with independent evaluation data, are encouraging and create a compelling case for Project UNIFY as a program with enormous value. The growth of Project UNIFY over the past three years, and the increasing interest and receptiveness in the program from policymakers, educators, teachers, and students, suggest that Project UNIFY can become an integral and sustainable part of a school’s culture of acceptance and inclusion.

Implications for Policy

Project UNIFY has provided SOI with the impetus to call on state education leaders to promote activities that can advance and sustain an inclusive and equitable educational experience for all students with ID using sports and recreation. Through collaborative efforts, educators and state Special Olympics programs can work together to determine what role Project UNIFY can play in meeting their state, district, and individual school’s strategic goals, whether it be promoting an accepting and welcoming school, developing more opportunities for physical fitness, building character, preventing bullying, or enhancing the opportunities for engagement between students with and without ID. However, it is important that there are policies in place that support and encourage collaboration within the school setting among administration, special educators, and general educators, not only in academic endeavors, but also as they impact the social inclusion of all students. For example, local policies should ensure that educators have adequate time for planning and carryout collaborative activities. Both state and local policymakers can work to ensure that all teachers have

When I was first asked if I wanted to help [with Project UNIFY] last year, my answer was a resounding no – my reasons being that I was fearful and had no experience with special ed kids. But the more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself to try it, just once...I was entirely surprised. I grew to look forward to it, treasuring the half-hour I had to spend with these students...I hope that if you ever have an amazing opportunity that you try it, just once.
—Middle school student without a disability
We have created an expectation in our school community: all students should be included, respected, and treasured whenever it is in the best interest of the kids. —Teacher

The general education and special education students have learned so much about each other... I see the students hanging out in the halls together now and having lunch with each other. It's a win-win situation for everyone. —High school teacher

the proper training and professional development regarding how to integrate and include students with and without disabilities safely in the same environment. Such training is especially important for general educators.

Policies and programs can also be supported that increase the opportunities provided for students with and without ID to interact both formally (e.g., inclusive PE) and informally (e.g., inclusive lunch, extracurricular activities) throughout and even beyond the school day. For example, programs such as Unified Sports provide a suitable starting point for engaging students with and without ID in an inclusive setting. In addition to providing an excellent opportunity to promote teamwork, acceptance, and social inclusion, Unified Sports also promotes exercise and healthy living. Similarly, the Get Into It educational resources, which are designed in part to teach students of all ages about respect and acceptance of differences, may dovetail well with existing programs being implemented to combat bullying or promote character development.

To that end, SOI has taken steps to ensure that the Project UNIFY philosophy addresses current and anticipated national educational and social issues by complementing existing policies that encourage and share its goals and objectives. Specifically, SOI urges state leaders to share the Project UNIFY strategies of engaging students both with and without ID in activities that excite and prepare them to be leaders for more accepting school communities. To do so, a comprehensive, student-centered strategy must be identified that acknowledges students of all abilities as having the knowledge and skills to contribute to an overall school climate that fosters acceptance and a respect for differences.

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Endnotes


www.nasbe.org August 2013 National Association of State Boards of Education | 27