



**Special
Olympics**

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: 2022-2023 Report

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Executive Summary

Special Olympics' Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is a leader in promoting inclusion within schools in the United States and the world. UCS is an evidence-based strategy that aims to foster social inclusion, equity, and development for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). UCS also aims to promote a school culture of acceptance and inclusion. Through three core experiences—Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement—UCS provides many opportunities for students with and without IDD to learn and work together. The last 15 years of research and program evaluation have shown that UCS is successful in providing inclusive schoolwide programming capable of effecting change within K-12 schools.

Given the wealth of information already amassed, CSDE approached the 2022-2023 evaluation seeking to explore factors related to sustainable and high-quality programs, and to investigate the long-term impacts of UCS implementation for students and schools. To do so, this year's evaluation report explores program implementation from several angles. First, for the 2022-2023 school year, CSDE examined new and continuing UCS programming via the annual Liaison Survey. This survey investigated the status of UCS within schools, as well as aspects related to sustainability, resource use, and perceived impacts of UCS programming. Second, CSDE examined long-term impacts and factors related to sustainability through interviews with staff from schools that started UCS implementation between 2014 and 2016.¹ Third, CSDE explored the relationship between UCS activities and a student's positive identity development by exploring how Unified Clubs and related activities leads to positive environments for and experiences for students with and without IDD. Across these three aspects, this year's evaluation focused on assessing the short- and long-term impact of UCS implementation and identifying factors that may relate to more sustainable and higher-quality programs.

The Liaison Survey (Program Implementation):

- CSDE attempted to contact 7,350 liaisons across 51 state Special Olympics Programs. CSDE received responses from 5,084 liaisons (which is a response rate of 69%).
- Sixty percent of schools were Full-implementation schools (i.e., they had at least one activity from each UCS core experience). This represents an increase from 2021-2022, where 51% of schools were Full-implementation schools. This increase mostly reflects a change in schools moving from Developing or Emerging Unified schools into Full-implementation schools.
- Where were small increases in the percentage of schools implementing at least one Unified Sports activity (87% in 2022-2023 compared to 84% in 2021-2022) or Whole School Engagement activity (85% in 2022-2023 compared to 82% in 2021-2022).

¹ Staff were from schools that participated in an intervention study that investigated the effect of UCS implementation on students' attitudes and behaviors towards youth with IDD. This was a coordinated effort between Special Olympics and CSDE (Siperstein, McDowell, Jacobs, Stokes, & Cahn, 2019)

There was a larger increase in the percentage of schools implementing at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity (71% in 2022-2023 compared to 62% in 2021-2022). However, Inclusive Youth Leadership still is the least implemented UCS core experience.

- Out of schools that had at least one Unified Sports component or experience:
 - Unified Sports team implementation had a small increase in 2022-2023. Sixty-five percent of schools had at least one Unified Sports team, which is a small increase from 2021-2022 (e.g., 60%). This shows a sustained recovery from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Unified PE showed similar implementation levels (63%) as Unified Sports. Other components were less frequently implemented in 2022-2023.
 - Only 20% of schools implemented Unified Fitness, and only 7% of schools implemented Unified Esports & Fitness.
 - Fifty percent of elementary schools implemented Young Athletes and 42% of elementary schools implemented Unified Developmental Sports.
 - These results are consistent with the findings from 2021-2022.
- Out of schools that had at least one Whole School Engagement component or experience:
 - Similar to 2021-2022, schools implemented between two and three Whole School Engagement activities in 2022-2023.
 - The most popular activity remains Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, with 76% of schools who implemented at least one Whole School Engagement activity implementing this event.
 - Many schools implemented Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally (50%), fundraising events or activities (41%), or Unified Sports Day/Festival (37%). Less schools implemented a Special Olympics Play or Performance (11%) (which is not a widely promoted activity) or a Unified Fitness Challenge (16%) (which has not been maintained in most cases due to return to in person play after covid).
 - These results are consistent with the findings from 2021-2022.
- Out of schools that had at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership component or experience:
 - Unified Club remained the most popular Inclusive Youth Leadership activity. Out of the schools that had at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity, 72% of schools had a Unified Club.
 - Other Inclusive Youth Leadership activities were less implemented, such as Inclusive Leadership Training or Class (39%), Young Athletes Volunteers (37%), Special Olympics Youth Summit (21%), or Special Olympics Youth Activation Committee (10%).
 - Inclusive participation—or the participation of students with and without IDD—was high across Inclusive Youth Leadership experiences. Inclusive participation ranged from 83% (for Young Athlete Volunteers) to 95% (for Unified Club).
- Implementation across years:

- CSDE also investigated whether a school's ability to implement a core experience was consistent across the last two years. In looking at schools that completed the Liaison Survey in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023:
 - 77% of schools implemented at least one Unified Sports activity in both 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.
 - 75% of schools implemented at least one Whole School Engagement activity in both 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.
 - 42% of schools implemented at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity in both 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.

Program self-sustainability:

- CSDE examined program sustainability based on a school's relationship with their State Program and within-school characteristics.
- Self-sustainability and state-level support:
 - Eighty-one percent of schools that completed the Liaison Survey received support from State Programs.
 - Fifty-nine percent of liaisons reported being in contact with their State Program at least once per month, with more contact occurring between State Programs and Full-implementation schools (64%) than Emerging schools (45%) or Developing schools (55%).
 - Overall, 68% of schools had an in-person visit from their State Program. The most common reasons included training or resource dissemination.
 - Seventy-seven percent of liaisons reported that they were satisfied with the support received from their state Special Olympics Program, and 81% of liaisons were satisfied with the amount of funding they received from their State Program.
- Resource Awareness and Usage
 - Liaisons were aware that Special Olympics offers resources to help with UCS implementation. Seventy-nine percent of liaisons were aware of at least one resource offered by Special Olympics, and 50% of those liaisons used at least one resource.
 - The most used resource was the playbook for each school level. Of liaisons who were aware of the playbooks:
 - Forty-six percent of elementary school liaisons reported using the Elementary School playbook.
 - Forty-seven percent of middle school liaisons who were aware of the Middle School playbook used it.
 - Forty-two percent of high school liaisons who were aware of the High School playbook used it.
 - Liaisons who used at least one resource offered by Special Olympics thought that the resource was useful and helpful in implementing UCS activities.
 - On average, liaisons prefer resources that are on a computer and printable. Liaisons also prefer to see successful examples from other schools over

challenges that they may face. However, they prefer instructional video tutorials over step-by-step text-based instructional guides.

- Self-sustainability and school-level support:
 - Liaisons reported about school-level support in three ways: having a UCS Leadership Team, the integration of UCS initiatives and policies within their school, and the perceptions of program continuation without direct involvement from the current liaison and their state Special Olympics program.
 - Regarding UCS Leadership Teams:
 - Thirty-eight percent of schools reported having a UCS Leadership Team in 2022-2023. This is an increase from 2021-2022, when 28% of schools reported having a UCS Leadership Team.
 - Compared to schools without UCS Leadership Teams, schools with UCS Leadership Teams reported more involvement from school administrators, general education teachers, and families of students with and without IDD.
 - Schools with UCS Leadership Teams reported that their funding was more sustainable (75%) than schools without a UCS Leadership Team (65%).
 - Regarding UCS integration with school policies and procedures:
 - Full-implementation schools reported that UCS was more integrated with their school's policies and procedures than Developing or Emerging schools.
 - Schools with a UCS Leadership Team reported that UCS was more integrated within their school than schools without a UCS Leadership Team.
 - Liaisons who reported that UCS was more integrated within their school also thought that their program was more sustainable.
 - Banner Schools reported more integration than Full-implementation schools.
 - Regarding the continuation of UCS implementation without the specific liaison's support or support from the State Program:
 - Based on implementation level:
 - Liaisons from Full-implementation thought that UCS would continue if the liaison left the program (74%) than liaisons from Developing (64%) or Emerging (63%) schools.
 - Similarly, more liaisons from Full-implementation schools thought that UCS would continue without direct support from Special Olympics (66%) than Developing (57%) or Emerging (50%) schools.
 - Lastly, more liaisons from Full-implementation schools thought their school was self-sustainable (66%) than liaisons from Developing (52%) or Emerging (45%) schools.
 - Based on having a UCS Leadership Team:

- Liaisons from schools with a UCS Leadership Team reported that they were more likely to continue if the current liaison left (77%) than schools without a UCS Leadership Team (63%).
- Similarly, liaisons from schools with a UCS Leadership Team reported that they were more likely to continue without direct support from state Special Olympics Programs (69%) than schools without a UCS Leadership Team (56%)
- Lastly, liaisons from schools with a UCS Leadership Team thought that their school was more self-sustainable (69%) than schools without a UCS Leadership Team (52%).

Impact of UCS within schools:

- Liaisons thought that UCS made an impact for students with and without IDD. Liaisons from Full-implementation schools thought that there was a greater impact for students with and without IDD than liaisons from Developing or Emerging Schools.
- About half of liaisons thought that UCS had a positive impact on different student groups, such as LGBTQ+ students, immigrant or refugee students, students where English is a foreign language, or new or transfer students. There were no noticeable differences in perceptions of impact based on the school's implementation level.
- Liaisons were also asked whether UCS programming led to more inclusive spaces where adults were active leaders (e.g., classroom or extracurricular spaces) or where students would freely interact with other students (e.g., school buses, the cafeteria, or other common areas within the school).
 - Overall, liaisons thought that UCS made an impact on adult-led spaces and spaces where students would freely interact with each other.
 - Compared to liaisons from Developing or Emerging schools, liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported higher levels of impact in both adult-led spaces and spaces where students would freely interact with each other.

Revisiting Schools that Participated in the UCS Intervention Study to Investigate Program Sustainability and Long-term Impacts:

- Interviews with staff from schools that participated in a prior intervention study (Siperstein, McDowell, Jacobs, Stokes, & Cahn, 2019) found that UCS implementation has many benefits for students with and without IDD.
- Long-term sustainability of UCS implementation was associated with:
 - Buy-in from school community members,
 - Communication with state Special Olympics Programs, and
 - A school's ability to manage multiple aspects of UCS implementation.

Initial Findings on How UCS Contributes to A Student's Positive Identity Development Within Schools:

- Liaisons, students, and alumni thought that identity development is an important topic to discuss—especially for students with IDD.
- Unified Clubs provide leadership opportunities for students with and without IDD. They also provide positive experiences within and outside schools.
- Among the 10 schools selected for this aspect of the annual evaluation, a school’s Unified Club was embedded within other UCS activities at their school. There was also a relationship between UCS programming and the school community more broadly.
- UCS provides students with and without IDD:
 - An inclusive community,
 - A chance to form relationships, and
 - A safe and supportive environment.
- These aspects of UCS programming help to promote student success and growth. Work in 2023-2024 will investigate how these aspects relate to youth’s positive identity development.

Summative Highlights and Recommendations for 2023-2024:

- Summative Highlights from 2022-2023:
 - UCS is sustaining its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - UCS continues to be beneficial for students with and without IDD.
 - Most schools reported that UCS implementation had a benefit for students at their school. However, the impact of UCS implementation appears to be stronger for schools where UCS is more integrated within their school’s community and where multiple core experiences are offered.
- Recommendations for 2023-2024:
 - Attempt to start new UCS programs as Full-implementation programs and support existing programs to reach and maintain full-implementation status.
 - Promote the ability for schools to network and communicate with other schools within their school district, region, or state.
 - Identify or audit current or newly developed resources to make sure they align with liaisons’ needs.
 - Utilize the existing data from prior UCS research and evaluation efforts to create a standard for indicators and outcomes of inclusion in schools.

Introduction

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is one of the many ways that Special Olympics (SO) is leading the inclusion revolution around the world. Focused on empowering students of all ages as agents of change, UCS is an evidence-based strategy for K-12 schools, colleges, and universities to prioritize social inclusion and equity for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and an inclusive school culture. As a youth-led strategy, UCS does not intend for students to be passive recipients of the program. Instead, UCS positions students as one of the driving forces behind a cultural shift where inclusion becomes the norm and expectation. UCS builds students' capacity to do this by uniting Partners (e.g., youth with IDD) and Athletes (e.g., youth without IDD) to learn and work side by side within three core experiences:²

- **SO Unified Sports®**: opportunities that bring students with and without IDD together to participate in competitive and recreational inclusive sports activities (such as Unified Sports teams, Unified PE, Unified Fitness, Unified eSports & Fitness, Young Athletes, and Unified Developmental Sports),
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership**: opportunities for students with and without IDD to take on leadership roles in promoting UCS activities, or other socially inclusive events, in their school and community (such as Unified Club, Inclusive Leadership Training/Class, Young Athletes Volunteers, SO Youth Summit, and SO Youth Activation Committee), and
- **Whole School Engagement**: opportunities for all students in the school to participate in UCS (such as Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, Unified Sports Day/Festival, SO plays/performances (e.g., “It’s Our School, Too” play), Unified Fitness challenges, and fundraising events and activities).

To support an evidence-based approach to program implementation that maximizes impact for schools and students, SO has partnered with the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. For the past fifteen years, CSDE has conducted an extensive annual evaluation focused on understanding how UCS is implemented across K-12 schools and its impact on school community members. The evaluation has consistently highlighted three well-established UCS implementation models, the effects of UCS implementation within schools, clear pathways of the mechanisms behind attitudinal changes toward inclusion and students with IDD (e.g., Siperstein et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). UCS is successful in providing inclusive schoolwide programming capable of effecting change within K-12 schools.

Given the wealth of information already amassed, CSDE approached the 2022-2023 evaluation seeking to explore factors related to sustainable and high-quality programs, and

² See Appendix A for a more thorough description of each core experience.

to investigate the long-term impacts of UCS implementation for students and schools. To do so, this year's evaluation report explores program implementation from several angles. First, for the 2022-2023 school year, CSDE examined new and continuing UCS programming via the annual Liaison Survey. This survey investigated the status of UCS within schools, as well as aspects related to sustainability, resource use, and perceived impacts of UCS programming. Second, CSDE examined long-term impacts and factors related to sustainability (or lack thereof) through interviews with staff from schools that started UCS implementation between 2014 and 2016.³ Third, CSDE explored the relationship between UCS activities and a student's positive identity development by exploring how Unified Clubs and related activities leads to positive environments for and experiences for students with and without IDD. Across these three aspects, this year's evaluation focused on assessing the short- and long-term impact of UCS implementation and identifying factors that may relate to more sustainable and higher-quality programs.

The following sections present the findings on these topics in detail, and the report concludes with recommendations that can guide programming into 2023-2024 and beyond.

³ Staff were from schools that participated in an intervention study that investigated the effect of UCS implementation on students' attitudes and behaviors towards youth with IDD. This was a coordinated effort between Special Olympics and CSDE (Siperstein, McDowell, Jacobs, Stokes, & Cahn, 2019).

Implementation of Unified Champion Schools in 2022-23

The annual UCS Liaison Survey is pivotal to understanding UCS programming across schools, and liaisons have become an important source for assessing the program scope and impact nationwide. UCS liaisons are school officials designated as the point of contact between Special Olympics and their school, as well as leaders for UCS programming.

Collaborating with state Special Olympics Programs, the CSDE evaluation team once again asked liaisons to share their insights and feedback as part of the annual evaluation. This year's UCS Liaison Survey included a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions that aimed to elicit rich details of UCS program implementation and its impact on schools and communities. The survey was divided into eight categories:

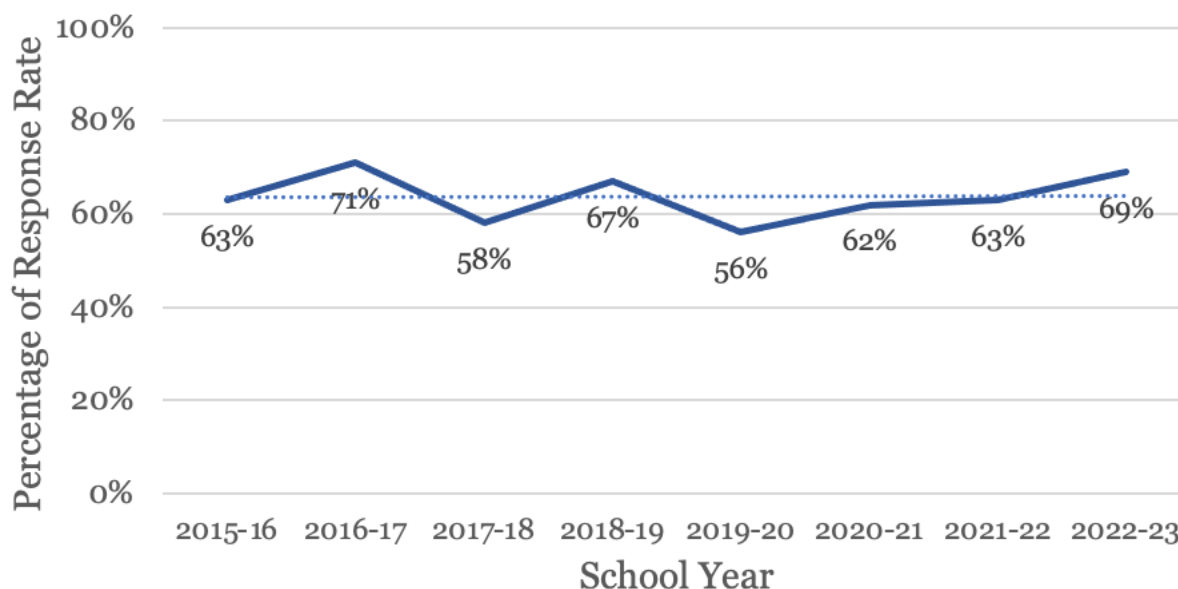
- a) liaison demographics and school characteristics,
- b) implementation of core experiences and activities,
- c) implementation support,
- d) Special Olympics' resource awareness and usefulness,
- e) Special Olympics' State Program support,
- f) funding,
- g) program sustainability, and
- h) impact of UCS programming on students and the school environment.

This section of the annual evaluation is separated into multiple subsections. The methods subsection describes the processes involved in collecting data for this year's Liaison Survey. Next, the following subsection describes UCS implementation across schools in 2022-2023. After that, additional analyses are presented regarding program sustainability and state-level or school-level implementation support. Lastly, this section concludes with a discussion of the impact of UCS on students and a school environment.

Methods

Between April and June 2023, the evaluation team contacted 7,350 liaisons across 51 State Programs.⁴ CSDE received responses from a total of 5,084 school liaisons, which was a national response rate of 69%. This is the highest response rate since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1 for response rates since the 2015-2016 school year). This also represents an increase of 842 responses from the 2021-2022 school year. See Appendix B for a full breakdown of school responses by State Program.

⁴ California has two State Programs: Northern California and Southern California. Puerto Rico and Washington DC also have state Special Olympics Programs.

Figure 1. National UCS Liaison Survey Response Rate Between 2015-2016 and 2022-2023.

Note: The COVID-19 pandemic started in Spring 2020. This may have contributed to the 2019-2020 response rate of the Liaison Survey.

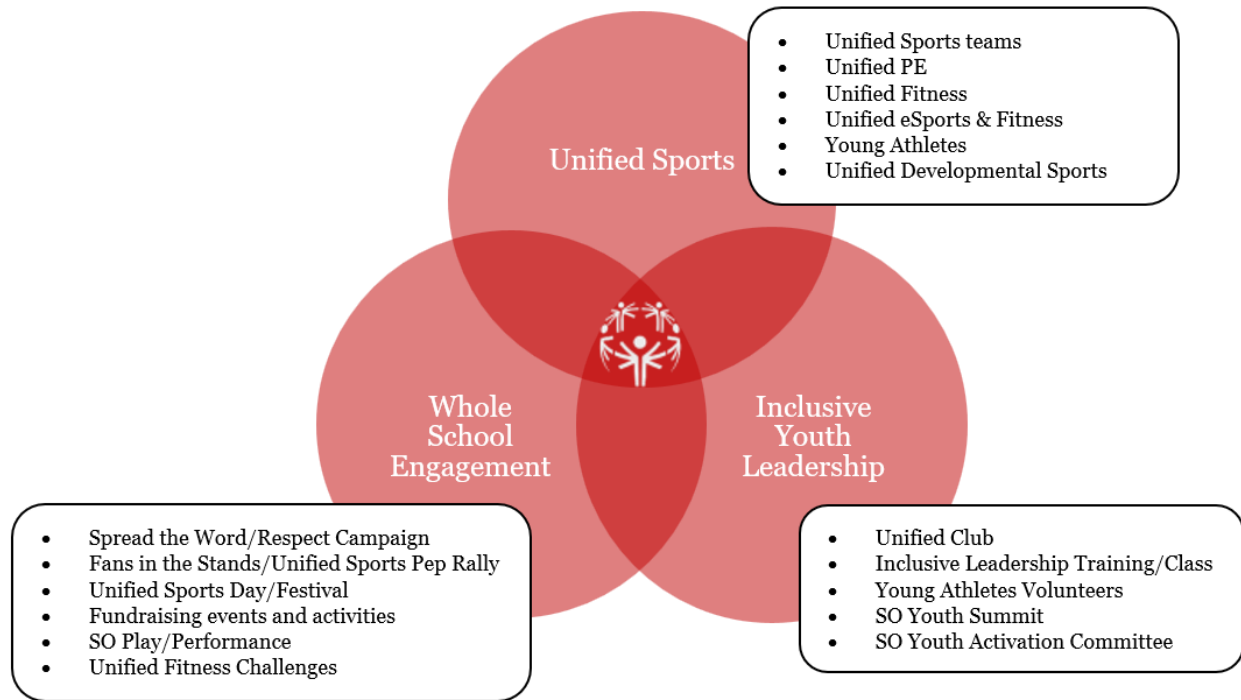
Most liaisons who responded to this year's survey were from suburban high schools with fewer than 1,000 students enrolled, which continues to align with the trends in previous annual evaluations. Overall, high school liaisons made up 47% of the entire sample. Similar to previous years, the largest proportion of responses from rural, town, and suburban locales were high school liaisons. They made up over 50% of the sample of rural, town, and suburban responses. Comparatively, 40% of the responses from urban locales came from elementary school liaisons. This matches the national percentage of UCS liaisons and programs.

UCS Implementation

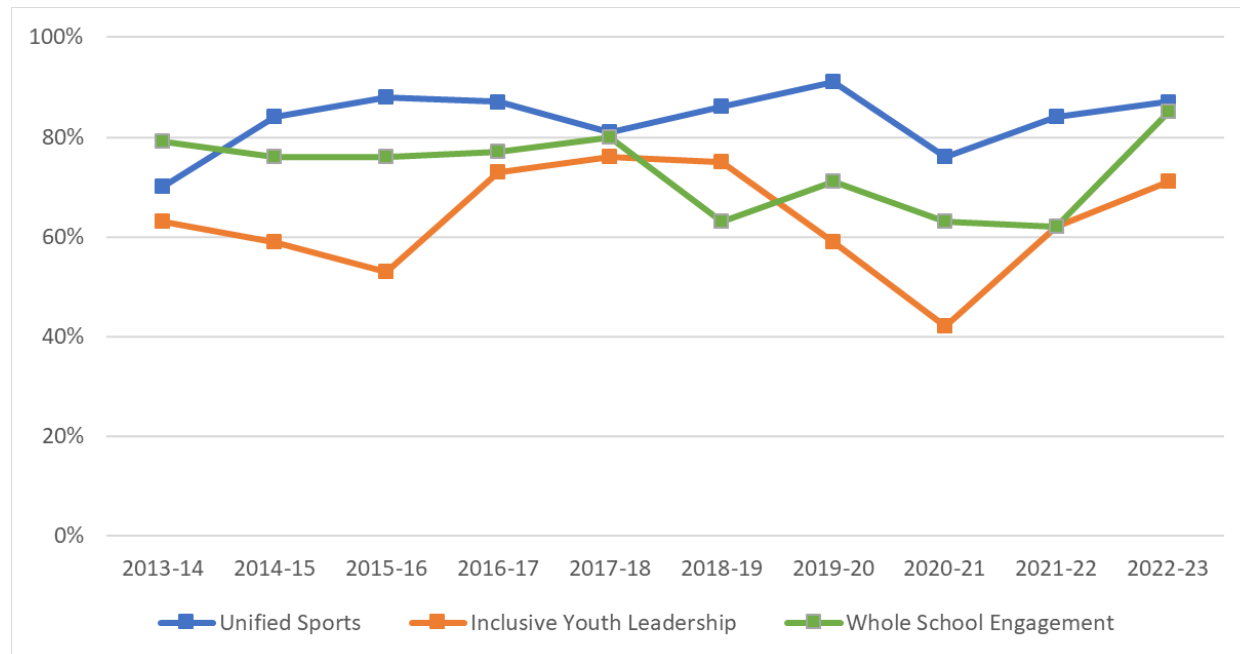
2022-2023 Implementation Across Schools

As mentioned in the overall introduction, the UCS program consists of three core experiences: Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement (see Appendix A). Within each core experience, schools may select one of many activities to implement. This flexibility allows school leaders and stakeholders to tailor their program to align with their school's specific context and needs. Figure 2 shows the most common activities that fall within each core experience—which were the primary activities asked about during this year's Liaison Survey.

Figure 2. UCS Core Experiences and Activities Evaluated In 2022-2023.



Implementation rates were consistent over the last two school years. There was a small increase in schools that implemented at least one Unified Sports activity (87% in 2022-2023, compared to 84% in 2021-2022). Similarly, there was a small increase in schools that implemented at least one Whole School Engagement activity (85% in 2022-2023, compared to 82% in 2021-2022). There was a larger increase in schools that implemented at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity (71% in 2022-2023, compared to 62% in 2021-2022). The initial recovery from COVID-19 observed in UCS schools in 2021-2022 appears to have continued in the 2022-2023 school year. See Figure 3 for the annual implementation rates of each core experience over the past ten years.

Figure 3. Implementation Of UCS Core Experiences Between 2013-14 and 2022-2023.

Note: The COVID-19 pandemic started in Spring 2020. This may have contributed to the reduced UCS implementation of core activities in 2020-2021.

Starting in 2014-2015, Special Olympics (SO) categorized UCS implementation into three levels:

- **Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools** implement at least one activity from all three core experiences.
- **Developing Unified Schools** implement activities from Unified Sports and one other core experience.
- **Emerging Unified Schools** implement activities from both Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement, or from just one of the three core experiences.

UCS activities are most impactful when all core experiences are fully integrated and can work in tandem (Siperstein et al., 2019; Siperstein et al., 2017). Because of this, schools are encouraged to strive for Full-implementation status, with activities from all three core experiences. However, schools can still choose other combinations of the core experiences to cater to their unique contexts and needs.

Among the 5,084 liaisons surveyed in 2022-2023, 60% were from Full-implementation schools, 21% were from Developing schools, and 16% were from Emerging schools. Historically, Full-implementation schools have been most common in the Liaison Survey sample each year. Compared to last year, there was a 9% increase in the

percentage of Full-implementation schools, and a 4% and 8% decrease in Developing and Emerging schools. More schools that have had UCS for more than one year were identified as Full-implementation schools (65%) compared to new schools in their first year of UCS implementation (56%). Taking these findings together, the increase in Full-implementation schools is better accounted for by returning UCS schools that have either maintained their status over time or successfully transitioned to Full-implementation this year from Developing or Emerging last year.

Unified Sports

Unified Sports is an essential component of UCS programming. Unified Sports activities are designed to create opportunities for students with and without IDD to train, compete, and develop understanding and friendship together. On average, schools implemented two Unified Sports activities in the 2022-2023 school year. The two most common activities implemented across schools were Unified Sports teams (65%) and Unified PE (63%).

The implementation of each Unified Sports activity remained consistent with last year's evaluation. In the 2020-2021 school year, 39% of liaisons reported having a Unified Sports team. This number increased to 60% in the 2021-22 school year and 65% in the 2022-2023 school year. Looking back, although the proportion of schools that have Unified Sports teams has not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels, the steadily increasing implementation rate continues to demonstrate ongoing recovery of UCS programming since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Table 1 illustrates the implementation of individual Unified Sports activities by school level.

Table 1. Percentage Of Schools with Unified Sports Implementing Each Unified Sports Activity.

Unified Sports Activity	All Schools (n = 4,441)	Elementary (n = 1,257)	Middle (n = 829)	High (n = 2,198)
Unified Sports team	65%	34%	66%	84%
Unified PE	63%	67%	67%	60%
Unified Fitness	20%	21%	21%	18%
Unified Esports & Fitness	7%	4%	7%	8%
Young Athletes	50%	50%	n/a	n/a
Unified Developmental Sports	33%	42%	19%	n/a

Notes: Percentages represent the implementation of each activity out of the total number of schools implementing Unified Sports.

The implementation of Young Athletes was calculated based on schools at the elementary level ($n = 1,257$). The implementation of Unified Developmental Sports was calculated based on schools at the elementary and middle levels ($n = 2,086$).

⁵ 76% of schools implemented Unified Sports in 2018-2019.

Table 2 breaks down the implementation of Unified Sports implementation by locale. This year, urban schools had somewhat higher rates of Unified PE and Unified Fitness compared to other locales. Conversely, Unified Sports was somewhat more prevalent in suburban, town, and rural schools compared to urban schools. Other Unified Sports activities were similarly implemented across school locales.⁶ Overall, these findings suggest that there is a small difference in the Unified Sports activities that a school chooses to implement based on whether they are in an urban or nonurban area.

Table 2. Percentage Of Implementing Unified Sports Activity, By Locale.

Unified Sports Activity	Urban (n = 1,153)	Suburban (n = 1,666)	Town (n = 527)	Rural (n = 949)
Unified Sports team	60%	69%	69%	65%
Unified PE	68%	60%	62%	63%
Unified Fitness	24%	18%	18%	19%
Unified Esports & Fitness	8%	6%	8%	6%
Young Athletes	50%	50%	52%	49%
Unified Developmental Sports	34%	31%	32%	35%

Note: The implementation of Young Athletes was calculated based on schools at the elementary level ($n = 1,221$). The implementation of Unified Developmental Sports was calculated based on schools at the elementary and middle levels ($n = 2,051$).

Lastly, liaisons reported the makeup of their Unified Sports teams as well as the activities that Unified Sports teams had during the school year. Unified Sports teams are designed to bring students with and without IDD together for various sports in both competitive and recreational models. In 2022-23, 60% of schools that had at least one Unified Sports activity offered a Unified Sports teams for two or more seasons. Of schools that had a Unified Sports team, 90% of schools had competition against Unified Sports teams from another school. The implementation of Unified Sports teams for multiple seasons, especially in the competitive model, was more common among middle and high schools. On average, schools with a Unified Sports team had two to three coaches this year and 64% of the coaches were trained or certified by Special Olympics. Across schools that had Unified Sports teams this year, nearly 70% of coaches were trained or certified by Special Olympics and 56% of coaches were certified through the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS). Most liaisons reported that their coaches were certified by both NFHS and Special Olympics (46%), 21% of liaisons reported that their coaches were only certified by Special Olympics, and 5% of liaisons reported that their coaches were only certified by NFHS.

Whole School Engagement

⁶ A chi-square test of independence showed a weak relationship between locale and Unified Sports activity, $\chi^2(6) = 28.88$, $p < .001$, *Cramer's V* = .04. Although this test is statistically significant, *Cramer's V* indicates that there is a small relationship between whether a school participates in a specific Unified Sports activity and their locale.

Whole School Engagement provides opportunities for all students to engage in UCS activities, facilitating a culture of social inclusion. Because Whole School Engagement events and activities include the largest number of students in a school, they can raise awareness of the capabilities and contributions of students with IDD while promoting an inclusive school culture. In the 2022-23 school year, schools on average implemented between two to three Whole School Engagement activities. Table 3 illustrates the implementation of individual activities across school levels.

Table 3. Percentage Of Schools with Whole School Engagement Implementing Each Whole School Engagement Activity.

Whole School Engagement Activity	All Schools (n = 4,332)	Elementary (n = 1,255)	Middle (n = 817)	High (n = 2,101)
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	76%	84%	79%	74%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	50%	32%	46%	63%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	37%	46%	30%	33%
Fundraising events and activities	41%	24%	39%	52%
SO Play/Performance	11%	8%	10%	13%
Unified Fitness Challenges	16%	18%	15%	13%

Overall, the percentage of schools implementing each Whole School Engagement activity is consistent with the findings from last year's annual evaluation. There was an increase in the percentage of schools that held a Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally (e.g., 50% of schools implemented this event in 2022-2023 compared to 41% of schools in 2021-2022). The consistency of Whole School Engagement activities over the last two school years supports the continued recovery from COVID-19 that was observed in last year's annual evaluation.

Looking at activity implementation by locale, urban schools showed similar rates of implementation for each activity compared to town, rural, and suburban locales, except for Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally and fundraising.⁷ Only 32% of urban schools had at least one fundraising event or activity, compared to 43% to 50% of suburban, town, or rural schools. Similarly, only 44% of urban schools had a Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, compared to 49% to 52% of suburban, town, or rural schools. These differences are small, but they may reflect differences in how urban schools implement Whole School Engagement activities.

Inclusive Youth Leadership

⁷ A chi-square test of independence showed a weak relationship between locale and Whole School Engagement activity, $\chi^2(15) = 65.31$, $p < .001$, *Cramer's V* = .05. Although this test is statistically significant, *Cramer's V* indicates that there is a small relationship between whether a school participates in a specific Whole School Engagement activity and their locale.

Inclusive Youth Leadership activities empower students to be leaders and to develop social skills such as advocacy and decision-making. A primary goal of Inclusive Youth Leadership is to offer students with and without IDD opportunities to nurture these skills, share their unique experiences, and enact changes in their communities. In 2022-2023, schools implemented an average of one to two Inclusive Youth Leadership activities. The implementation of each activity is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentage Of Schools with Inclusive Youth Leadership Implementing Each Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity.

<i>Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity</i>	<i>All Schools (n = 3,585)</i>	<i>Elementary (n = 930)</i>	<i>Middle (n = 673)</i>	<i>High (n = 1,845)</i>
Unified Club	72%	53%	76%	81%
Inclusive Leadership Training/ Class	39%	38%	44%	38%
Young Athletes Volunteers	37%	60%	30%	30%
SO Youth Summit	21%	3%	15%	32%
SO Youth Activation Committee	10%	5%	7%	14%

Schools' implementation of Inclusive Youth Leadership activities was similar to 2021-2022 and pre-pandemic years. Unified Club (72%) continued to be the most frequently implemented activity nationally, followed by Inclusive Leadership Training/Class (39%). Consistent with previous years, the implementation of most Inclusive Youth Leadership activities varied by school level. As expected, Young Athletes Volunteers were mostly offered within elementary schools, while Unified Club, SO Youth Summit, and SO Youth Activation Committees were more common at the high school level.

Similar to 2021-22, liaisons reported on the level of student participation for each Inclusive Youth Leadership activity. The proportion of schools that had inclusive participation (e.g., including students with and without IDD) for each activity ranged from 83% (for Young Athletes Volunteers) to 95% (for Unified Club). Some liaisons ($n = 372$) disclosed the reasons why only students with IDD or only students without IDD participated in inclusive activities, including a) the nature of the activity, b) the need for more time and support, c) scheduling conflicts, d) limitations in student group participation, and e) issues with transportation. A common reason for why only one student group participated was because of the activity design ($n = 74$). For example, some schools utilized Inclusive Youth Leadership Training/Class or Youth Athlete Volunteers as an opportunity for students without IDD to learn more about disabilities, while inclusion alongside students with IDD was promoted in other activities and events. Another main reason related to a lack of time and support ($n = 70$). Some liaisons reported that because their school was new to UCS or transitioning with new staff, it became challenging to implement inclusive activities this year. Other liaisons ($n = 59$) noted scheduling conflicts. Since students with and without IDD often had different schedules during the school day, it was difficult to have all of them participate in the same activity. Additionally, some schools

had difficulty attracting diverse student participation into these activities ($n = 52$), particularly if they only served students with disabilities or had very few students with IDD enrolled this year. Lastly, a small group of liaisons ($n = 15$) mentioned that due to safety concerns, transportation became an issue when inviting students with IDD to participate in certain activities.

A final aspect of exploring this year's Inclusive Youth Leadership activities focused on a deeper analysis of a school's Unified Club. As the most frequently implemented Inclusive Youth Leadership activity for years, Unified Club offers a school-based hub to gather students with and without IDD together. Prior research and evaluation findings showed that students who are actively involved in Unified Club gain more positive experiences related to taking lead roles and developing a sense of responsibility. In the 2022-2023 evaluation, 31% of schools had a Unified Club that met at least once per week, and 56% of schools had a club that met monthly. When club members met, they focused on social emotional learning skills (68%), leadership (60%), event planning (46%), and advocacy skills for students with and without IDD (46%). In contrast, far fewer schools used the Unified Club to promote college and career readiness skills (9%).

Implementation Across Years

The CSDE evaluation team also explored whether a school's ability to implement a core experience in 2021-2022 related to their ability to implement that core experience in 2022-2023. Examining data from schools that participated in the survey in two consecutive years allows CSDE to investigate whether schools are consistent in their UCS implementation of core experiences overall and specific events or activities within each core experience.

Out of the 2,709 schools that completed the Liaison Survey in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, 77% of the schools implemented at least one Unified Sports activity in both of the last two years. Table 5⁸ shows how schools implemented the various Unified Sports activities within the last two years. When looking at specific activities, Unified Sports teams (50%) and Unified PE (44%) were the most consistently implemented Unified Sports experiences that were implemented by schools over the last two years. Fewer schools included Unified Esports & Fitness as part of their programs. Although only 27% of elementary schools implemented Young Athletes in both years, there was a higher percentage of Young Athletes' implementation in 2022-2023 (17%, vs. 8% in 2021-2022).

Out of the 2,734 schools that completed the Liaison Survey in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, 75% of the schools implemented at least one Whole School Engagement activity in both of the last two years. Table 6 shows how schools implemented the various Whole School Engagement activities within the last two years. The most common consecutive activity was the Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, implemented by 59% of schools in both years. Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally or fundraising were implemented

⁸ Tables 5, 6, and 7 are shown on pp. 19-20.

by about 27% of schools in both of the last two years. Fewer schools implemented SO Play/Performance and Unified Fitness Challenge as a consistent part of their program.

Compared with the other two core experiences, Inclusive Youth Leadership demonstrated lower consistency in implementation over the past two years. Out of the 2,709 schools that completed the Liaison Survey in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, 45% of the schools implemented at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity in both of the last two years. Approximately 42% of schools implemented Unified Club in both years. The remaining Inclusive Youth Activities were not regularly implemented in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 (see Table 7).

Table 5. Unified Sports Activities Implemented Among Schools That Participated in the 2021-2022 And 2022-2023 Liaison Survey (N = 2,709).

<i>Year(s) of Implementation</i>	<i>Unified Sports team</i>	<i>Unified PE</i>	<i>Unified Fitness</i>	<i>Unified Esports & Fitness</i>	<i>Young Athletes</i>	<i>Unified Developmental Sports</i>
In both years	1,342 (50%)	1,182 (44%)	251 (9%)	57 (2%)	200 (27%)	149 (12%)
In neither year	881 (33%)	799 (29%)	1,867 (69%)	2,442 (90%)	350 (48%)	757 (61%)
Only in 2021-2022	175 (6%)	330 (12%)	340 (13%)	97 (4%)	62 (8%)	151 (12%)
Only in 2022-2023	311 (11%)	398 (15%)	251 (9%)	113 (4%)	124 (17%)	192 (15%)

Note: Young Athletes is only offered at the elementary-school level (n = 736). Unified Developmental Sports are only offered at the elementary- and middle-school levels (n = 1,249)

Table 6. Whole School Engagement Activities Implemented Among Schools That Participated In 2021-2022 And 2022-2023 Liaison Survey (N = 2,734).

<i>Year(s) of Implementation</i>	<i>Spread the Word/Respect Campaign</i>	<i>Fans in the Stands/ Unified Sports Pep Rally</i>	<i>Unified Sports Day/ Festival</i>	<i>Fundraising</i>	<i>SO Play/ Performance</i>	<i>Unified Fitness Challenge</i>
In both years	1,625 (59%)	736 (27%)	441 (16%)	739 (27%)	78 (3%)	158 (6%)
In neither year	466 (17%)	1,279 (47%)	1,534 (56%)	1,312 (48%)	2,322 (85%)	2,097 (77%)
Only in 2021-2022	286 (10%)	225 (8%)	326 (12%)	280 (10%)	153 (6%)	262 (10%)
Only in 2022-2023	357 (13%)	494 (18%)	433 (16%)	403 (15%)	181(7%)	217 (8%)

Table 7. Inclusive Youth Leadership Activities Implemented Among Schools That Participated In 2021-2022 And 2022-2023 Liaison Survey Evaluation (N = 2,709).

<i>Year(s) of Implementation</i>	<i>Unified Club</i>	<i>Inclusive Leadership Training/Class</i>	<i>Young Athletes Volunteers</i>	<i>SO Youth Summit</i>	<i>SO Youth Activation Committee</i>
In both years	1,138 (42%)	390 (14%)	268 (10%)	273 (10%)	114 (4%)
In neither year	872 (32%)	1,534 (57%)	1,779 (66%)	2,013 (74%)	2,353 (87%)
Only in 2021-2022	236 (9%)	372 (14%)	256 (9%)	165 (6%)	103 (4%)
Only in 2022-2023	463 (17%)	413 (15%)	406 (15%)	258 (10%)	139 (5%)

The UCS National Recognition Program and Banner Schools

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools's National Recognition Program acknowledges schools that best exemplify UCS programming and implementation. The National Recognition Program highlights schools that meet four sets of standards relating to Unified Sports or Young Athletes, Inclusive Youth Leadership, Whole School Engagement, and Sustainability. Schools that meet this standard are recognized as a Banner Unified Champion School (e.g., Banner School) based on a review by a national panel of educators and representative from Special Olympics.⁹

Being recognized as a National Banner School can contribute to overall UCS program sustainability in many ways. Schools eligible for recognition are motivated to maintain high standards in implementation and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. Recognized schools may become a valuable resource for other schools and educators. Moreover, such recognition can elevate UCS's profile within a school district or overall community, which can help attract more students, families, educators, and potential partners.

Table 8 shows the school-level demographics for schools that were recognized as a Banner School and who completed the 2022-2023 Liaison Survey. As seen in Table 8, most Banner schools were in suburban communities and were at the high school level. Fifty-one percent of schools were Title I schools, and 30% of these schools were school-wide Title I schools. Banner Schools implemented anywhere between two and three activities within each core component or experience of UCS.

⁹ Further information about the National Recognition Program and current Banner Schools can be found here: <https://www.specialolympics.org/what-we-do/unified-champion-schools/banner-recognition-program>.

Table 8. Demographics Of Year 15 Banner Schools in the 2022-23 Evaluation.

Variable	Percent	Average Activities
Locale		
Urban	21%	
Suburban	49%	
Town	11%	
Rural	18%	
Title I ¹	51%	
Title I School Wide ²	30%	
School Level		
Elementary	14%	
Middle	16%	
High	69%	
Other	1%	
Average implemented activities		
Unified Sports		2.5
Inclusive Youth Leadership		2.8
Whole School Engagement		3.3

^{1,2} The percentage was calculated out of all awarded banner schools in the survey.

Table 9 shows the difference in UCS implementation between Banner Schools who were recognized in the 2022-2023 school year and Full-implementation schools that have not yet been recognized as a Banner School. As seen in Table 9, more Banner Schools had a Unified Sports team (91%) than non-recognized Full-implementation schools (69%). At the elementary school level, more Banner Schools had a Young Athletes program (83%) than non-recognized Full-implementation schools (58%). On average, Banner Schools had more Inclusive Youth Leadership programming than non-recognized Full-implementation schools. Regarding Whole School Engagement activities, a larger percentage of Banner Schools had the Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Rally, Unified Sports Day/Festival, or fundraising events than non-recognized Full-implementation schools.

Table 9. UCS Activities, By Banner Schools and Other Full-Implementation Schools

Activity	Year 15 awarded Banner Schools (n = 164)	Non-awarded Full- implementation Schools (n = 2,890)
Unified Sports programs		
Unified Sports team	91%	69%
Unified PE	69%	65%
Unified Fitness	26%	23%
Unified Esports & Fitness	17%	8%
Young Athletes ¹	83%	58%
Unified Developmental Sports ²	39%	37%
Inclusive Youth Leadership		
Unified Club	90%	73%
Leadership Training/Class	63%	40%
Young Athletes Volunteers	43%	39%
Youth Summit	54%	21%
SO Youth Activation Committee	26%	10%
Whole School Engagement		
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	92%	79%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Rally	80%	56%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	49%	40%
Fundraising events and activities	72%	46%
SO Play/Performance	15%	13%
Unified Fitness Challenge	18%	18%

¹The implementation of Young Athletes was calculated based on responses from Elementary school level, since it is a program implemented through Grade 2.

²The implementation of Unified Developmental Sports was calculated based on responses from Elementary and middle school level, since it is a program implemented through Grade 7.

Summary

The 2022-2023 evaluation aimed to understand the UCS program over the last year while also comparing implementation from the first two full school years after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this approach, the CSDE evaluation team presented the landscape of UCS schools by school level and implementation level, and by UCS core experience

implementation. In 2022-2023, the highest proportions of UCS schools were high schools and Full-implementation schools.

Overall, UCS implementation appears to be as good as or better than 2021-2022. The recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have continued in 2022-2023 across all three core experiences of UCS. Although there may be some variability within each core experience and activity, schools are implementing UCS activities at a similar level as they did in 2018-2019 (i.e., the last year before the COVID-19 pandemic). As schools have continued to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, many returning UCS schools scaled up their programming, as shown by the increase in the number of Full-implementation schools this year.

Aligning with historical trends, Unified Sports yielded the highest implementation rate across all three core experiences. The number of schools implementing individual Unified Sports activities remained stable compared to last year. This shows a steady recovery from COVID-19. Similarly, Whole School Engagement activities such as fundraising, Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, and Spread the Word/Respect Campaign saw comparable implementation rates this year to pre-pandemic levels. Taken together, these data indicate that more schools this year had the capacity to implement in-person activities and events. There may be small differences based on school locales in terms of Unified Sports activities.

Inclusive Youth Leadership activities were implemented at similar rates this year compared to last year. Due to the activity content and design, implementation of most Inclusive Youth Leadership activities varied by school level. Aligned with the purpose of Inclusive Youth Leadership, the implemented activities demonstrated high levels of inclusive participation from both students with and without IDD. When only one student group participated, common reasons included the nature of the activity design, the need for more time and support, and scheduling conflicts.

In the 2022-2023 evaluation, CSDE also investigated whether schools implemented the same activities year-to-year. Among schools that participated in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 Liaison Surveys, no more than 30% of schools implemented an activity in one year but not the other. Instead, most schools were consistent in either implementing or not implementing each UCS activity across both school years.

This year's analysis of the Annual Liaison Survey was also the first to describe Banner Schools and how they differ from other Full-implementation programs. Most Banner Schools come from suburban locales and are high schools. Banner Schools had a higher prevalence of implementing different activities within each core experience compared to non-recognized Full-implementation schools.

Sustainability and State Special Olympics Support

UCS's mission is to facilitate social inclusion for students with IDD from kindergarten to early adulthood. Achieving this mission requires UCS to grow as a sustainable program to ensure the delivery of long-term benefits for students. To that end, the 2022-2023 Liaison Survey examined program sustainability through the support of state SO Programs. UCS sustainability was promoted through communications and partnerships between state SO Programs and schools. Liaisons shared insights on assistance and funding from SO State Programs. They also reported on their awareness and usage of SO resources and their preferred resource format.

SO State Program Assistance and Funding

UCS sustainability is strengthened through partnerships between SO State Programs and schools. Typically, SO State Programs offer assistance and training on activity implementation. In 2022-2023, 81% of schools that completed the Liaison Survey received support from state SO programs. Common types of support included a) general guidance about program rules, b) administrative assistance (e.g., filling out applications and paperwork), and c) funding. About 65% of liaisons stated that their current funding levels—including funding from Special Olympics—met the needs of their program. This percentage was similar across implementation levels (e.g., 61-65%) and grade levels (e.g., 60-68%).

Most schools kept close communication with their SO State Program, as 59% of liaisons reported being in contact with SO state staff at least once a month, most commonly via email. A higher proportion of Full-implementation UCS schools reported being in contact with their SO State Programs at least once a month (64%), compared to Emerging schools (45%) or Developing schools (55%). SO also made in-person visits to approximately two-thirds (68%) of the schools, primarily with the purpose of training or resource dissemination.

Diverse funding sources are also important for program sustainability. In this year's Liaison Survey, schools reported various funding sources for program implementation, including funding from SO State Programs, their school budget, and fundraising efforts. SO State Programs were the most common funding source for UCS, used by over half of the schools (54%), and on average, SO State Program funding comprised 68% of all UCS funding. Consistent with last year, a larger proportion of schools at the Emerging implementation level reported funding support from SO State Programs compared to Full-implementation schools (77% vs. 65%).

Reflecting on the support received from SO State Programs this year, 77% of school liaisons were satisfied (19%) or very satisfied (58%). Liaisons from Full-implementation, Developing, and Emerging schools reported similar satisfaction levels. When asked specifically about funding, 81% of liaisons indicated that they were satisfied with the level of funding received from SO State Programs. Still, funding was identified as the top priority, followed closely by training, for what schools wanted from state programs for future UCS

implementation (24% and 14%, respectively). These results were consistent across locales, school levels and implementation levels.

Resource Awareness and Usage

Special Olympics offers a diverse collection of resources that provide schools with supplemental guidance and support during implementation. Consistent with last year's Liaison Survey, this year's survey asked liaisons to indicate whether they were aware of and used specific SO resources (a description of resources can be found in Table 9). Liaisons were aware of 5 to 6 resources on average. Over three-quarters of the liaisons (79%) were aware of at least one resource offered by Special Olympics, and half of them (50%) had used at least one resource during the 2022-2023 school year. New and returning UCS schools were similar in their use of SO resources, although returning schools were aware of more resources (the average resources in awareness for new and returning schools are 4.7 and 6.2 respectively). Examining SO resource use by liaison position showed that the resources were more frequently used by liaisons who were District Coordinators (65%), Adapted PE teachers (61%), and Special education aides/paraprofessionals (58%) than by liaisons in other positions (such as Athletic Directors and Administrators, see Table 10).

Table 10. Usage Of Special Olympic Resources, By Liaison Positions ($N = 4,998$).

Positions	Percent of Liaisons that Use at least One Resource
District coordinator	65%
Adapted physical education teacher	61%
Special education aide/paraprofessional	58%
Special education services provider	56%
General education teacher	55%
Physical education teacher	54%
Special education teacher	54%
School Psychologist/Counselor/Social Worker	47%
Administrator	43%
Athletic Director	31%
Other positions	47%

Table 11 shows liaisons' awareness and usage of different Special Olympics resources. The awareness column shows the percentage of liaisons who were aware of a specific resource, and the usage column shows the percentage of liaisons who used the

resource if they said they were aware of that resource. Overall, liaisons reported the highest awareness and usage of the playbook associated with their school level. That is, 67% of elementary school liaisons were aware of the Elementary School Playbook, and 46% of them used it. Sixty-four percent of liaisons from middle schools were aware of the Middle School Playbook, and 47% of those liaisons used it. Lastly, 68% of liaisons at the high school level were aware of the High School playbook, and 42% of liaisons used it.

In contrast to playbooks, many of the other SO resources are less specific to school levels. There were no differences in liaisons' usage of the *Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools*, *High 5 For Fitness Guide*, *Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide*, and *Unified Classroom Lessons and Activities* across school levels. However, usage of the *Unified Physical Education Resource* and *Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide* was higher in middle and high school. See Table 11 for resource awareness and usage.

Table 11. Awareness And Usage of SO Resources.

Name of Resource	Awareness	Usage
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	1,005 (67%)	463 (46%)
Middle School Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	606 (64%)	282 (47%)
High School Playbook	1,618 (68%)	683 (42%)
Unified Classroom lessons and activities	2,578 (52%)	668 (26%)
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	2,021 (42%)	511(25%)
Unified Physical Education Resource	2,305 (47%)	524 (23%)
Inclusion Tiles game/activity	1,709 (36%)	374 (22%)
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	1,845 (38%)	365 (20%)
High 5 For Fitness Guide	1,617 (33%)	263 (16%)
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	1,923 (40%)	307 (16%)
Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools	2,322 (47%)	304 (13%)
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	1,401 (29%)	165 (12%)
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide (for adults)	1,487 (31%)	181 (12%)
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide (for students)	1,454 (31%)	152 (10%)

Note: Percentages for the implementation playbooks were calculated based on the school level, while percentages for the remaining resources were calculated based on the overall sample.

Percentages for the use of each SO resource are based on the total number of liaisons who were aware of each resource.

Liaisons were also asked to rate the usefulness of each resource that they used. Table 12 shows overall ratings for each resource. Overall, the median rating for each resource was a 4 (on a 1 = *not useful* to 5 = *extremely useful* scale) and did not differ based on school level of implementation level.

Table 12. Overall Resource Usefulness, By Mean, Median and Standard Deviation.

Resource	N	Mean	Median	SD
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	553	4.04	4.00	.74
Middle Level Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	403	3.92	4.00	.76
High School Playbook	744	3.90	4.00	.76
Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools	301	4.11	4.00	.71
High 5 For Fitness Guide	259	4.09	4.00	.79
Unified Physical Education Resource	520	4.13	4.00	.74
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	163	4.22	4.00	.72
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	364	4.22	4.00	.73
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	303	4.14	4.00	.67
Unified Classroom lessons and activities	661	4.12	4.00	.69
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	508	4.20	4.00	.71
Inclusion Tiles game/activity	371	4.04	4.00	.83
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide (for adults)	181	4.28	4.00	.69
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide (for students)	150	4.33	4.00	.68
Others	321	4.03	4.00	.78

Note: Counts for the implementation playbooks were calculated based on the school level, while counts for the remaining resources were calculated based on the overall sample.

This year's Liaison Survey also asked liaisons how future resources could be structured. More liaisons preferred that:

- Resources were viewable on a computer (81%) rather than a smartphone (19%).
- Resources were printable and static (75%) compared to online webinars (25%).
- Content focused on successful examples from other schools (74%) rather than examples of challenges (26%).

There was less of a consensus for whether instructional resources should be shared as video tutorials (63%) or a step-by-step text-based resources (37%), resources should be very detailed (58%) or only include high-level overviews (42%), whether liaisons would prefer shorter fact sheets and one-page documents (59%) or guidebooks and manuals (41%), and whether resources should be comprehensive resource covering the whole program (51%) or a la carte resources or standalone modules (49%).

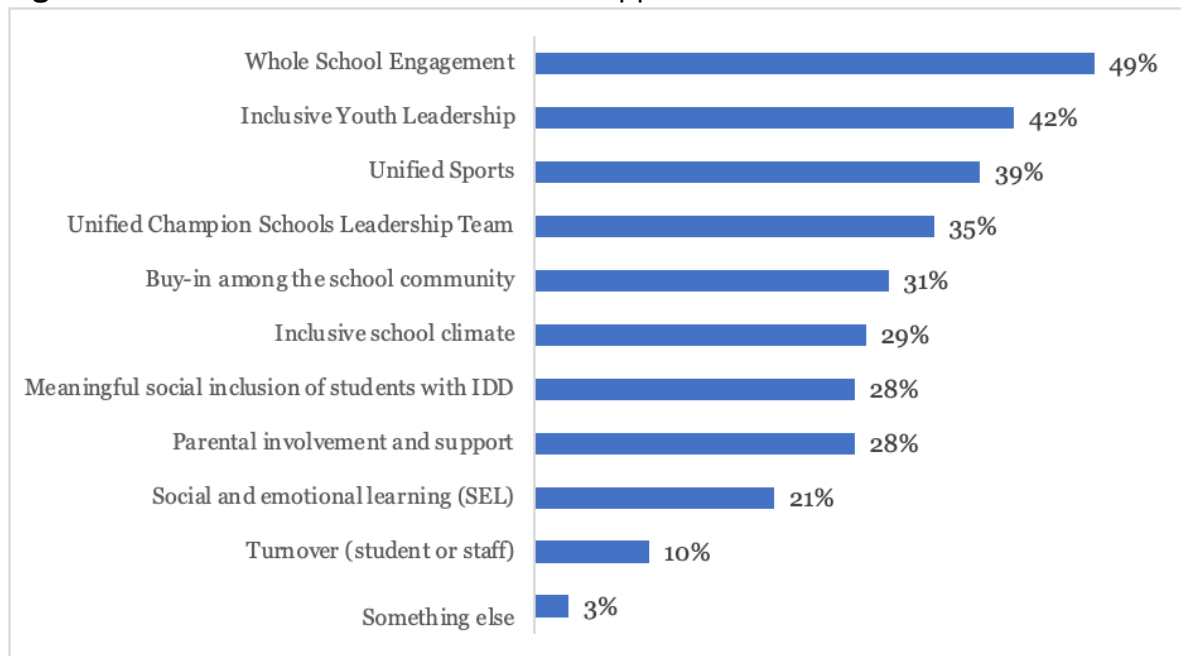
Furthermore, as seen in Table 13, liaisons were given five options for learning formats and were asked to rank their preferences for they should be structured. Liaisons more preferred on-demand or self-paced online courses or in-person workshops and trainings. Live workshops and peer-to-peer workshops with fellow schools doing UCS were moderately preferred, and one-on-one workshops with a mentor was less preferred.

Table 13. Overall Ratings of Learning Formats, By Mean, Median and Standard Deviation ($n = 3,458$).

Learning Format	Mean	Median	SD
On-demand, self-paced eLearning (online courses)	2.33	2	1.50
In-person workshops and trainings	2.60	2	1.42
Live virtual workshops and webinars	3.01	3	1.22
Peer-to-peer with a group (virtual or in-person)	3.31	3	1.11
One-on-one with a mentor (virtual or in-person)	3.75	4	1.32

Note: Values refer to rankings on a 1 (*most preferred*) to 5 (*least preferred*) list. Lower values means that more liaisons ranked that learning format more preferably.

In thinking about new potential resources, liaisons were asked to select all areas where more resources or support would be beneficial for UCS implementation at their school. As seen in Figure 4, liaisons thought that more resources covering UCS core experiences would be beneficial for them. To a lesser extent, they also thought that resources on improving specific aspects of their school environment or relationships with fellow school community members would be beneficial.

Figure 4. Areas Where More Resources or Support Would Be Beneficial.

Resource Benefits

In addition to the survey responses reported in the previous section, liaisons also provided information regarding what they did or did not like about each resource. Themes based on these responses¹⁰ are summarized in Table 14. Overall, liaisons who reported using a resource found it helpful for themselves and their UCS program.

¹⁰ Responses led to 3,248 unique responses that were coded across all open-ended questions related to each resource. Codes were then grouped into 16 higher order codes and then grouped into six general themes.

Table 14. Themes Identified from Qualitative Findings Regarding Resource Use and Benefits.

General Findings	Specific Findings
Resources are great communicative tools	They are helpful in getting and keeping students involved and active during UCS-related activities
	They help students open up during activities and facilitate discussions among students
	They inform other school community members about UCS programming and activities
	They help staff collaborate with other staff at their school
Resources are fun, accessible, structured, and filled with helpful examples	They provide fun and interactive activities for UCS participants
	They provide useful examples of UCS programming and activity implementation
	They are accessible and easy to understand
	They are well organized and provide examples of important skills
Resources are helpful in activity planning and implementation	They help liaisons design and plan activities
	They also help liaisons run UCS-related events and activities
Resources facilitate inclusion and raise awareness regarding students with IDD	They help liaisons facilitate inclusion within their school
	They help promote awareness and knowledge regarding children and adolescents with IDD
Resources facilitate skill development within students	They promote leadership skill development
	They promote students' health and wellbeing
Resources help liaisons guide and monitor UCS implementation	They help guide newer schools in their UCS development and initial implementation
	They help keep new and longer-term programs on track

Liaisons thought that resources were helpful in communicating UCS content to students and staff. Overall, liaisons thought that resources were helpful in communicating content towards students and staff. Liaisons reported that resources can help students start UCS-related activities and keep them engaged throughout the activity itself. For example, liaisons reported resources are helpful in keeping students involved and active during UCS activities. One liaison noted: “[The High School Playbook] helped engage the students in activities as opposed to just being told information.” Another liaison noted that the Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide “referenced ways to

implement inclusive leadership experiences and provided student-led engagement activities.”

Additionally, liaisons thought that resources helped students to open up during discussions and facilitate conversations within UCS-related activities. One liaison noted that “[The Inclusive Tiles Games/Activity] allowed for discussion and interaction among students.” Another liaison noted that “[The Generation Unified Videos or YouTube Channel] created great discussions and reflections for students” after watching the videos. Being able to open up during these activities allowed for more impactful UCS experiences for students.

Furthermore, liaisons thought that resources helped to inform other school community members about UCS programming and activities. One liaison noted: “[students] shared [parts of the High School Playbook] with families and it was helpful during the beginning of the year when we were gaining interest for our program.” Another liaison noted that they “used [the Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide for Adults] with their staff in preparation for the lesson with their students.” This liaison further discussed how the resource helped their fellow staffers understand inclusion in their own lives and school community.

Lastly, liaisons thought that resources were helpful in fostering collaboration between liaisons and other staff members, administrators, and other adult school community members. One liaison noted that “[the Unified Physical Education Resource] was helpful to use when collaborating with our school’s physical education teacher about their Unified PE class.” Another liaison similarly reported that the Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools was helpful in working with their school’s PE teacher. A third liaison noted that the Inclusive Tiles Games/Activities helped “staff to work together and think about the levels of inclusion they are supporting in their classroom.” These responses exemplify how resources can foster collaboration between school staff and administrators.

Resources are fun, accessible, structured, and filled with helpful examples. In addition to resources being a good communication tool, liaisons also reported that resources are fun, accessible, structured, and filled with helpful examples. Liaisons specifically noted that having fun and interactive activities helped start UCS events. One liaison noted: “[The Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide] included fun activities that were useful to start Unified Club meetings.” Another liaison noted that the activities required students to be interactive within their events, which allowed them to participate in UCS events more actively while enjoying the activity itself. Fun activities helped students become engaged in UCS activities.

Liaisons also noted that resources provide useful examples of UCS programming and activity implementation. One liaison noted how the examples from the Elementary School Playbook helped them prepare for all components of UCS implementation:

What was most useful to me were the stories shared about schools that have incorporated all 3 main parts in becoming a Unified Champion School. It was helpful to learn about that specific and unique ways that schools accomplished this and the importance of each piece.

Similarly, another liaison noted how the Middle School Playbook provided examples of success: "I enjoyed the success stories, the questionnaires, and the great ideas on how to implement social inclusion in middle school. The entire book is full of great information." An additional response from a different liaison mentioned how the Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools provided good examples and modifications for students with disabilities.

Additionally, liaisons thought that the resources were easy to access, understand, and implement within their school. One liaison noted that they were "able to read about whole school engagement, leadership and Unified sports all in [the High School Playbook]." They further stated how the accessible nature of the resources assisted with their planning of activities for the upcoming school year.

Furthermore, liaisons thought that the resources were well organized and provided examples of important skills. One liaison who used the Elementary School Playbook exemplified this point:

I appreciate how it breaks down foundational skills necessary to participate in sports. This has been a great resource for helping both our school gym teacher and our coaches shift their mindset in how to collaborate with their athlete peers.

Another liaison who utilized the Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide noted: "At the elementary level I think this guide helped to breakdown the importance of fundamentals, implementation, and how it best promotes physical and mental health and build inclusion." A third liaison noted how providing structure and visual resources helped support their students' development and participation in physical activities.

Resources are helpful in activity planning and implementation. Regarding activity planning, liaisons noted that activities were helpful in designing and planning inclusive activities. One liaison who used the Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools exemplified this point:

This year we created an "Inclusive Practices" club to learn more about incorporating the Unified Club. Our school's first step was to create a Unified Sports Program team. Now, we are working to learn more information. This was our brainstorming year. I used this resource to learn more about creating a Unified Fitness club.

Liaisons also noted that resources are helpful in activity implementation. One liaison appreciated that the Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide provided

“step-by-step activities to prepare for sports” as well as “activities to send home for parents to try.” Other liaisons noted how the resources provided guidance on how to implement activities and worksheets to help guide activity implementation.

Resources facilitate inclusion and raise awareness regarding students with IDD.

Regarding inclusion, liaisons noted that resources help liaisons facilitate inclusion within their school. One liaison who used the Inclusion Tiles Games/Activity noted that “it gave both students with and without IDD opportunities to express themselves in a different and fun way.” Another liaison who used the same resource noted that “it provides an opportunity for students to share and think and collaborate about inclusion and speak about personal experiences.”

Liaisons also noted that resources promoted awareness and knowledge about students with IDD. For example, one liaison noted how the Unified Classroom Lessons and Activities provided “pre-prepared lessons to educate peers on communication strategies while working with peers with IDD who have difficulty communicating or maintaining communication.” Another liaison noted how the Generation Unified Videos or YouTube Channel provided appealing videos to help teenagers educate the whole school on the awareness of students with IDD. A third liaison noted how resources promoted inclusion, education, and awareness within their school.

Resources facilitate skill development within students. Resources helped promote students’ leadership skills. One liaison noted that their students were involved in leadership training activities and that they would want to expand their leadership training next year. Another liaison stated that “the most useful thing about [the Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator’s Guide] was the information given about the Youth Leadership explanations and information about how we can make our school better.” A third liaison noted how resources help teachers and youth leaders develop and lead programs and activities within their Unified Clubs.

Additionally, resources helped liaisons to promote student health and wellbeing. One liaison noted that the High 5 for Fitness guide provided “a healthy form of staying mentally and physically fit.” Another liaison noted that they used the Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools to develop a plan for students during the off season (of their Unified Sports teams) to encourage students to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Resources help liaisons guide and monitor UCS implementation. This was helpful for both new schools and schools that have continued their UCS implementation for more than one year. Regarding new schools, one liaison noted how the Elementary School Playbook helped them get started as a UCS school. Another liaison noted that it was their first year as a UCS School, and that the High School Playbook helped them know what they needed to do as a new school. A third liaison noted that the Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide helped to outline the structure of how to start new Unified Sports activities and to start and grow UCS at their school.

Liaisons also noted that resources help keep programs on track. One liaison that used the High 5 for Fitness guide noted that it “helped them outline their program properly with a guide and roadmap.” Another liaison who used the Elementary School Playbook noted that “it was helpful to know that we were on the right track for implementation and in line with the vision of Special Olympics UCS.” A third liaison appreciated that the resources provided clear and definitive objectives to help them structure the program properly.

Summary

SO State Programs partner with schools to support UCS implementation and program sustainability. State Programs offer a variety of technical assistance, such as general guidance on UCS programming and training opportunities for school staff. Full-implementation schools indicated more frequent communication with SO state staff. SO State Programs were also the most common source of funding for UCS programming. In the 2022-2023 Liaison Survey, liaisons reported relatively higher usage of the playbook at each school level relatively lower usage of other UCS resources. However, liaisons who used resources generally liked the resources that they used. Liaisons’ preferences about resources were also documented, and they would prefer future resources to be printable, viewable on the computer, and contain successful examples from other schools. Liaisons would also prefer either on-demand online courses or in-person workshops and training courses.

Sustainability and School-level Implementation Support

At the school level, liaisons provided valuable insights about UCS sustainability from three perspectives: a) contribution of a school UCS Leadership Team to UCS implementation, b) school capacity to integrate UCS with school initiatives and policies (including UCS National Banner School recognition), and c) perceptions of program continuation without direct involvement of the liaison and SO.

UCS Leadership Teams

As a prominent best practice in supporting UCS, a UCS Leadership Team typically consists of school and community members who work together to carry out UCS activities in the school. This year, 38% of all schools reported having a UCS Leadership Team. This is an increase from 2021-2022, when 28% of schools reported having a UCS Leadership Team. In terms of team composition, 90% of UCS Leadership Teams this year included special education teachers followed by students without IDD (65%) and students with IDD (62%).

Having a school UCS Leadership Team is a critical component of active and robust implementation of UCS. As mentioned in last year’s annual report (Jacobs et al., 2022), having a UCS Leadership Team fostered increased collaboration and participation in UCS events and activities. In comparison to schools without UCS Leadership Teams, schools with UCS Leadership Teams also reported more involvement in UCS events and activities

from school administrators (83% vs. 63%), general education teachers (79% vs. 59%), and families of students with IDD (51% vs. 37%) and without IDD (45% vs. 28%). Furthermore, schools with UCS Leadership Teams reported higher volunteer rates from school staff and families at UCS events such as fundraising, sports events, and inclusion campaigns. UCS Leadership Teams can increase buy-in from multiple stakeholders within a school community and, in turn, create more sustainable UCS programs.

Liaisons who received support from a UCS Leadership Team reported slightly stronger connections between their school and SO State Program in the implementation of UCS. Eighty-eight percent of schools with UCS Leadership Teams received support from SO State Programs, compared to 77% of schools without UCS Leadership Teams. They were also more confident in UCS funding stability, with 75% of liaisons with UCS Leadership Teams reporting confidence in the stability of future funding in their schools, compared with 65% of those without UCS Leadership Teams.

UCS Integration with School Policies and Procedures

In addition to UCS Leadership Teams, liaisons reported UCS sustainability through the school's capacity to integrate UCS into school operations, policies, and public support (e.g., school improvement plans and school/district initiatives). Liaisons were asked to rate four statements about UCS integration: (1) to what extent was UCS integrated into new school or district initiatives, (2) to what extent was UCS considered a top priority by school administrators, (3) to what extent was UCS embedded into school or district policy, and (4) to what extent was UCS part of school operating procedures.

To analyze levels of UCS integration, a composite score was calculated for each school, with higher scores indicating better integration of UCS with school operations and policies. Based on these scores, there was no difference in UCS program integration across elementary, middle, and high schools. As expected, the level of integration was higher in Full-implementation schools ($M = 8.15$, $SD = 2.39$) than Developing ($M = 7.17$, $SD = 2.27$) and Emerging schools ($M = 6.77$, $SD = 2.24$).¹¹ Schools that had a UCS Leadership Team also showed higher levels of integration ($M = 8.52$, $SD = 2.37$) compared to those without a UCS Leadership Team ($M = 7.12$, $SD = 2.32$).¹² Lastly, liaisons who reported that UCS was more engrained within their school also thought that their program was more sustainable.¹³ When UCS is integrated with the school strategies and operations, the program would be more likely to be a sustainable program.

Differences between Nationally Recognized UCS Programs and Other Programs

As a reminder, Special Olympics offers national banner recognition to UCS programs that have met or exceeded 10 standards of excellence in inclusion and

¹¹ $F(2, 4,667) = 140.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$

¹² $t(3,054) = 19.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$

¹³ $r_{pb} = 0.40$, $p < .001$. A point biserial correlation was used for this analysis.

engagement. Key standards include participation in Unified Sports, promotion of Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement, and establishment and planning of self-sustainability. Being a national banner school not only showcases the delivery of high-quality programming, but also highlights strong integration with school strategies and structures.

Based on the UCS integration composite scores, Table 15 shows further comparisons between Banner Schools and Full-implementation schools that were not recognized as Banner Schools as of Spring 2023. A higher percentage of Banner Schools had a UCS Leadership Team, had more frequent communication with Special Olympics, and viewed their program as more sustainable than non-recognized Full-implementation schools. Banner schools were also aware of more resources, and Banner Schools demonstrated higher integration than schools at all other implementation levels—including Full-implementation schools that were not recognized as a Banner School in 2022 or 2023.¹⁴ There were no noticeable differences between whether a program received funding from Special Olympics for their UCS program or their level of satisfaction with the funding received from Special Olympics between Banner Schools and non-recognized Full-implementation schools.

¹⁴ Comparing the UCS integration score between the class of 2023 National Banner Schools with other implementation statuses, their scores significantly varied among groups, $F(3, 4661) = 108.7, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. To see if results are similar with a larger sample of Banner Schools, we also combined the class of 2022 and 2023 National Banner Schools and compared those schools with the remaining schools. The National Banner Schools still yielded the highest integration scores among groups, $F(3, 4647) = 125.8, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$. Moreover, post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD tests showed that UCS was integrated at higher levels in awarded banner schools than the Full-implementation schools that did not have the Banner School designation.

Table 15. Implementation And Program Support, By Banner Schools and Other Full-Implementation Schools.

Characteristics¹	Year 15 awarded Banner Schools	Non-recognized Full-implementation Schools
UCS Leadership Team	66%	49%
Average SO resources in awareness ²	8.7	6.3
Received funding from SO	46%	49%
Frequency in contact with SO ³		
More than once a month	39%	33%
Once a month	40%	30%
Several times a year	20%	35%
Never	1%	1%
Level of satisfaction with the funding received from SO		
Satisfied	84%	80%
Unsatisfied	16%	20%
Average level of UCS integration ⁴	9.28	8.09
Perceiving UCS as a self-sustainable program	85%	63%

¹ The percentage for each row was calculated out of all schools in the analysis sample.

² Liaisons reported awareness of over 14 SO resources. The resource awareness ranged from 0 to 14.

³ In this table, “More than once a month” includes “Once a week or more” and “2-3 times a month,” “Several times a year” includes “2-3 times a year” and “Once a year.”

⁴ The level of school integration ranged from 4 to 12, with 12 points indicating the highest level of integration.

The Continuation of UCS Implementation

Program sustainability can be measured in part by the likelihood that a school’s UCS activities would continue if the current liaison left the school or if the SO State Program no longer supported program implementation. Without their direct involvement, 69% of current liaisons reported that their schools would be likely or very likely to continue implementing UCS. The likelihood of continued UCS implementation without the current liaison differed by implementation level. Specifically, a higher proportion of liaisons from Full-implementation schools (74%) stated that their program was more likely to continue when compared to Developing and Emerging schools (64% and 63%, respectively). Similarly, without direct support from the current liaison, schools with a UCS Leadership Team were also more likely to continue UCS implementation than those without a UCS Leadership Team (77% vs. 63%).

The Liaison Survey also asked liaisons whether they anticipated that they would be the liaison for their school in the upcoming school year. About 80% of liaisons reported that they anticipated being the UCS liaison for their school in the upcoming school year, 10% of liaisons stated that they did not anticipate that they would be their school's UCS liaison in the upcoming school year, and 11% of liaisons were unsure if they would be their school's liaison in the upcoming school year. Response patterns were similar across implementation level and school level.

The Liaison Survey also explored the likelihood of continued UCS programming without direct support from SO State Programs. Overall, 61% of liaisons indicated that UCS would be likely or very likely to continue at their school without involvement from SO State Programs, though this varied by school implementation level and UCS Leadership Team status. As expected, a higher proportion of Full-implementation schools (66%) were likely to continue, compared with Developing and Emerging schools (57% and 50%, respectively). Liaisons from schools with a UCS Leadership Team also stated that they were more likely to continue UCS without state SO program support compared to schools that did not have a UCS Leadership Team (69% vs. 56%).

Similar to 2021-2022, big picture sustainability was assessed by asking liaisons to rate whether they considered UCS "self-sustainable" at their school. Fifty-nine percent of liaisons believed the UCS program at their school was self-sustainable. Liaisons' perceptions of sustainability varied depending on their school's implementation level. Consistent with previous evaluations, more liaisons in Full-implementation schools considered their UCS program to be self-sustainable (66%) compared with those in Developing (52%) and Emerging schools (45%). Relatedly, a higher proportion of liaisons from schools that had a UCS Leadership Team perceived their program as self-sustainable (69%) compared to liaisons from schools without a UCS Leadership Team (52%). Liaisons' perception of program self-sustainability was consistent across school levels (ranging between 56% and 60%) and locales (ranging between 55% and 61%).

Summary

The 2022-2023 Liaison Survey provided important insights regarding factors that may relate to more sustainable UCS programs within schools. For example, UCS Leadership Teams played a crucial role in offering necessary support, as schools with UCS Leadership Teams attracted more engagement of stakeholders. Liaisons from schools with UCS Leadership Teams also felt more confident in funding stability, which is important for the development of a sustainable program.

Another key component to sustainability is the integration of UCS into school initiatives and policies. Notably, UCS programs were reported by liaisons to be self-sustainable when they were more integrated into school policies and procedures. Furthermore, analyses of UCS National Banner Schools showed that these schools obtained significantly higher levels of UCS integration across implementation statuses, even compared to other Full-implementation schools.

Finally, sustainability was assessed through the lens of whether UCS programs would continue through changes in current support. Over 60% of liaisons indicated that their schools would continue to implement UCS without direct involvement from the current liaison or their SO State Program. A similar proportion of liaisons felt that their UCS program was self-sustainable. As expected, higher proportions of liaisons from Full-implementation schools and those with UCS Leadership Teams reported that their UCS programs were self-sustaining and likely to continue being implemented without their current liaison or State Program support.

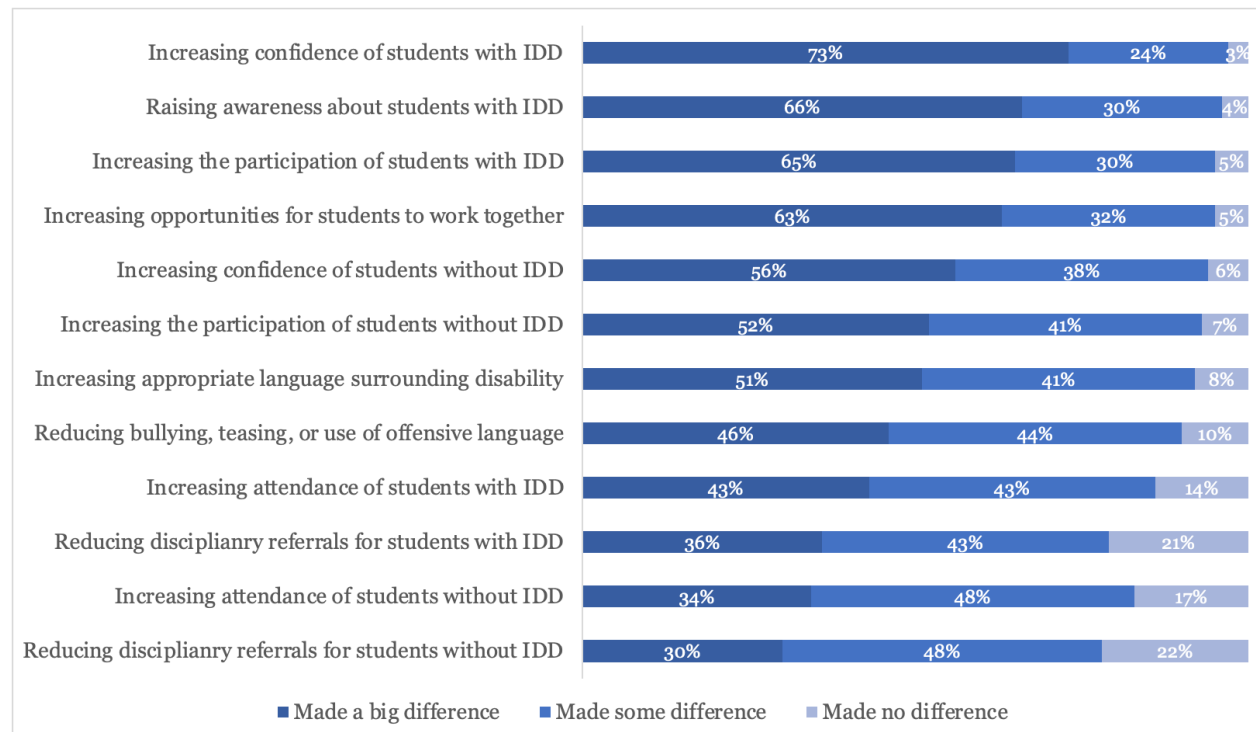
Impact of UCS on Students and School Environment

For 15 years, the annual evaluation has documented liaisons' perceptions of UCS impact on students and overall school climate. In the 2022-2023 Liaison Survey, there was a continued focus on understanding the impact and value of UCS activities for students and the school environment. This year, CSDE assessed the impact of UCS programming on specific spaces within a school community as well as on students who may be marginalized within a school community.

Impact on Students

At the student level, liaisons were asked to rate the impact of UCS on students with and without IDD (see Figure 5). Overall, liaisons reported that UCS "made a big difference" for students with IDD in increasing their confidence and school participation (73% and 65%, respectively). By facilitating school inclusion, liaisons also felt that UCS "made a big difference" in raising awareness about students with IDD (66%) as well as creating more opportunities for students with and without IDD to work together (63%).

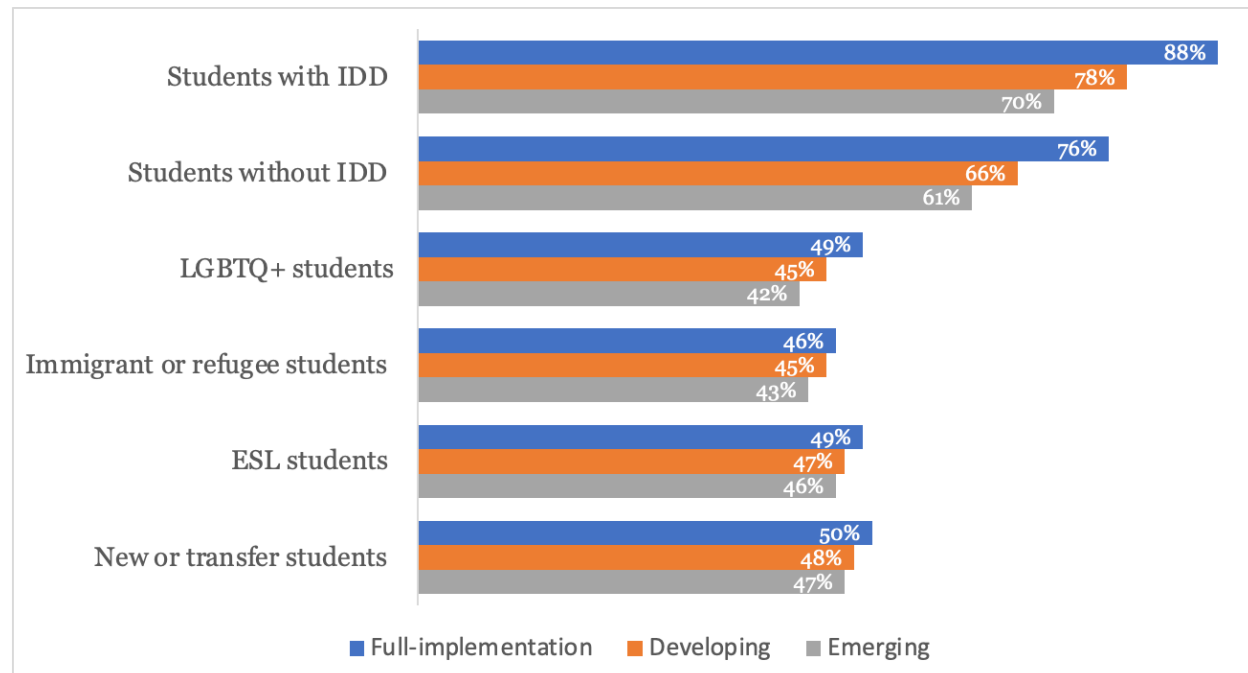
Figure 5. Perception Of UCS Impact on Students.



Note: The original survey questions employed 5-point Likert scale, in which 0 means “The Unified Champion Schools activities did not make a difference” and 5 means “The Unified Champion Schools activities did not make a difference.” In the analysis, the scale was combined in ways that 5 and 4 mean “Made a big difference,” 3 and 2 means “Made some difference,” and 1 and 0 means “Made no difference.”

Liaisons were also asked about the perceived value of UCS activities for students, and as expected, they reported high value for students with IDD (83%) and without IDD (72%). More liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported high value for students with IDD (88%) and without IDD (76%) compared to liaisons from Developing and Emerging schools (see Figure 6). Perceptions of UCS activity value also differed by the number of Whole School Engagement activities that a school implemented. When schools implemented three or more Whole School Engagement activities, liaisons more often reported that UCS activities were high value, compared to schools that implemented fewer than three Whole School Engagement activities.

Figure 6. Perceived High Value of UCS Activities for Students, By School Implementation Level.



Liaisons also reported that UCS activities were valuable for students who may be marginalized within their school, such as LGBTQ+ students, immigrant or refugee students, students where English is a foreign or second language, or new or transfer students within their school. The value for these student groups was consistent across implementation levels and school levels and ranged between 42% and 54%.¹⁵

Impact on the School Environment

In addition to examining the impact of UCS programming on various student groups, UCS impact was investigated at the school level. Consistent with previous findings, liaisons reported high levels of program impact on the overall school environment. Over half (57%) of liaisons believed that UCS activities contributed to the development of an inclusive school environment. This belief was more common among liaisons from Full-implementation schools (66%) than those from Developing (46%) and Emerging schools (35%). Similarly, more liaisons from schools with a UCS Leadership Team (71%) held this belief compared to those from schools without a UCS Leadership Team (47%). Since the main goal for Whole School Engagement activities is to foster a schoolwide inclusive environment, liaison's belief of UCS impact would be reflected in the level of activity implementation. A greater percentage of liaisons from schools that implemented three or

¹⁵ These percents were obtained by counting how many liaisons responded with a "4" or "5" to the question "How valuable do you believe UCS activities are for the following group of students (0 = *not valuable*, 5 = *extremely valuable*).

more Whole School Engagement activities (72%) held this belief, compared to those from schools that implemented fewer activities (48%).

In the 2022-2023 Liaison Survey, the CSDE evaluation team also explored whether liaisons thought that UCS impacted specific spaces within their schools. These spaces included contexts where teachers and other adults may or may not be present. Liaisons were asked to rate whether UCS had an impact on expanding inclusion in the following spaces: in the classroom and academic settings, extracurricular activities and afterschool settings, school buses, the cafeteria, and other common areas in the school.

Two average scores were created for spaces that were likely to include an adult actively leading an activity (e.g., the classroom or extracurricular activities) and spaces where students would freely interact with fellow students (e.g., school buses, the cafeteria, or other common areas within the school). Overall, liaisons reported that UCS made an impact on expanding inclusion in both adult-led spaces ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.14$) and student-led spaces ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.18$).¹⁶

The CSDE team then investigated whether liaisons' perceptions of impact in student-led and adult-led spaces differed based on grade level, locale, or implementation level. Liaisons slightly differed by school level in their responses about adult-led spaces, with liaisons from middle and high schools reporting higher UCS impact on expanding inclusion in adult-led spaces than liaisons from elementary schools.¹⁷ Liaisons also slightly differed by locale, with averages ranging between 3.25 and 3.70 depending on their specific locale.¹⁸ However, liaisons' responses differed more significantly based on implementation level.¹⁹ Liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported that UCS made a bigger difference expanding inclusion in adult-led spaces ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.11$) than liaisons from Developing ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.20$) or Emerging schools ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.25$).

Liaisons' perceptions of impact in student-led spaces did not differ based on grade-level²⁰ or locale.²¹ As expected, liaisons' responses differed more significantly based on their school's UCS implementation level.²² Liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported that UCS made a bigger difference in student-led spaces ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.11$) than liaisons from Developing ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.22$) or Emerging schools ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.25$).

Summary

¹⁶ Responses were scored on a six-point scale (0 = UCS activities did not make a difference, 5 = UCS activities made a big difference).

¹⁷ $F(3, 391.60) = 12.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

¹⁸ $F(12, 44.833) = 2.03$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2 < .01$.

¹⁹ $F(2, 882.76) = 92.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

²⁰ $F(3, 388.82) = 0.88$, $p = .449$, $\eta^2 < .01$.

²¹ $F(12, 448.61) = 1.71$, $p = .061$, $\eta^2 < .01$.

²² $F(2, 907.48) = 54.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$.

Liaison Survey data showed that UCS programming had positive impacts for students and for the school community. At the student level, liaisons reported that they perceived UCS activities to positively influence the confidence and school participation of students with ID, raise awareness about students with ID, and create opportunities for students with and without ID to collaborate. Furthermore, liaisons highlighted the UCS program's value for students, with liaisons from Full-implementation schools more commonly reporting high value for students both with and without IDD. The number of Whole School Engagement activities that a school implemented was also related to perceived value, with more liaisons from schools implementing at least three activities reporting high value.

At the school level, liaisons continued to report high impact of UCS programming on the development of an inclusive school climate, with the highest perceptions of impact among liaisons from schools that were at Full-implementation status, had at least three Whole School Engagement activities, and had a UCS Leadership Team.

Finally, when examining whether UCS made a difference in expanding inclusion in specific school areas, liaisons reported positive impacts in spaces where adults are actively present as well as spaces that are primarily student-led. The extent of perceived impact differed by UCS implementation level, with liaisons from Full-implementation schools reporting greater impact in adult-led and student-led spaces than liaisons from Developing and Emerging schools.

Revisiting Schols that Participated in the UCS Intervention Study to Investigate Program Sustainability and Long-term Impacts

Introduction and Background

Between 2014 and 2016, Special Olympics and the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) implemented an intervention study to assess the impact of Special Olympics Unified Champion School (UCS) participation on students and schools (Jacobs et al., 2017; McDowell et al., 2017). This intervention study involved 11 schools, where half of the schools started UCS in the 2014-2015 school year, and the other half of the schools started UCS in the 2015-2016 school year. Results showed that UCS participation was associated with students having more positive attitudes toward, and social interactions with, students with IDD. They also perceived their school as more inclusive to students with and without IDD (Siperstein, McDowell, Jacobs, Stokes, & Cahn, 2019). These results were corroborated by interviews with teachers, staff, and parents.

The schools that participated in the intervention study had a common context for beginning their UCS implementation as well as a shared implementation process that helped start UCS within each school. The initial benefits have been well documented (Siperstein et al., 2019), and similar findings have been found across prior evaluation reports. However, the impact of long-term UCS implementation and the factors that influence a program's long-term sustainability (or lack thereof) have not been established. Although prior evaluative research has asked liaisons to report factors related to program sustainability (Jacobs et al., 2021), they did not explicitly investigate whether factors related to long-term sustainability differed from those relating to short-term sustainability. Furthermore, prior evaluative efforts primarily focused on responses from UCS liaisons. Having diverse opinions from both faculty, staff, and administrators who were either present during the intervention study between 2014-2016 or who joined their school after 2016 could help corroborate findings regarding UCS impacts and factors related to program sustainability.

Therefore, in the 2022-2023 school year, Special Olympics and CSDE began an investigation of the long-term impact of UCS implementation in schools. This section of the evaluation report details a qualitative exploration of the consequences of long-term UCS implementation and factors related to program sustainability. School staff from schools that participated in the control trial were interviewed to assess how UCS progressed in their school after the first two years of the control trial study (e.g., after the 2015-2016 school year). After discussing the findings from these interviews, this section of the evaluation report concludes with implications from the present findings.

A full description of the methods used for this aspect of the 2022-2023 evaluation can be found in Appendix C of this report. In short, CSDE interviewed 26 teachers, staff, and administrators from schools that participated in the intervention study in 2014-2016. Interviews focused on the impact of UCS, successes and challenges related to UCS

implementation, and support from school administrators, fellow teachers, and Special Olympics.

Findings

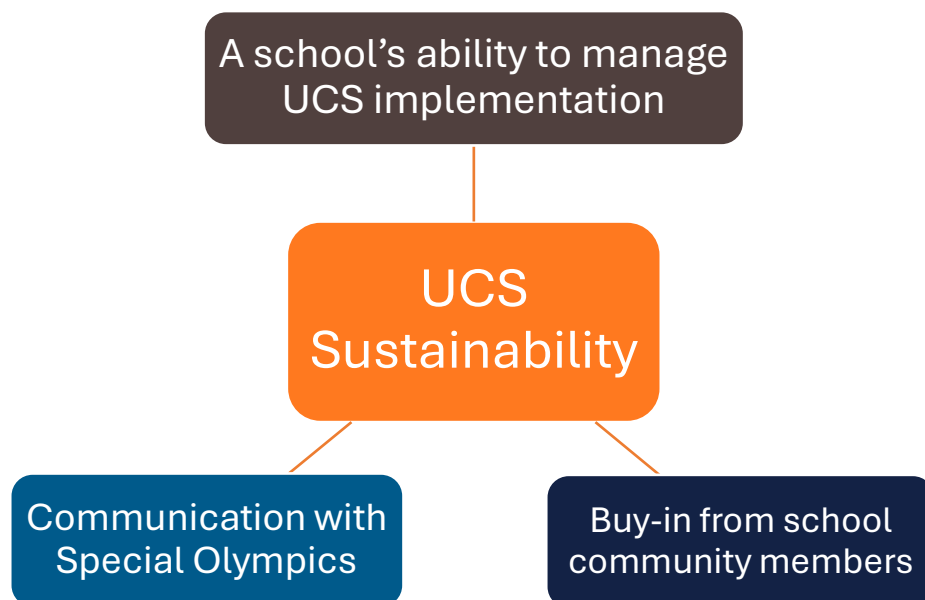
Based on initial discussions with State Special Olympics Programs, CSDE found out that six control trial schools (out of 11 total schools) continued UCS implementation as of Spring 2023. Five of the six schools that actively implemented UCS as of Spring 2023 were at the Full-implementation level of UCS implementation, and the sixth school was at the Developing level of UCS implementation. All four schools from Colorado continued UCS implementation, one out of four schools from Michigan continued UCS implementation,²³ and one out of three schools from North Carolina continued UCS implementation.

Interviews with staff from the control trial schools led to many findings related to UCS program sustainability, their perception of the continued impact of UCS implementation, and specific challenges that led to some schools deciding to discontinue their UCS implementation.

Factors Related to Sustainability

One important finding is that out of the seven control trial schools that participated in the follow-up, four schools were actively implementing UCS programming while three schools had stopped their UCS implementation. Even with the benefits that come from long-term UCS implementation (which are discussed in the next section), staff noted that there were challenges related to maintaining and growing a sustainable program. Importantly, staff from all schools noted similar factors that influenced their decision and ability to sustain or not sustain UCS within their schools: buy-in from school community members, communication with Special Olympics, and management of UCS. These factors are graphically represented in Figure 7.

²³ In between when interviews were conducted and the final draft of this report, one school that paused their UCS implementation restarted UCS programming.

Figure 7. Factors That Influence UCS Sustainability.

Buy-in from school community members. Overall, staff noted that support from fellow teachers, school community members, and district members was needed to maintain UCS programming in their school. A positive example of support was shared by an administrator who was present during the control trial at a school that is still actively implementing UCS: “We've got support from our superintendents. We've got support from our principal. We haven't really had to convince anybody of, ‘Help us do this.’ Everyone's like, ‘Oh, this is great,’ from the top on down.” Similarly, a general education teacher present during the control trial at another school still implementing UCS noted:

[Our] assistant principal was on board from the get-go. Then, when she took over the school, oh my goodness, yeah, that's when we got the support. We would get the same kind of support that any other club or activity in the school got.

Two other staff from schools that are continuing UCS corroborated this finding. A general education teacher who joined their school after the control trial explained: “Because our administration and our teachers believe in it, and then they sell it to students who then come along and usually end up believing in it.” An administrator who also joined the school after 2016 highlighted the important role that community support has played in the sustainability of their UCS program:

The staff that's behind it, that's really working it and dedicated to it, they're extremely involved. The parents are extremely involved, and the community. We've got individuals that sponsor our kids all the time. When we sent our kids to a state competition, our local sheriff's department gave them a police escort. We have lots

of community support. Our city council and our mayor are very supportive of our program.

Just as the presence of buy-in from administrators and staff was related to more sustainable programs, the absence of buy-in was related with less sustainable programs. A new staff member at a school that is still implementing UCS noted the implications of Unified Sports not being viewed as equally important at the school and state level:

Since we're not a [state athletics organization]-sanctioned sport, [it is hard to get] the space to practice because all in-season sports have priority over us. With basketball, we were unable to have gym space in our high school because boys' and girls' basketball had the courts every day after school from 4:30 until 9:00 or 10:00 at night.

This point was also noted by staff and administrators from other schools. A general education teacher from a school that discontinued UCS implementation noted the influence of administrator support, or lack thereof: "I have pitched it to my principal, and his attitude was always like, 'I don't think it'll work.'"

Support from students is also important for UCS to be sustainable within schools. Although there are many benefits of UCS implementation for students with and without IDD, some schools did not have adequate support from students to maintain UCS implementation. One special education teacher present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS implementation discussed this challenge: "I feel just getting students to get involved in anything right now is pulling teeth or herding cats." Similarly, an administrator who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted:

Getting the kids to support all kinds of stuff can be difficult. I'm not sure how to integrate the activities more. [A Whole School Engagement event] helps to get everybody involved. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of carry-over to: "Hey, now let's go watch them play soccer."

Overall, support is needed from school administrators, students, and other members of the school and local community for UCS to be sustainable.

Communication with Special Olympics. Another factor that affected the sustainability of UCS programming was the communication between school staff and Special Olympics (SO). Staff explained that having a positive relationship with Special Olympics—either at the state or national level—was related to their ability to implement consistent UCS programming. A special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted: "I could ask for anything I ever needed. [state SO staff] were right there. They were there to support us, especially as we were building the program. I can always ask." Another staff member new to their school noted: "There's a pretty good relationship there. We feel comfortable reaching out to

Special Olympics and talking to them.” A third special education teacher at a school still implementing UCS echoed this point: “[state SO staff] are just easy to talk to. If I ever sent an email, I get a response quickly. If I call them, I get called back quickly.”

School staff felt most supported by Special Olympics when state or national SO staff provided resources and insights regarding UCS program development or implementation. A general education teacher present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted: “From visiting the school to holding clinics for us to get off the ground, [SO staff have] always been a huge, huge, positive force in what we do.” Similarly, a special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS shared:

[A state SO Program representative] sat down with me and our athletic director and said, "This is how you get things going." The fact that I had someone step-by-step walk me through it, give me all the information that I need, help me get equipment, which was really helpful.

A general education teacher at a school still implementing UCS made a similar observation:

[SO staff] did coach trainings. They were great at answering questions. They even did recognition at the end of the year, which was nice to appreciate the time and effort that people made. They made sure that everybody knew that what they were doing was important.

However, staff in control trial schools who discontinued UCS pointed to a lack of communication Special Olympics. Several staff noted that a lack of communication between their school district and Special Olympics led to limited knowledge about the processes involved in implementing UCS activities at their school. For example, one special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS noted: “Special Olympics implemented many things that made it difficult to get involved. We signed kids up. Then they’d say, ‘Oh, we changed it.’ And then you must do the whole process again. I have kids with disabilities. I can’t.” Overall, the experiences that schools had communicating with state and national SO staff influenced their ability to maintain UCS implementation.

Management of UCS. The sustainability of UCS programming was also related to school staff’s management of UCS roles and responsibilities. Many staff explained that they could manage different aspects of UCS implementation. One general education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted: “It was easy to budget time. It was easy to prioritize.” A special education teacher in a school still implementing UCS who joined after the control trial stated: “I think it’s fine and manageable. I don’t think it’s going over the top or doing too little. I think it’s at a pretty good pace right now where you can handle just about anything that’s going on.” Similarly, an administrator who was present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS

shared: “I wouldn't say it was difficult to manage at all. It was another class on the kids' schedule, and it was an event that seemed to come together seamlessly.” Importantly, a special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted how management is a continuous process: “We've made it sustainable. When we had 8 to 10 adults involved, splitting it that way makes it more sustainable. Right now, it's just about rebuilding that adult pool.”

While UCS implementation was manageable for some schools, staff from other schools cited significant challenges related to manageability, such as finding staff to meet program needs. Multiple staff noted that positions that were volunteer-based were harder to recruit and maintain. This issue was compounded by the time commitments involved in fulfilling UCS-related roles and participating in UCS activities, in addition to other school and personal commitments. A special education teacher who joined their school after discontinuing UCS summarized this point:

Teachers are busy. They're young. They have families. They have things to do. Finding someone that wants to stay after school one day a week for an hour or two hours to run a Unified Sports practice is difficult. Because everybody has things going on and most of them have multiple jobs.

A general education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS also noted that it was hard to maintain a balance between UCS-related responsibilities and other school commitments: “We go from 8:30 in the morning till 4:30. And us as workers, we're here from 7:30 to 5:00. Our priority is the schoolwork. It's been difficult to find a nice balance.”

Summary. Overall, successes and challenges with UCS sustainability stemmed from buy-in from school community members, communication with and support from Special Olympics, and management of UCS roles and responsibilities. Despite these factors being dynamic and everchanging, schools that found success in these areas were more often able to develop sustainable UCS programs. Schools that had less buy-in from school community members, less communication with and support from Special Olympics, and less ability to manage UCS implementation also tended to be schools that discontinued UCS implementation.

Continued Impacts and Benefits of UCS

In addition to factors related to program sustainability, school staff discussed many benefits that came from the long-term implementation of UCS. Previously, the CSDE team (McDowell, Jacobs, et al., 2017) identified initial impacts and benefits from UCS implementation in the control trial schools. These impacts focused on (1) facilitating normative school experiences and interactions between students with and without IDD and (2) fostering confidence and understanding among students. Overall, data from the follow-up interviews suggest that staff's perceptions of the benefits from UCS implementation continued after the 2014-2016 control trial period. The impacts of

continued UCS implementation are summarized in the following sections: benefits for students with IDD, benefits for students without IDD, and benefits for schools. These benefits are summarized in Table 16.

Table 16. A Summary of Continued Benefits from UCS Implementation in Schools.

Group	Benefits
Students with IDD	Greater acceptance by peers without IDD Increased inclusion by peers without IDD Increased self-confidence and pride More opportunities for participation in school activities
Students without IDD	Improved understanding of disabilities overall Increased awareness and understanding of peers with IDD. Increased engagement in school activities within UCS Increased feelings of their own acceptance within schools
School communities	Greater perception of an inclusive school culture Integration of students with IDD within the school Improved sense of belonging for students with and without IDD

Note: These benefits were self-reported through interviews with staff.

Perceived benefits for students with IDD. Many staff noted the positive impacts of UCS on students with IDD, and these benefits occurred in both formal and informal events and interactions at school. One quote from a general education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS highlights this point: “Positively to the thousandth power, just seeing [students with IDD] realizing that they could be them[selves]. They were accepted for who they are.” This point was exemplified by staff from other schools. An administrator who was also present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS noted: “I think for our disabled students and our exceptional children, it provided them with an opportunity to feel like they were one of the gang.” Similarly, a special education teacher in a school still implementing UCS who joined after the control trial said: “I think our kids [with IDD] are also seeing that they are fitting in, and they are a piece of this community, and they are part of this school. And they’re super proud of it.”

School staff consistently noted that UCS provided students with IDD opportunities to feel included within their schools. These moments of inclusion were often precursors to students’ growth and positive development. For example, an administrator in a school still implementing UCS who joined after the control trial shared: “It’s been good for students with IDD just for their own self-confidence and to show that they can do a lot of things that maybe they’ve been told they couldn’t in the past.” This observation of improved confidence among students with IDD was supported by staff from other schools. A special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS explained: “[Students with IDD improved] their understanding [of] teamwork and that it’s not just about them. They can impact other people. Other people can impact them. It’s

amazing how fast their social skills grow when they're participating in these activities.” Another administrator who joined this school after the control trial noted:

One of the biggest things that I've seen is how special needs kids adapt to the school environment. Being involved in these programs makes that transition a little bit easier. The amount of growth that I see in those kids who participate in these programs has been incredible.

In schools that continued UCS programming, staff who were present during the control trial and those who joined following the control trial reported that the program developed over time, leading to long-term benefits for students with IDD. One special education teacher present during the control trial at a school that still implements UCS described how their program has grown: “When we first started, it was very small. And then it grew. We had two teams for basketball, two teams for football, two teams for soccer. Soccer went to the USA Games in 2018 as a school team.” Staff in some schools also noted the addition of other inclusive activities designed to increase participation opportunities for all students. One administrator who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS explained:

We've added a couple of classes to our programming. We have a comprehensive Unified PE class. We also added Unified Percussion. It's an opportunity for our percussionists to work with our students who have differing abilities and give them a chance to have a concert, perform, and really take part in that side of school, which is a performance-based area.

Importantly, staff observed that sustained UCS programming led to more opportunities to promote inclusion within their school districts and communities. One administrator who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS noted: “We were the first program in our school district to implement UCS. Since then, all seven other high schools in our district now implement UCS. We also see middle schools [in our district] incorporating this into their programming.” Another administrator who was new to this school stated: “Besides the impact within our building as far as positive and just inclusivity, it's kind of taking that out into our community.” These staff highlighted the extended benefits for students with IDD that can occur after the initial years of UCS implementation.

Perceived benefits for students without IDD. Sustained UCS implementation also led to many benefits for students without IDD. These benefits included developing a better understanding of students with IDD (or disabilities more generally), greater acceptance within schools, and increased engagement in schools and communities.

Many staff noted that UCS programming helped students without IDD understand how disabilities affect their classmates' lives. One general education teacher who joined their school after 2016 from a school that discontinued UCS stated: “It makes the kids aware of what their language is, including all types of disabilities, or just even different personalities.” This point was expanded upon by staff who were present during the control

trial. One administrator from a school that discontinued UCS summarized this point: “[UCS] provided an awareness and an understanding for our general education population of students to understand what it's like to have visible or invisible disabilities.”

Staff observed that within their school environments, there is now more acceptance and inclusion of students with IDD from their peers without IDD. One administrator who was present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS noted:

When you can see your knucklehead kids engaging with special needs students, and suddenly, they're not jerks, right, they are inclusive of these kids. That's when you know, “Okay. These kids are going to be okay.” At the heart of it, they're great kids.

A special education teacher who recently joined a school that is still implementing UCS also discussed how students without IDD benefited from inclusion by participating in UCS activities:

I know a couple of students were cut from their sport like basketball. And so, they came out for Unified and now they're a part of something. It's helping our kids [with IDD] tremendously, but it's also helping all kids tremendously because there are kids that need that support and that feeling of acceptance that aren't in our special education classes. They're feeling that acceptance through [UCS participation].

An administrator present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS corroborated the importance of UCS activities for students without IDD:

And it was just fantastic seeing the way that the kids interacted together. And it wasn't always our straight-A students that were the ones that worked the best with them. Sometimes it was kids that you were surprised at how great they were able to connect. And they needed it as much as a special education student needed it.

Over the years, consistent UCS programming has helped students with and without IDD feel included within their school. This, in turn, has led to an increase in student interest and engagement in UCS activities. One special education teacher in a school that is still implementing UCS who joined after the control trial explained: “We send out notices saying, ‘Hey, if you want to be a Partner,²⁴ come on in.’ Students that have never worked with students with a disability before coming in with the greatest attitude and end up loving these students.” Another special education teacher present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS similarly noted: “We have so many people that want to participate in it. It's amazing. They come and help in my classroom. And they're getting invited to birthday parties.” Overall, staff reported that students without IDD have benefited from sustained UCS programming after the control trial by developing a better

²⁴ As a reminder, the term “Partner” refers to a student without IDD who participates in UCS activities.

understanding of their peers with IDD, being part of an accepting school culture, and being more engaged in their schools and communities.

Perceived benefits for schools. In addition to the various benefits of UCS for students with and without IDD, staff from the control trial schools highlighted several ways that UCS programming impacts school communities. Most notably, UCS implementation has led schools to create and promote a sustainable inclusive culture. An administrator present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS exemplified this point:

We see it as part of the curriculum in the performing arts, we see it in physical education. And each year, kids in their leadership capstone projects are getting involved with Unified Sports and helping to coach teams. It's really become self-propelling and self-sustaining. Because people see the fun and they're like, "Wow, I want to do that."

This sentiment was shared by staff from other schools. One administrator present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS explained:

Those kids [with IDD] help every day. They are making school announcements. You see them walking the halls, high-fiving people. They're no longer the little group that just kind of travels around. Other students know who they are. They know them by name. It's just much more integrated than they were before.

Another special education teacher who joined their school after the control trial noted how UCS achievements are celebrated in noticeable and mainstream ways:

Our program has had a presence. We have a championship banner that sits in our hallway, and so that's a great conversation starter for anyone that walks in the building. It's right in our lobby, along with everyone else's. We have championship plaques in our case; blended right in with everyone else's. It really is a prideful walk for our students to go by those glassed in cases and see what they've earned as well.

Similarly, one general education teacher in a school that is still implementing UCS who joined after the control trial shared a specific example of how UCS participants were integrated into a high-visibility district event:

Everything they did this semester was [highlighted] at our district band night. They came and performed as Unified percussion. One big ensemble performance with all the Unified percussion groups from around the district.

Furthermore, staff recalled many examples of how their school's inclusive culture has become fully integrated across contexts and students. One special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school that discontinued UCS discussed the benefits of the UCS culture:

Oh, there's no doubt it has made a total difference. When we first did [UCS], everyone wanted to be part of it. And then a couple of years when we weren't even at school. We were online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students would go online and either text or join our Zoom calls.

Similarly, a special education teacher present during the control trial noted that while students with IDD were tolerated before UCS, they were fully included within their school now. This point was further supported by a special education teacher who was present during the control trial at a school still implementing UCS:

I had a parent say, "My kid's finally a part of a team and a part of a school, not just an attendee of the school." So, it just gives students that sense of belonging, along with all the other skills that are so important that are impossible to teach in a classroom unless you're in that kind of environment.

Overall, at the school level, staff highlighted the benefits of continued UCS programming in creating a sustainable and mainstream inclusive culture that is integrated across the school community and contexts.

Discussion of Schools that Stopped UCS Implementation

When reflecting on UCS implementation, staff from the control trial schools reported various benefits for students with and without IDD, as well as benefits for their school community at large. However, while the perceived benefits of UCS were similar among all staff, schools varied in whether they had continued UCS implementation. Specifically, three schools (out of the seven that CSDE was able to reach) did not continue with UCS programming after the control between 2016 and the 2022-2023 school year. In addition to discussing factors related to sustainability and benefits of UCS implementation, staff from these three schools were specifically asked why they stopped UCS implementation. These factors are presented holistically across schools, as themes were shared across schools that stopped UCS implementation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was mentioned as a reason why schools stopped implementing UCS programming after the control trial. A special education teacher who joined their school after the control trial stated: "When COVID hit, we lost [our momentum], obviously. And then that year, that following fall when we came back, we were unable to do any of that because of procedures and protocols related to social distancing." Similarly, a general education teacher who was present during the control trial stated: "Well, yeah, we couldn't do anything. A lot of athletics was postponed, but especially ours because of our population's easy exposure and not being able to fight off anything."

In some cases, schools faced a unique combination of challenges due to COVID along with other changes in the school. A special education teacher who was present during the control trial stated: "We got hit with a double whammy. [Staff name] retired after almost 50 years, and then we had [staff name] as a new teacher who took over that whole

class. And then COVID. And with those double whammies and transitions, [UCS] did not pick back up.” The logistical barriers of the pandemic between 2020 and 2022 made it difficult for schools to sustain UCS implementation during and beyond those school years.

Another reason for stopping UCS implementation was due to transitions that involved staff or student leaders leaving the school. This was particularly impactful in programs where there were one or two leaders who were the main motivation for continuing UCS in the school. One staff member explained: “[UCS] was brand new. It was exciting. Then, it just kind of continued and lost momentum. And I think when [staff name] retired, that was certainly a big hole.” Similarly, another staff member said:

[UCS] was initiated as a project by one of our seniors. She was the brains behind all of it and she did all the work. I think when she left it didn’t continue because it graduated with her ... We were so excited to get it started. We didn’t think about what will happen after she graduates.

Lastly, a third special education teacher present during the control trial highlighted the challenges of managing a multifaceted program like UCS in a long-term and sustainable way:

We were juggling too many roles to tackle such a huge beast. [UCS] was a huge undertaking. And just with our roles at the time, we were just burnt out. I’m not sure that we had a clear vision of what we wanted it to look like and what it was going to be like.

To summarize, these three control trial schools discontinued UCS implementation for a variety of reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic, key UCS staff and student champions/leaders transitioning out of the school (e.g., graduation, retirement), and challenges with distributed and long-term management. Importantly, most staff cited a combination of these factors, rather than one reason, when reflecting on how and why their school’s UCS program dissolved.

Summary

During the intervention study, data from participating schools showed that UCS implementation is associated with many benefits for students with and without IDD (Jacobs et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019) as well as positive changes within school communities (McDowell et al., 2017). This part of the annual evaluation built on these findings by investigating the long-term benefits associated with UCS implementation, as well as successes and challenges related to long-term program sustainability, from the perspective of school staff. Through this process, CSDE and Special Olympics gained insight into why some schools continued or discontinued UCS implementation.

Overall, interviews highlighted that UCS can be sustainable. This insight supports prior evaluation findings—including those presented in this year’s report—that schools

can, and do, maintain UCS implementation for many years. Staff identified specific benefits for students with and without IDD, as well as benefits for schools, which result from sustained long-term implementation. These long-term impacts stem from and build upon the impacts that have been documented in the initial years of UCS program implementation.

Furthermore, staff reported that the factors related to program success in the first few years of implementation are like the factors related to long-term program sustainability. UCS programs appeared to be more sustainable when they (1) had buy-in from a range of administrators, teachers, and students, (2) communicated with and felt supported by state or national Special Olympics staff, and (3) had staff and strategies to sustainably manage the multifaceted nature of UCS implementation. Importantly, schools varied in how successful they were in these areas. Three of the schools had stopped UCS implementation between 2016 and 2023, and although they reported similar benefits as the schools that had continued implementation, they cited more challenges with buy-in, SO communication and support, and management of UCS. When asked specifically about discontinuing their UCS programs, these schools also highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in creating logistical barriers and exacerbating other challenges, like turnover of key UCS staff.

The findings from interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators from schools that participated in the intervention study supports findings from the annual Liaison Survey as well as past evaluative findings regarding overall UCS program sustainability (Jacobs et al., 2021). With that said, the present findings show that the challenges related to program sustainability are similar for both short- and long-term UCS implementation—especially when staff are directly asked about the challenges related to long-term sustainability and UCS implementation. These findings also include the perspectives of staff from schools that discontinued UCS implementation—a perspective that is new to the overall annual UCS evaluation.

CSDE and Special Olympics will continue to evaluate the long-term effects of UCS implementation in 2023-2024. To do so, CSDE will identify schools that have implemented UCS for a similar amount of time as the schools that participated in the intervention study. Interviewing staff from these schools will compare staff perceptions from schools that participated in the intervention study with staff from schools that started UCS implementation independently from the intervention study (Jacobs et al., 2017; McDowell et al., 2017). CSDE will also survey current students from both sets of schools to see whether impacts related to student attitudes and social interactions were sustained within each school over time (Siperstein et al., 2019).

Initial Findings on How UCS Contributes to A Student's Positive Identity Development Within Schools

Prior annual evaluations and published research have established that students who participate in Unified Champions School (UCS) programming have more positive attitudes and meaningful social interactions with students with IDD (Siperstein et al., 2019). Furthermore, students with and without IDD who more consistently participate in UCS participation also report that their school has a more inclusive school environment (Siperstein et al., 2022). These benefits highlight the positive influence of UCS programming on schools and students.

As part of continued efforts to demonstrate the benefits and values of UCS, Special Olympics and the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) investigated the influence of UCS participation on students' positive identity development (Jacobs et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2023). Instead of focusing on how a student's disability contributes to negative thoughts about themselves, both Special Olympics' and CSDE's prior work have focused on how group membership in UCS activities helps promote a positive sense of self (Rodriguez et al., 2023). These efforts illustrate an additional benefit of UCS participation: UCS helps students with and without IDD develop increased confidence and self-esteem as well as a stronger sense of self (Jacobs et al., 2020). Furthermore, a multi-tiered qualitative approach²⁵ with youth leaders with and without IDD who were selected into the Special Olympics U.S. Youth Ambassador Program (Youth Ambassadors) found that UCS participation helped Youth Ambassadors develop a positive sense of self—regardless of whether they had IDD.

To follow up on these prior findings, Special Olympics and the CSDE evaluation team are interested in documenting whether the benefits of UCS participation extend to students who may participate in their school's UCS program but are not among those selected to be Youth Ambassadors. While Youth Ambassadors reported that their participation in Special Olympics Programming facilitated positive identity development, the experiences of Youth Ambassadors are different than the typical student who participates in UCS.²⁶ Knowing whether students with or without IDD receive similar

²⁵ In this context, a multi-tiered qualitative approach describes a study where Youth Ambassadors provided information in three contexts: an audio diary recording that they took on their own time, a group focus group, and an individual interview.

²⁶ A more detailed description of the Youth Ambassador program comes from Jacobs et al. (2020): "The Special Olympics U.S. Youth Ambassador program is a two-year program where youth leaders with and without ID learn skills in inclusive leadership, storytelling, and advocacy. To become a Special Olympics U.S. Youth Ambassador, youth leaders must complete an application that details their experience with SO and UCS and sit for a virtual interview with SO. Once selected, Youth Ambassadors complete training in UCS basics, responsibilities as a Youth Ambassador, social media and brand ambassador topics, and foundations of Inclusive Youth Leadership. During their time as Youth Ambassadors, they receive additional training in public-speaking, media, and content creation." On average, no more than 20 students are selected to be a Youth Ambassador each year across all State Programs.

benefits from their participation in Unified Activities as Youth Ambassadors can help show support for the continued benefits of UCS participation for students in schools.

In the 2022-2023 Evaluation, CSDE started the process of investigating the role that UCS plays in a student's positive identity development. To do so, CSDE interviewed students, high school alumni, and liaisons to assess whether students think about identity and related processes as they progress through high school. CSDE also asked about the structure of their school's Unified Club and the culture of UCS at their school. Lastly, CSDE asked about factors from UCS at their school that could relate to students' positive identity development. This aspect of the annual evaluation also asked liaisons and students whether the methods used in prior work on UCS and identity development in Youth Ambassadors (Jacobs et al., 2020) could work for planned work in the 2023-2024 annual evaluation.

A full description of the methods used in this aspect of the 2022-2023 Evaluation can be found in Appendix D. In short, CSDE interviewed 13 staff and 32 students or alumni (17 with IDD and 15 without IDD) to ask about identity, the structure of their school's UCS activities,²⁷ and factors that may related to a student's positive identity development.

Study Findings

Findings are organized into three sections. The first section describes how students, alumni, and liaisons viewed research on identity development and the planned evaluative work for 2023-2024. The second section describes the makeup of Unified Clubs in these schools and its relationship with its school community and other UCS activities at their school. The third section highlights findings from student and alumni focus groups regarding factors that are precursors to a student's positive identity development.

Liaisons, Students, and Alumni Thought Identity was an Important Topic to Investigate

Liaisons, students, and alumni were asked about whether they thought identity development and whether UCS participants' identity development was an important topic to study. Overall, liaisons, students, and alumni thought this topic was important to investigate—especially for students with IDD. One liaison noted how the research planned in 2023-2024 could help provide insights that are often overlooked regarding identity development and IDD:

Students said it was good, fine. [The focus groups] seemed like a positive experience for the kids and being exposed to something like that is rewarding and valuable for them. A lot of times this population can be ignored, and their ideas and beliefs are not appreciated.

²⁷ Although the original goal of this aspect of the annual evaluation was to focus on Unified Clubs only, findings showed that Unified Clubs were connect with UCS programming across all core experiences or activities within their school.

Students, alumni, and liaisons were also asked whether schools would be interested in and have the capacity to collaborate with CSDE and Special Olympics on a study similar to prior work focusing on Youth Ambassadors (Jacobs et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2023). This concern was not as relevant in 2019-2020 because of the existing infrastructure associated with the Youth Ambassadors program as well as the smaller sample size (e.g., 12 students). However, the increase in the total number of students schools that CSDE and Special Olympics hope to recruit in 2023-2024 made this question more relevant. Overall, liaisons, students, and alumni were supportive of the purpose of the study, thought that they could implement the study within their schools, and thought that the insights from the study could highlight the perspective of students and enhance their programming. Liaisons also provided suggestions about how the interview/focus group questions could be better designed to help students with and without IDD think about their experiences and identity development.

Both students with and without IDD mentioned that questions used in the prior work on Youth Ambassadors and identity development were easy to understand. Like liaisons, athletes and partners mentioned that using specific examples would help them think about their identity and relationship with UCS. During a focus group, one partner stated: “I think the questions [presented in this focus group] were easy to talk about. They also gave a lot of insight to what we do in our community and through our school.” Athletes mentioned that questions that are more abstract may be harder to answer (e.g., “What is something that is different about me today than before?”) than questions that had more concrete reference points or examples. In summary, liaisons, students, and alumni felt that identity was an important topic to investigate, particularly for students with IDD. They also expressed support for further research regarding the role that UCS plays in a student’s identity development.

The Makeup of Unified Clubs and its Relationship with UCS Activities and the School Community

After establishing that identity development is a topic relevant to students’ lives and that further research should be done to investigate the relationship between UCS and positive identity development, CSDE’s next step was to describe how Unified Clubs are structured within schools. Liaisons were asked to describe their Unified Clubs and how it related to other UCS programming at their school and their school community overall.

Unified Clubs rely on student leadership. Liaisons reported that their Unified Clubs heavily relied on student leadership for the everyday and yearly functions of each Unified Club. This includes having student leadership positions within the club structure (e.g., president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer). Each club may vary in the titles or responsibilities related to each student-led position, but all clubs had an organized student UCS Leadership Team comprised of various leadership positions. These leadership positions comprised of both Athletes and Partners.

Students in these Unified Clubs were often responsible for planning events at their school—both within their Unified Club and for the entire school community. Many liaisons noted how events were either student-run or thought of by the students themselves. One liaison expanded on this topic:

One activity that our club regularly plans is a school-wide dance. However, it did not work out this year. So [the club leaders] were like, "Let's do something different." Instead of just canceling and not doing anything, they came up with the idea to do a Unified game night. And we did it in the evening, at our school. And we invited all students from our school, not just students from UCS. That was wonderful because they had not been around our athletes and partners. So we just got to play a lot of games and just hang out and have fun.

Other liaisons noted that activities planned by Special Olympics provided experiences that could anchor their school's Unified Club. One liaison noted how a student-led fundraising event both provides students opportunities to show leadership in the club and fund their club's events for the year. Another liaison noted that students are responsible for planning club events and activities within their club:

We have a calendar now of, every month, we have something going on. And so I share with the students what's happening this month, and then we talk about what needs to be done and assign tasks to accomplish those things. So if it's Unified Sports, we figure out who will collect paperwork. If it's Polar Plunge, we figure out how we're going to fundraise or promote participation. If it's a Unified assembly, we need to figure out who's going to emcee and who's going to take which role. We kind of lay it out there, and then students just kind of go for it. And I can help support, and I do some of the support in the background and some of the higher-level logistics with transportation and funding and things. But our students have really taken a lot of that leadership on.

Unified Clubs are a part of their school's community. Unified Clubs did not act independently within their schools. Across all interviews with liaisons, Unified Clubs were talked in relation to other experiences within and outside their school. One teacher noted: "We do a lot more than just sports. We also try and do stuff with the arts. So we paired up with the arts and music teachers to do events during school." Another liaison noted how UCS related to increased integration of students with IDD within their school.

When UCS came along, it gave access and kind of visibility to our kids with disabilities, especially our kids who are in more self-contained environments and have a higher level of need. Before UCS programming, there weren't a ton of entry points for our kids in any type of meaningful way. I think some classroom rosters would be inclusive, right, because our kids would show up on the roster but sometimes wouldn't be very meaningfully engaged in those classes. And so in my experience, it would be an adult supporting the kid in that class on the sidelines. But

with our Unified classes, it's just very much like our students with disabilities are the fabric of the class, very much engaged, and very much a part of everything.

In summary, liaisons reported that their Unified Clubs were structured to fit within their overall school community, were student-led, and provided opportunities for leadership and growth both within their school and within their extended communities. Instead of liaisons reporting a leadership model that was consistent across clubs, liaisons instead reported matching their club's leadership structure to their students and school communities. Importantly, Unified Clubs were an integrated part of UCS within these schools, and this integration led to an environment that may foster students' growth and positive identity development.

Unified Club Creates Environments that May Foster Students' Positive Identity Development

Findings have supported both the idea that identity is an important and relevant topic for students with and without IDD and that the structure of Unified activities provides students leadership opportunities and positive student experiences. Consequentially, the CSDE evaluation team was also able to gain a richer understanding of the role that UCS plays in positive identity development. Specifically, liaisons,²⁸ students, and alumni highlighted three factors related to UCS programming²⁹ that may lead to positive identity development among participants: the development of an inclusive community, opportunities for students with and without IDD to have meaningful relationships, and student growth stemming from safe and supportive UCS communities. Importantly, factors and examples were congruent between Athletes and Partners and are presented together in this section.

UCS is an inclusive community. Many students and alumni noted that UCS created a positive inclusive community. One student noted: "For Unified at our school, I feel like it's not just a club, but it's almost a family-type thing. We all can be there for each other." Another student noted: "It's about bringing people together." A third student similarly stated: "We include students that usually get pushed off to the side." Lastly, a student summarized: "Everybody wants to feel like they belong, and participating in [UCS], we can create a community to thrive in. I have always felt completely welcome with everyone that participated."

Students and alumni mentioned that the community built around specific activities at their school led to UCS being perceived as an inclusive and welcoming environment. One student summarized this aspect of UCS:

²⁸ For the most part, liaisons' perspectives were congruent with student perspectives.

²⁹ Although an original goal was to describe how a school's Unified Club influenced a student's positive identity development, student and alumni experiences often involved multiple core experiences within UCS.

If you feel left out in school, join Unified because you'll never feel left out at all. There's always going to be people there supporting you. It's going to feel like a community, and then you'll make more friends. And I feel like high school would go by fast when you have this sense of community and support by going to a club for those 40 minutes, but it still makes it a very impactful feeling in your life.

Another student offered a similar perspective about what attracts people to UCS:

The staff, the partners, and the athletes are all so supportive and welcoming. We are always celebrating each other's accomplishments. So, as well as the partners joining because they want to help, the athletes join because I feel like they see the sense of community and support. And I feel like that's just something anyone—athletes or partners—would want to be a part of.

UCS provides opportunities for students to make and maintain relationships. As described above, UCS offers an inclusive community for all students. Being in an inclusive community allowed students with and without IDD to establish and maintain relationships. Students explained that being part of UCS helped them make friends and spend time together consistently, during or after school. One student summarized this point: "We just meet maybe once a week, once a month, whenever everyone is available, and we just spend time together a lot. We spend time with each other, talk about things, and we just have a good time." Another student expanded on supportive relationships in the UCS community: "It's really scary, doing new things. But from my first day, I've just felt continuous support from everyone, and I feel like everyone feels the same way--partners and athletes."

Some students specifically talked about developing friendships through UCS activities. One student noted: "It's fun and easy to talk to people. And you can make friends there and stuff like that." An alum similarly noted:

I think my biggest takeaway was friendships. So many friendships over the years, some of which I still hold true today eight years later out of high school. When someone still consistently reaches out, it shows that you made an impact to them and that they value you as a true friend.

The maintenance and growth of these relationships can then contribute to students' identity development. One student highlighted this process:

I have a friend who has autism and Asperger's syndrome. It affects how he socializes with people. He has always had a hard time making friends. He opened up to me about that. It was eye-opening. It's like, "Oh, he felt safe with me." That's something that's crazy to me.

The same student continued:

And sometimes it can be a social aspect. Sometimes it can be a verbal aspect, like some of the kids that I'm close with, they are nonverbal. So sometimes some kids without disabilities don't know how to communicate with them. And sometimes you have to be more patient and learn how to communicate. It can really vary on why it'd be so hard, but here, it's just like if you come, you immediately make a friend. The first time you come, you might be a little scared. You're like, "What do I do?" But once you get into it, it's like, "I'm here. Let's go find my friend. Let's go play basketball. Let's go do skills. Let's go do whatever. I know I'm here with people who support me."

Safe and supportive UCS communities promote student success and growth.

Students and alumni stated that the UCS community and the relationships formed with fellow students made them feel like they were in a safe space. One student noted: "I feel happy when I'm myself, because when I'm myself, in Unified, I don't have to feel judged." Another student shared a similar response: "Personally, for me, it's a safe place because I have a lot going on. And when I come into Unified, it's just like all one giant family." A third student similarly shared: "[UCS can make students] feel a lot more open and less hidey. Last year, I would hide behind benches constantly. And I don't feel that need to do that anymore." A fourth student summarized this perspective:

I feel like UCS is a safe space. We're close with the teachers and the kids, and the bonds that we make. It just makes it fun to come to school every day and know that we can spend time together and have a good time in the middle of the school day.

Students and alumni reported that being in a supportive community free from judgment allowed them to try new things. This, in turn, led to students experiencing new accomplishments, such as making it to the state championship in Unified Sports or improving their sports skills and abilities. These accomplishments also included trying new things through UCS activities. One student shared their experience:

I think [my school's liaison] provided a community where we all feel comfortable being able to meet new people and experience things that we might not be necessarily comfortable with. We did the play. I'm not necessarily someone who likes to do theater, but I still did it. And I'm glad I did it because it's probably one of the more fun things I've done.

Students also discussed how their accomplishments from UCS experiences extended to their life outside of school. One student noted: "It's really great when you're able to get to know how to clean your home." Another noted: "It's funny, I consider helping my family as my job. I help with my mom with doing laundry, helping outside or picking weeds or just helping her with cooking, baking, picking up dog poop, and just cleaning the house." Students with and without IDD noted that their experiences within UCS activities allowed them to try new experiences outside of UCS and to feel accomplished their successes outside of UCS.

In general, students reported that experiences of accomplishments within a safe space helped them grow. One student mentioned that while they were shy outside of UCS-related spaces, they were not shy when they were in Unified Club or participated in other UCS activities. Another student mentioned: “My favorite thing is watching a new student come in and join in on activities and group projects.” These successful growth experiences then led students to try more activities or learn new skills, furthering their own growth and providing a model for other students within UCS.

Summary

In this aspect of the 2022-2023 evaluation, CSDE interviewed liaisons, students, and alumni to investigate how participation in UCS activities and being in an inclusive school environment could help students develop a positive sense of self. Through focus groups with students and alumni, as well as interviews with UCS liaisons in Spring 2023, CSDE found support for combined interest in identity development, the way that club structures foster positive student experiences and leadership opportunities, and UCS’s integration within the school community. Combined, these point towards the potential for UCS activities to foster positive identity development for students with and without IDD.

The relationship between UCS and a student’s growth and identity development has been supported in prior evaluative findings (Jacobs et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2023). This aspect of the 2022-2023 evaluation offers continued support for this finding. This aspect also contextualizes the role that a school’s Unified Club and related activities plays in fostering an environment that can promote a student’s growth, leadership opportunities, and potential identity development. Both Athletes and Partners reported congruent benefits and factors from their participation within UCS activities as well as their description of their Unified Club and UCS within their schools.

Further work in 2023-2024 will directly focus on how aspects of a school’s UCS program and related experiences relate to a student’s positive identity development using similar methods from prior evaluative work (Jacobs et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2023) and feedback from students, alumni, and liaisons.

Summative Highlights and Recommendations for 2023-2024 (Year 16)

The Center for Social Development and Education’s 2022-2023 UCS Evaluation continues to show the impact that Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools (UCS) has on promoting inclusion for students with IDD. In addition, this year’s evaluation continues to show the benefits of UCS for students without IDD as well as teachers, administrators, and members of a school’s community. This final section will cover highlights obtained from all components of this year’s evaluation before offering recommendations for the 2023-2024 school year. Table 17 shows the summative highlights from the 2022-2023 school year and the recommendations for the 2023-2024 school year.

Table 17. Summative Highlights and Recommendations for the 2023-2024 School Year.

<p>Summative highlights from the 2022-2023 school year</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UCS is sustaining its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. • UCS continues to be beneficial for students with and without IDD. • Most schools reported that UCS implementation had a benefit for students at their school. However, the impact of UCS implementation appears to be stronger for schools where UCS is more integrated within their school’s community and where multiple core experiences are offered.
<p>Recommendations for the 2023-2024 school year</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attempt to start new UCS programs as Full-implementation programs and support existing programs to reach and maintain full-implementation status. 2. Promote the ability for schools to network and communicate with other schools within their school district, region, or state. 3. Identify or audit current or newly developed resources to make sure they align with liaisons’ needs. 4. Utilize the existing data from prior UCS research and evaluation efforts to create a standard for indicators and outcomes of inclusion in schools.

Summative Highlights from the 2022-2023 Evaluation

Across all three aspects of the 2022-2023 annual evaluation, CSDE found many summative highlights that exemplify UCS’s status after the 2022-2023 school year. Across all three sections of the 2022-2023 Annual Evaluation, CSDE found many summative highlights that exemplify UCS’s status after the 2022-2023 school year. A first highlight is that the initial evidence for UCS’s recovery after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic continued through the 2022-2023 school year. At a nationwide level, 29% of schools responding to the Liaison Survey were schools where this is their first year of UCS implementation. Also from the Liaison Survey, there is a higher percentage of schools that

have moved from Emerging or Developing schools into Full-implementation schools. Furthermore, from the Liaison Survey, schools are implementing each UCS core experience at the same percentage or higher compared to the 2021-2022 school year. Interviews from liaisons and students that participated in the two qualitative sections of the annual evaluation also stated how their program structure and sustainability allowed them to continue their programs and provide opportunities for students with and without IDD.

UCS also continues to be beneficial for students with and without IDD. Liaisons in the Liaison Survey noted that UCS activities had a positive benefit for students with IDD (83%) and without IDD (72%). Specific benefits for students with and without IDD were discussed by students, alumni, and staff through the qualitative components of the annual evaluation, and liaisons further reported the benefits of UCS participation for marginalized students. Students and staff noted that UCS activities created inclusive environments. When asked directly whether UCS activities increased inclusion within their schools, liaisons stated that inclusion improved in spaces that were adult-led and student-led (see the subsection titled “Impact on the School Environment”).

Lastly, the overwhelming majority of schools reported that UCS implementation had a benefit for students at their school—including students with and without IDD. However, the impact of UCS implementation appears to be stronger for schools where UCS is more integrated within their school’s community and where multiple core experiences are offered. Liaisons who responded to the Liaison Survey from Full-implementation schools reported more integration and positive benefits for students than liaisons from Emerging or Developing schools. A similar pattern was observed in the qualitative aspects of this year’s evaluation: having multiple core components or experiences allowed for more opportunities for students with and without IDD, which in turn led them to have more positive experiences within UCS activities. Having more activities across core experiences led to more positive outcomes and opportunities for growth for students.

Recommendations for the 2023-2024 (Year 16) School Year

Given the findings from this year’s report, CSDE offers the following six recommendations as Special Olympics UCS embarks on its 16th year of implementation. These first four recommendations are based on prior years’ evaluations as well as the findings from this year’s report. Although these recommendations are not necessarily new, they may continue to guide Special Olympics North America and state Special Olympics Programs throughout the 2023-2024 school year.

- 1. Attempt to start new UCS programs as Full-implementation programs and support existing programs to reach and maintain full-implementation status.***

Although UCS implementation is associated with positive benefits for students and school communities, the strength of these benefits is stronger for Full-implementation

schools and for schools that have integrated UCS programs within their school community. Special Olympics already has the goal that programs should start as Full-implementation programs or reach Full-implementation status if they start as an Emerging or Developing school. Special Olympics may benefit from working with state programs and schools to identify why some schools do not start as a Full-implementation school to help develop strategies for helping new and existing schools reach Full-implementation status. Furthermore, Special Olympics may continue to advocate for the creation of UCS Leadership Teams and the use of resources to help schools manage the multiple components of UCS implementation. Lastly, Special Olympics may recommend to state programs ways in which UCS may be further integrated into their school community through embedding UCS principles within the overall school culture or promoting UCS Leadership Teams in schools that do not have them.

This recommendation is not necessarily new. A similar recommendation was offered in 2019-2020 (e.g., “Special Olympics should better engage all school stakeholders in seeing UCS as a priority in their school.”) and 2021-2022 (e.g., “Strengthen training and technical assistance plans so that program health and sustainability factors, as informed by the annual evaluation, continue to drive how state SO programs and schools are supported.”). Evidence from this year’s evaluation shows the benefits of Special Olympics acting on these recommendations to increase UCS integration and implementation status. This recommendation builds from these two prior recommendations by focusing on the impacts that come from more engagement and support.

2. Promote the ability for schools to network and communicate with other schools within their school district, region, or state.

Within the resource evaluation component of this year’s Liaison Survey, liaisons reported a preference for examples of success from other schools and a preference for in-person training. Staff interviews also noted the benefits of having other schools within their region or state that they can collaborate with—whether it is through interscholastic events or opportunities for students and staff to come together to learn or share experiences. Finding ways to promote schools within a state to share experiences and collaborate with each other can help increase the sustainability of a UCS program and the impacts from UCS implementation. Tying these opportunities with Inclusive Youth Leadership events may help both promote the uptake of Inclusive Youth Leadership opportunities within schools and collaborations across schools.

This recommendation also builds from recommendations in 2019-2010 (e.g., “Special Olympics should create a guide to developing various types of school-community partnerships and support State SO Programs in promoting and facilitating school-community partnerships.”) and 2021-2022 (e.g., “Connect more school UCS programs with more community SO programs so students in UCS schools have expanded, long-term opportunities to participate in inclusive activities and liaisons and Unified Sports coaches have expanded, long-term support and resource networks.”). Emphasizing to state

programs the importance of and opportunities for UCS-related events can help UCS programs form relationships and collaborate with each other long-term.

3. *Identify or audit current or newly developed resources to make sure they align with liaisons' needs.*

Special Olympics UCS has many resources that are available to UCS programs and liaisons to help with UCS implementation. Liaisons who use resources often say they are helpful for their implementation and have many benefits that come from resource use. However, liaisons also list program manageability as a challenge to program sustainability and have offered many suggestions and preferences for the design and conceptualization of current and new resources. Special Olympics UCS would benefit from aligning resources with liaisons' stated needs and preferences.

This recommendation is a continuation from last year's recommendation (e.g., "Strengthen training and technical assistance plans so that program health and sustainability factors, as informed by the annual evaluation, continue to drive how state SO programs and schools are supported."). Special Olympics has already started this process in updating its resources. Further aligning existing resources or newly created resources with program needs—as reported in the Liaison Survey—to increase resource use.

4. *Utilize the existing data from prior UCS research and evaluation efforts to create a standard for indicators and outcomes of inclusion in schools.*

Findings across many years' worth of research and program evaluations have shown how UCS is a leader in promoting inclusion for children and adolescents with IDD. In addition, the structure of UCS implementation within schools has led to more inclusive school communities and positive benefits for students with and without IDD. Special Olympics has the opportunity to develop standards of inclusion from across its prior research and evaluative work to create standards for inclusion within schools. In doing so, Special Olympics can have a common benchmark to measure and promote inclusion within schools and compare aspects of inclusion across schools.

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Appendix A

Special Olympics Guidelines

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities affecting system-wide change. With sports as the foundation, the three-component model offers a unique combination of activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classrooms, and school climates of acceptance. These are school climates where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities, opportunities, and functions.

Unified Champion Schools Core Experiences

Unified Sports

A fully-inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities. Examples include such things as Interscholastic Unified Sports, Unified PE, Unified Fitness, or Young Athletes. These activities occur throughout the school year with the support of an adult coach and include opportunities for competition.

Inclusive Youth Leadership

Students with and without intellectual disabilities work to lead awareness, Unified Sports, advocacy, inclusion, and other SO activities throughout the school year. Examples include such things as Unified Clubs, Young Athletes Volunteers, or similar types of inclusive student groups. The clubs are supported by an adult liaison and offer leadership opportunities and/or training for students with and without disabilities. Youth leadership may also include participation in state-, regional-, or national-level inclusive youth leadership trainings, events, or conferences.

Whole School Engagement

These awareness and education activities promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population. Examples include such things as Spread the Word to End the Word (R-word)/Respect Campaigns, Pep Rallies/“Fans in the Stands” for Unified Sports teams, or student fundraising. Ideally students with and without disabilities are involved with planning and leading awareness events with the support of an adult in the school.

Unified Champion Schools Implementation Levels

Full-Implementation Unified Champion School

These schools implement activities from all three Unified Champion Schools core experiences (Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, Whole School Engagement).

Through various levels of intensity, the combination of the three core experiences creates the maximum impact within a school.

Developing Unified School

These schools are on their way to becoming full-implementation Unified Champion Schools. Developing Unified schools implement activities from two out of three core experiences (Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, Whole School Engagement), and Unified Sports must be one of the two experiences implemented. These schools are expected to become Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools within three years.

Emerging Unified School

These schools implement activities from just one core experience, or the Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement experiences but not the Unified Sports experience. Emerging Unified schools are expected to typically be in their first year of UCS implementation.

National Recognition Program (Banner Schools)

National Banner Schools are nationally recognized for having exemplary Unified Champion Schools programs. To be recognized as a National Banner School, schools must meet ten criteria, differing slightly by school type (elementary school, middle school, high school, or college). Among these criteria, schools must implement Unified Sports or Young Athletes throughout the school year. These Unified sporting activities must be recognized by the school at the same level as other school activities and coached by an adult who has received SO Unified Sports training. These schools must also implement Inclusive Youth Leadership with a Unified Club that meets regularly throughout the year and is supervised by an adult liaison, similar to other school activities. The Inclusive Youth Leadership program must give leadership opportunities to both students with and without ID. National Banner Schools must also implement two Whole School Engagement activities per year that are planned by both students with and without ID. Finally, National Banner Schools must be self-sustainable or have a plan in place to sustain each of the three components in the future.

Schools must apply to become a National Banner School, demonstrating that they meet each of the above criteria. Schools must reapply every four years to maintain the National Banner School title. The 2022 class of National Banner Unified Champion Schools included 166 schools. To date, there have been 683 schools recognized.

Unified Sports Team Models

Competitive

The Unified Sports Competitive model combines Athletes (individuals with ID) and Partners (individuals without ID) as teammates on sport teams for training and competition. Two things differentiate the Competitive Unified Sports model from the other two models: 1) all Athletes and Partners on a Unified Sports Competitive team must have attained the

necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current SO Official Sports Rules³⁰ and 2) teams that participate in this model may be eligible for advancement to Regional and World Games. A Unified Sports team is an inclusive sports program with approximately equal numbers of Athletes and Partners.

Player Development

The Unified Sports Player Development model combines approximately equal numbers of Athletes and Partners as teammates on sports teams for training and competition. What differentiates Unified Sports Player Development from the other two models is: 1) teammates are not required to be of similar abilities, and 2) teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics and in successfully participating in a cooperative team environment.

Recreation

Unified Sports Recreation consists of inclusive recreational sports opportunities for SO Athletes and Partners. This model does not follow any prescribed training, competition, or team composition requirements established by SO. These recreational opportunities may take place in partnership with schools, sport clubs, the community, and other private or public organizations as introductory one-day events, exhibitions or demonstrations (including Unified Sports Experiences), or ongoing activities such as physical education classes and intramurals.

Unified Fitness

Unified Fitness, and the associated *SO Fitness Guide for Schools*, was officially introduced as a component of SO and the UCS program in the summer of 2019. Unified Fitness marks the first intentional Unified Sports activity option that both keeps students physically active and teaches them about their overall health/wellness. Unified Fitness can be implemented using three models:

- Fit Families & Friends – A six-week fitness and wellness challenge. Participants set physical activity and nutrition goals and track their progress with encouragement from their Fit Families & Friends team.
- Unified Fitness Club – A year-round program that meets weekly and is based around one main physical activity (e.g., walking, hiking, yoga, etc.). The club members earn incentives through tracking their progress.
- SOFit – An eight-week holistic health education class combining four pillars of wellness: physical, nutritional, emotional, and social.

In conjunction with any of the models, schools are also encouraged to use Fit 5, a resource guide based on three fitness goals: exercising five times per week, eating five total fruits and vegetables per day, and drinking five bottles of water per day. The Fit 5 guide also provides schools with fitness cards and videos that offer exercises to challenge all abilities.

³⁰ SO Official Sports Rules: https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/general/Sports-Rules-Article-1-2017.pdf?_ga=2.128522444.1795695031.1544735922-1605599380.1544735922

Appendix B

2022-2023 Evaluation Tables

Table B1. Liaison demographics.

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	<i>Percent of Liaisons¹ (n = 5084)</i>
Liaison for more than one school	16%
Position within school	
Special Education Teacher	49%
Administrator	11%
Athletic Director	4%
District Coordinator	4%
Physical Education Teacher	8%
General Education Teacher	5%
Adapted Physical Education Teacher	6%
Special Education Aide/paraprofessional	2%
Special Education Services Provider	2%
School Psychologist/Counselor/Social Worker	2%
Other position not specified	6%
Number of years as liaison	
1 year or less	37%
2-3 years	31%
4-6 years	20%
7-10 years	9%
10 or more years	3%

¹ Exact sample may vary between variables based on data availability, such as if a liaison skipped the question.

Table B2. UCS Liaison Survey Response Rate, By State Program.

State Program	Surveys Completed¹	Completion Rate
Alaska	27	43%
Arizona	85	67%
Arkansas	41	73%
Colorado	104	26%
Connecticut	62	67%
Delaware	46	88%
District of Columbia	23	85%
Florida	355	85%
Hawaii	25	41%
Idaho	25	71%
Illinois	170	71%
Indiana	35	36%
Iowa	88	85%
Kansas	66	71%
Kentucky	50	91%
Louisiana	58	17%
Maine	51	43%
Maryland	63	60%
Massachusetts	211	76%
Michigan	331	88%
Minnesota	165	73%
Mississippi	46	74%
Missouri	62	45%
Montana	71	85%
Nebraska	140	83%
Nevada	34	60%
New Hampshire	52	66%
New Jersey	191	92%
New Mexico	48	94%
New York	124	50%
North Carolina	294	73%
North Dakota	8	38%
Northern California	116	44%
Ohio	37	33%
Oklahoma	81	94%
Oregon	71	89%
Pennsylvania	305	94%
Puerto Rico	6	55%
Rhode Island	59	72%
South Carolina	262	78%
South Dakota	31	56%
Southern California	85	99%

Tennessee	72	82%
Texas	392	88%
Utah	33	69%
Vermont	25	47%
Virginia	90	54%
Washington	82	81%
West Virginia	10	91%
Wisconsin	66	94%
Wyoming	30	81%
Total	5004	69%

² Surveys completed takes into account only liaisons who satisfactorily completed the survey. Partial responses were not included.

Table B3. UCS Liaison Survey Response Rate by School Level and State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys ¹	Elementary ²	Middle	High	Other
Alaska	29	7 (24%)	4 (14%)	15 (52%)	3 (10%)
Arizona	85	21 (25%)	9 (11%)	52 (61%)	3 (4%)
Arkansas	42	7 (17%)	11 (26%)	24 (57%)	0 (0%)
Colorado	111	21 (19%)	32 (29%)	52 (47%)	6 (5%)
Connecticut	64	9 (14%)	23 (36%)	30 (47%)	2 (3%)
Delaware	46	19 (41%)	9 (20%)	15 (33%)	3 (7%)
District of Columbia	23	14 (61%)	2 (9%)	4 (17%)	3 (13%)
Florida	359	166 (46%)	66 (18%)	102 (28%)	25 (7%)
Hawaii	26	10 (38%)	3 (12%)	13 (50%)	0 (0%)
Idaho	26	9 (35%)	4 (15%)	12 (46%)	1 (4%)
Illinois	175	69 (39%)	33 (19%)	63 (36%)	10 (6%)
Indiana	35	10 (29%)	4 (11%)	21 (60%)	0 (0%)
Iowa	88	30 (34%)	25 (28%)	32 (36%)	1 (1%)
Kansas	66	16 (24%)	6 (9%)	42 (64%)	2 (3%)
Kentucky	51	9 (18%)	13 (25%)	28 (55%)	1 (2%)
Louisiana	61	31 (51%)	10 (16%)	14 (23%)	6 (10%)
Maine	54	5 (9%)	11 (20%)	35 (65%)	3 (6%)
Maryland	65	34 (52%)	1 (2%)	30 (46%)	0 (0%)
Massachusetts	214	56 (26%)	40 (19%)	111 (52%)	7 (3%)
Michigan	331	149 (45%)	53 (16%)	107 (32%)	22 (7%)
Minnesota	167	35 (21%)	40 (24%)	88 (53%)	4 (2%)
Mississippi	46	11 (24%)	13 (28%)	16 (35%)	6 (13%)
Missouri	62	4 (6%)	9 (15%)	49 (79%)	0 (0%)
Montana	72	30 (42%)	16 (22%)	24 (33%)	2 (3%)
Nebraska	143	60 (42%)	18 (13%)	61 (43%)	4 (3%)
Nevada	35	10 (29%)	10 (29%)	14 (40%)	1 (3%)
New Hampshire	54	2 (4%)	9 (17%)	41 (76%)	2 (4%)
New Jersey	193	52 (27%)	49 (25%)	90 (47%)	2 (1%)

New Mexico	48	21 (44%)	13 (17%)	11 (23%)	3 (6%)
New York	134	3 (2%)	2 (1%)	124 (93%)	5 (4%)
North Carolina	299	92 (31%)	73 (24%)	119 (40%)	15 (5%)
North Dakota	11	0 (0%)	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	0 (0%)
Northern California	122	44 (36%)	20 (16%)	55 (45%)	3 (2%)
Ohio	37	5 (14%)	5 (14%)	26 (70%)	1 (3%)
Oklahoma	81	16 (20%)	25 (31%)	38 (47%)	2 (2%)
Oregon	73	7 (10%)	17 (23%)	49 (67%)	0 (0%)
Pennsylvania	305	22 (7%)	22 (7%)	258 (85%)	3 (1%)
Puerto Rico	6	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)
Rhode Island	59	23 (39%)	16 (27%)	17 (29%)	3 (5%)
South Carolina	268	124 (46%)	59 (22%)	76 (28%)	9 (3%)
South Dakota	31	9 (29%)	6 (19%)	16 (52%)	0 (0%)
Southern California	85	31 (36%)	10 (12%)	44 (52%)	0 (0%)
Tennessee	72	18 (25%)	13 (18%)	37 (51%)	4 (6%)
Texas	392	139 (35%)	93 (24%)	152 (39%)	8 (2%)
Utah	33	3 (9%)	1 (3%)	27 (82%)	2 (6%)
Vermont	25	5 (20%)	6 (24%)	11 (44%)	3 (12%)
Virginia	92	20 (22%)	20 (22%)	47 (51%)	5 (5%)
Washington	82	10 (12%)	14 (17%)	58 (71%)	0 (0%)
West Virginia	10	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
Wisconsin	66	20 (30%)	14 (21%)	32 (48%)	0 (0%)
Wyoming	30	6 (20%)	10 (33%)	14 (47%)	0 (0%)
Total	5084	1514 (30%)	966 (19%)	2413 (47%)	191 (4%)

¹The number of schools at each school level, when totaled, may not equal the number of completed surveys due to partially completed surveys, which were retained in the dataset for analysis when possible, or missing school level information from NCES.

²Preschool/kindergarten level schools were combined with elementary schools.

Table B4. Demographics Of Schools in the 2022-2023 Evaluation.

Variable	Percentage of schools¹
Locale	
Urban	27%
Suburban	38%
Town	12%
Rural	22%
New to UCS this year ²	29%
Title I	62%
Title I School Wide	45%
School Level	
Elementary	30%
Middle	19%
High	47%
Other	4%
Student Enrollment ³	
<500	30%
501-1000	37%
1001-1500	16%
>1500	17%
Students with IDD	
0-10	28%
11-20	31%
21-30	16%
31-50	14%
More than 50	12%
Students receiving free/reduced lunch	
0%-25%	25%
26%-50%	35%
51%-75%	23%
76%-100%	17%
Students of racial/ethnic minority	
0%-25%	35%
26%-50%	28%
51%-75%	18%
76%-100%	19%
<i>Implementation of Virtual learning</i>	
Yes	10%
No	86%
Don't know	4%

¹ Note: Percentages in table may not add to 100% due to “other” responses.

² Data on “new” schools is based on liaison reports, which may be inaccurate. Inaccurate liaison reports may be due to liaison turnover or misunderstanding the question.

Table B5. UCS Activities, By Implementation Level.

Activity¹	Full- implementation Unified Schools (n = 3,054)	Developing Unified Schools (n = 1,064)	Emerging Unified Schools (n = 826)
Unified Sports programs	100%	100%	39%
Unified Sports team	70%	58%	18%
Unified PE	65%	59%	22%
Unified Fitness	24%	12%	3%
Unified Esports & Fitness	8%	3%	1%
Young Athletes ²	58%	37%	14%
Unified Developmental Sports ³	38%	27%	6%
Inclusive Youth Leadership	100%	22%	36%
Unified Club	74%	14%	24%
Inclusive Leadership Training/Class	41%	4%	11%
Young Athletes Volunteers	39%	7%	10%
Youth Summit	23%	3%	3%
SO Youth Activation Committee	11%	1%	2%
Whole School Engagement			
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	80%	55%	42%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	57%	30%	12%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	41%	20%	16%
Fundraising events and activities	47%	20%	16%
SO Play/Performance	13%	5%	3%
Unified Fitness Challenges	18%	9%	3%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experiences.

² Because Young Athletes is a program for children ages 2 to 7, the percentages by implementation levels are calculated based on responses from preschool, prekindergarten, and elementary schools.

³ Because Unified Developmental Sports is implemented at elementary and middle School levels, the percentages by implementation levels are calculated based on responses from the elementary and middle schools.

Table B6. Level of UCS implementation, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys ¹	Full-implementation Unified Schools ²	Developing Unified Schools ³	Emerging Unified Schools ⁴
Alaska	29	9 (31%)	7 (24%)	9 (31%)
Arizona	85	48 (56%)	24 (28%)	9 (11%)
Arkansas	42	33 (79%)	6 (14%)	3 (7%)
Colorado	111	58 (52%)	30 (27%)	17 (15%)
Connecticut	64	46 (72%)	15 (23%)	3 (5%)
Delaware	46	34 (74%)	7 (15%)	5 (11%)
District of Columbia	23	11 (48%)	6 (26%)	3 (13%)
Florida	359	236 (66%)	78 (22%)	43 (12%)
Hawaii	26	12 (46%)	6 (23%)	6 (23%)
Idaho	26	11 (42%)	6 (23%)	9 (35%)
Illinois	175	107 (61%)	39 (22%)	28 (16%)
Indiana	35	21 (60%)	8 (23%)	6 (17%)
Iowa	88	49 (56%)	19 (22%)	16 (18%)
Kansas	66	44 (67%)	15 (23%)	7 (11%)
Kentucky	51	39 (76%)	7 (14%)	5 (10%)
Louisiana	61	27 (44%)	17 (28%)	13 (21%)
Maine	54	27 (50%)	16 (30%)	9 (17%)
Maryland	65	28 (43%)	22 (34%)	14 (22%)
Massachusetts	214	141 (66%)	51 (24%)	18 (8%)
Michigan	331	181 (55%)	64 (19%)	82 (25%)
Minnesota	167	89 (53%)	33 (20%)	35 (21%)
Mississippi	46	31 (67%)	11 (24%)	3 (7%)
Missouri	62	28 (45%)	19 (31%)	13 (21%)
Montana	72	38 (53%)	14 (19%)	20 (28%)
Nebraska	143	71 (50%)	31 (22%)	38 (27%)
Nevada	35	21 (60%)	7 (20%)	7 (20%)
New Hampshire	54	32 (59%)	11 (20%)	11 (20%)
New Jersey	193	126 (65%)	35 (18%)	30 (16%)

New Mexico	48	31 (65%)	13 (27%)	4 (8%)
New York	134	91 (68%)	28 (21%)	15 (11%)
North Carolina	299	156 (52%)	57 (19%)	64 (21%)
North Dakota	11	6 (55%)	4 (36%)	1 (9%)
Northern California	122	73 (60%)	24 (20%)	22 (18%)
Ohio	37	19 (51%)	12 (32%)	5 (14%)
Oklahoma	81	64 (79%)	13 (16%)	4 (5%)
Oregon	73	38 (52%)	25 (34%)	9 (12%)
Pennsylvania	305	254 (83%)	30 (10%)	16 (5%)
Puerto Rico	6	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
Rhode Island	59	38 (64%)	17 (29%)	4 (7%)
South Carolina	268	139 (52%)	41 (15%)	74 (28%)
South Dakota	31	17 (55%)	6 (19%)	7 (23%)
Southern California	85	77 (91%)	7 (8%)	1 (1%)
Tennessee	72	47 (65%)	16 (22%)	8 (11%)
Texas	392	204 (52%)	81 (21%)	84 (21%)
Utah	33	23 (70%)	7 (21%)	3 (9%)
Vermont	25	9 (36%)	13 (52%)	3 (12%)
Virginia	92	61 (66%)	14 (15%)	16 (17%)
Washington	82	49 (60%)	26 (32%)	7 (9%)
West Virginia	10	6 (60%)	2 (20%)	2 (20%)
Wisconsin	66	35 (53%)	15 (23%)	14 (21%)
Wyoming	30	14 (47%)	8 (27%)	4 (13%)
Total	5084	3054 (60%)	1064 (21%)	829 (16%)

¹ The number of schools at each implementation, when totaled, may not equal the number of completed surveys because schools that do not implement any core experience (N=137) are not shown in the table. However, they are included in the sample of all schools.

² Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools implemented 3 core experiences.

³ Developing Unified Champion Schools implemented 2 core experiences (one of which had to be Unified Sports).

⁴ Emerging Unified Champion Schools implemented either 2 core experiences (neither of which was Unified Sports) or just 1 core experience.

Table B7. Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Unified Sports Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.¹

State Program	Completed Surveys	Unified Sports program	Unified Sports team	Unified PE	Unified Fitness	Unified Esports	Young Athletes ²	Unified Developmental Sports ³
Alaska	29	79%	64%	32%	11%	0%	0%	27%
Arizona	85	93%	76%	69%	15%	13%	24%	13%
Arkansas	42	100%	88%	50%	14%	10%	57%	28%
Colorado	111	84%	68%	59%	13%	8%	24%	13%
Connecticut	64	98%	92%	55%	22%	2%	22%	31%
Delaware	46	93%	80%	57%	11%	4%	74%	57%
D. C.	23	78%	39%	52%	13%	0%	71%	19%
Florida	359	89%	43%	52%	18%	3%	74%	37%
Hawaii	26	81%	69%	35%	19%	8%	20%	23%
Idaho	26	88%	31%	65%	19%	8%	11%	31%
Illinois	175	89%	49%	63%	13%	9%	54%	22%
Indiana	35	86%	74%	43%	9%	17%	20%	29%
Iowa	88	78%	44%	59%	18%	8%	30%	16%
Kansas	66	92%	65%	50%	14%	2%	6%	32%
Kentucky	51	92%	71%	63%	10%	0%	11%	18%
Louisiana	61	84%	40%	70%	30%	7%	47%	32%
Maine	54	93%	89%	31%	11%	0%	60%	19%
Maryland	65	94%	51%	51%	17%	2%	88%	9%
Massachusetts	214	94%	70%	60%	20%	4%	46%	28%
Michigan	331	86%	45%	56%	18%	5%	39%	28%
Minnesota	167	78%	42%	56%	5%	3%	26%	20%
Mississippi	46	93%	59%	83%	41%	22%	73%	54%
Missouri	62	84%	56%	44%	16%	6%	0%	8%
Montana	72	85%	44%	58%	21%	3%	27%	20%
Nebraska	143	84%	57%	59%	15%	8%	13%	24%
Nevada	35	89%	49%	71%	23%	20%	30%	40%

New Hampshire	54	91%	85%	57%	22%	6%	0%	9%
New Jersey	193	86%	60%	52%	12%	8%	29%	31%
New Mexico	48	94%	77%	46%	21%	19%	29%	50%
New York	134	98%	94%	35%	10%	6%	100%	60%
North Carolina	299	77%	27%	55%	25%	5%	38%	27%
North Dakota	11	91%	45%	55%	9%	0%	0%	25%
Northern California	122	86%	48%	53%	19%	4%	30%	33%
Ohio	37	92%	73%	32%	19%	5%	40%	0%
Oklahoma	81	96%	89%	65%	27%	19%	44%	32%
Oregon	73	99%	88%	64%	11%	3%	29%	21%
Pennsylvania	305	96%	94%	40%	10%	4%	14%	14%
Puerto Rico	6	100%	83%	100%	50%	33%	0%	0%
Rhode Island	59	95%	69%	69%	15%	0%	35%	36%
South Carolina	268	71%	28%	53%	16%	4%	44%	26%
South Dakota	31	74%	52%	52%	16%	6%	33%	27%
Southern California	85	100%	56%	73%	29%	8%	71%	34%
Tennessee	72	96%	67%	64%	14%	7%	33%	23%
Texas	392	83%	41%	65%	22%	7%	36%	31%
Utah	33	100%	88%	52%	15%	15%	0%	25%
Vermont	25	96%	76%	52%	20%	4%	0%	9%
Virginia	92	88%	65%	49%	21%	13%	35%	32%
Washington	82	100%	83%	45%	23%	4%	60%	21%
West Virginia	10	80%	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Wisconsin	66	82%	24%	62%	21%	0%	25%	29%
Wyoming	30	77%	57%	47%	7%	0%	0%	6%
Total	5084	87%	57%	55%	17%	6%	42%	28%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

² The “Young Athletes” column only includes responses from preschool, prekindergarten, and elementary schools.

³ The “Unified Developmental Sports” column only includes responses from elementary and middle schools.

Table B8. Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.¹

State Program	Completed Surveys	Inclusive Youth Leadership	Unified Club	Inclusive Leadership Training/Class	Young Athletes Volunteers	Youth Summit	Youth Activation Committee
Alaska	29	52%	38%	21%	14%	10%	7%
Arizona	85	61%	51%	22%	12%	16%	15%
Arkansas	42	79%	69%	19%	33%	29%	17%
Colorado	111	60%	37%	21%	23%	22%	5%
Connecticut	64	75%	58%	17%	22%	30%	11%
Delaware	46	78%	57%	30%	52%	13%	4%
D. C.	23	65%	26%	30%	39%	4%	0%
Florida	359	72%	41%	25%	40%	7%	2%
Hawaii	26	58%	42%	35%	15%	8%	15%
Idaho	26	54%	23%	19%	23%	8%	8%
Illinois	175	71%	45%	27%	29%	22%	14%
Indiana	35	69%	66%	14%	26%	3%	6%
Iowa	88	58%	39%	26%	25%	16%	3%
Kansas	66	76%	45%	35%	20%	24%	8%
Kentucky	51	82%	71%	47%	20%	16%	4%
Louisiana	61	57%	33%	26%	26%	5%	8%
Maine	54	54%	39%	11%	17%	26%	4%
Maryland	65	49%	26%	18%	31%	5%	2%
Massachusetts	214	72%	53%	25%	29%	16%	5%
Michigan	331	68%	49%	33%	18%	6%	15%
Minnesota	167	72%	56%	29%	17%	16%	8%
Mississippi	46	72%	50%	46%	46%	4%	4%
Missouri	62	58%	29%	24%	39%	3%	3%
Montana	72	58%	40%	22%	22%	7%	3%
Nebraska	143	55%	40%	19%	20%	6%	4%
Nevada	35	74%	51%	40%	29%	11%	9%
New Hampshire	54	74%	57%	22%	30%	26%	11%

New Jersey	193	86%	84%	31%	17%	7%	4%
New Mexico	48	77%	48%	42%	29%	15%	8%
New York	134	80%	44%	26%	33%	51%	42%
North Carolina	299	70%	55%	24%	26%	4%	4%
North Dakota	11	64%	27%	18%	18%	9%	0%
Northern California	122	67%	37%	32%	37%	3%	2%
Ohio	37	65%	32%	22%	35%	11%	8%
Oklahoma	81	83%	72%	35%	28%	32%	14%
Oregon	73	60%	40%	30%	16%	19%	5%
Pennsylvania	305	89%	80%	32%	14%	59%	6%
Puerto Rico	6	100%	67%	50%	67%	33%	33%
Rhode Island	59	76%	56%	32%	31%	3%	3%
South Carolina	268	70%	45%	29%	34%	13%	6%
South Dakota	31	65%	45%	26%	29%	6%	0%
Southern California	85	93%	73%	45%	34%	8%	2%
Tennessee	72	72%	56%	47%	29%	11%	6%
Texas	392	64%	47%	24%	27%	3%	3%
Utah	33	70%	55%	36%	18%	39%	24%
Vermont	25	52%	40%	16%	16%	4%	8%
Virginia	92	78%	63%	25%	35%	9%	4%
Washington	82	70%	50%	26%	18%	12%	4%
West Virginia	10	90%	70%	60%	30%	0%	0%
Wisconsin	66	65%	50%	15%	21%	3%	3%
Wyoming	30	57%	20%	23%	33%	7%	7%
Total	5084	71%	51%	28%	26%	15%	7%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

Table B9. Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Whole School Engagement Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.¹

State Program	Completed Surveys ¹	Whole School Engagement	Spread the Word Campaign	Fans in the Stands	Unified Sports Day/Festival	Fund-raising Events	SO Play/Performance	Unified Fitness Challenges
Alaska	29	41%	34%	10%	17%	21%	0%	10%
Arizona	85	84%	68%	36%	38%	38%	11%	8%
Arkansas	42	93%	67%	67%	24%	57%	10%	19%
Colorado	111	86%	76%	41%	20%	35%	8%	6%
Connecticut	64	94%	56%	66%	27%	38%	9%	25%
Delaware	46	93%	91%	41%	24%	57%	9%	7%
D. C.	23	65%	57%	22%	26%	17%	9%	22%
Florida	359	97%	94%	27%	46%	14%	11%	15%
Hawaii	26	73%	69%	23%	19%	27%	8%	38%
Idaho	26	73%	36%	28%	40%	12%	4%	20%
Illinois	175	91%	82%	37%	33%	41%	9%	10%
Indiana	35	91%	60%	26%	43%	77%	3%	3%
Iowa	88	94%	92%	24%	22%	23%	6%	15%
Kansas	66	92%	80%	30%	23%	23%	6%	14%
Kentucky	51	96%	92%	27%	31%	25%	2%	4%
Louisiana	61	72%	49%	33%	48%	16%	21%	31%
Maine	54	80%	53%	70%	21%	25%	4%	0%
Maryland	65	77%	65%	31%	23%	28%	6%	18%
Massachusetts	214	89%	66%	60%	37%	37%	10%	15%
Michigan	331	79%	69%	30%	26%	24%	4%	7%
Minnesota	167	80%	58%	22%	21%	57%	5%	4%
Mississippi	46	93%	85%	48%	46%	20%	13%	59%
Missouri	62	81%	44%	45%	39%	45%	8%	0%
Montana	72	88%	68%	51%	29%	57%	7%	19%
Nebraska	143	84%	66%	36%	26%	30%	6%	15%
Nevada	35	83%	68%	38%	44%	18%	18%	35%

New Hampshire	54	80%	30%	56%	19%	54%	7%	15%
New Jersey	193	84%	66%	34%	26%	50%	8%	10%
New Mexico	48	88%	65%	58%	67%	21%	10%	15%
New York	134	81%	56%	57%	18%	40%	15%	8%
North Carolina	299	79%	54%	34%	30%	26%	15%	19%
North Dakota	11	91%	91%	18%	9%	27%	0%	9%
Northern California	122	85%	55%	57%	40%	15%	9%	14%
Ohio	37	78%	57%	49%	38%	19%	14%	14%
Oklahoma	81	96%	57%	80%	27%	79%	14%	19%
Oregon	73	78%	44%	56%	22%	44%	8%	8%
Pennsylvania	305	92%	80%	68%	19%	66%	8%	8%
Puerto Rico	6	83%	83%	33%	33%	33%	67%	50%
Rhode Island	59	88%	64%	64%	39%	42%	3%	12%
South Carolina	268	85%	65%	39%	39%	34%	9%	13%
South Dakota	31	97%	97%	42%	19%	48%	3%	3%
Southern California	85	96%	89%	61%	62%	36%	13%	16%
Tennessee	72	86%	78%	36%	32%	44%	17%	6%
Texas	392	77%	43%	41%	35%	26%	12%	18%
Utah	33	91%	82%	64%	36%	30%	21%	6%
Vermont	25	80%	40%	40%	24%	44%	8%	12%
Virginia	92	87%	71%	52%	41%	35%	11%	19%
Washington	82	82%	46%	57%	20%	18%	5%	15%
West Virginia	10	90%	60%	20%	40%	20%	10%	10%
Wisconsin	66	86%	68%	29%	24%	45%	5%	14%
Wyoming	30	80%	40%	20%	13%	40%	10%	0%
Total	5084	85%	66%	42%	31%	35%	9%	13%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

Appendix C: Methods for Qualitative Research Studies

The following two sections describe the methods used for the two qualitative research aspects of the 2022-2023 UCS evaluation.

Methods for the Intervention Study Follow-up Interviews

The first step in the evaluation process was to reach out to Special Olympics Colorado, Michigan, and North Carolina to describe the purpose of the control trial follow-up evaluation and collaborate with them to connect with the 11 schools that participated in the original control trial evaluation. In this meeting, CSDE also obtained information about the status of UCS implementation in each Control Trial School.

After contacting each school, CSDE scheduled interviews with staff from seven out of the 11 original control trial schools. CSDE was able to contact 16 staff from four schools that had actively continued UCS programming since the control trial and 10 staff from three schools that discontinued UCS programming after the end of the control trial. Seventeen staff were present during the initial control trial study, and nine staff joined the school after the 2015-2016 school year. Staff roles ranged from general education teachers ($n = 4$) and special education teachers ($n = 12$) to physical education teachers ($n = 3$) and administrative staff ($n = 7$). CSDE was unable to connect with four of the schools during the 2022-2023 school year. The CSDE evaluation team will attempt to contact these four schools in the 2023-2024 school year.

Given that some schools continued with UCS implementation while others did not, and some staff were present during the control trial and others joined their school after the control trial, CSDE created three interview protocols to capture the varying perspectives of staff from the control trial schools. These interview protocols followed a narrative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and were designed to allow participants to share their perspectives about UCS after the control trial ended. All staff were asked questions about their role at their school and in UCS, impacts of UCS implementation on their students and school communities, successes and challenges related to UCS implementation and program sustainability, and support from school administrators, fellow teachers, and Special Olympics. Staff from schools that continued UCS were asked about factors that related to program sustainability and potential areas for improvement, and staff from schools that discontinued UCS were asked why UCS implementation stopped and if there were ways that UCS could have been maintained. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to complete and ranged between 22 and 61 minutes.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by a third-party provider. A coding guide was created by three members of the evaluation team and included the following concepts: student impact (with and without IDD), school impact, factors of sustainability, support received from Special Olympics or their school, and suggestions to promote UCS sustainability within their school. A research assistant initially reviewed each

transcript to identify initial findings. Afterwards, two senior researchers and a research assistant met to discuss and summarize findings, themes, and implications.

Methods for the Interviews and Focus Group regarding UCS and Identity Development

CSDE and Special Olympics collaborated to identify potential schools for data collection efforts in 2023-2024 that could participate in this pilot study. After developing an initial list, CSDE asked seven Special Olympics State Programs to provide feedback on the list and recommend additional schools to reach out to as potential collaborators. Through this process, CSDE identified 10 high schools to contact and request their participation in the study. Participants from these 10 schools consisted of 25 current students, seven UCS alumni, and 13 UCS liaisons or other school staff members. Of the 32 students and alumni, 17 were athletes (i.e., students with IDD) and 15 were partners (i.e., students without IDD). Students and alumni were recruited by their school's liaison to participate in this pilot study.

Data collection occurred between April and June 2023. Current students and alumni participated in one of eight focus groups, with between three and eight students or alumni per group. Focus groups occurred over a video conferencing platform. Two members of the CSDE evaluation team conducted each focus group, and focus groups took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. The protocol for the focus groups involved students reviewing specific questions used in the prior study with Youth Ambassadors (Jacobs et al., 2020) and modifying questions based on student and alumni responses and feedback.³¹ Specific topics included students' experiences with their school's Unified Club, the impact of Unified Club on their ability to make friends, being a student at their school, and community visibility and leadership.

As part of this study, ten school liaisons and three staff also participated in interviews. One member of the CSDE evaluation team led each interview, which typically took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. During the interviews, participants discussed the following topics: Unified Club history and current club characteristics, current Unified Club climate and culture, purpose of their school's Unified Club, and future directions of the Unified Club at their school. The focus group and interview protocols for this study can be found at the end of this report.

After the student focus groups and liaison interviews were completed, audio recordings were transcribed using a third-party transcription service. Two members of the evaluation team checked the transcriptions for accuracy and then analyzed the transcripts for insights relevant to 2023-2024 data collection plans, considerations when asking

³¹ Question modification occurred in two ways. First, student and alumni participants provided feedback about questions during the focus group. Second, the CSDE evaluation team modified questions for future focus groups and assessed if responses improved after using the new questions.

students about their identity development, and the role that UCS has played in their school experience.

Table C1. Number Of Participants in the 2019-20 Evaluation, Separated by Project.

Participants	Survey	Interview and/or Focus Group
Liaison Survey		
Liaisons	5,084	n/a
Intervention Study Follow-up		
Liaisons	n/a	6
Other School Staff	n/a	21
Identity And Leadership		
Liaisons	n/a	10
Other School Staff	n/a	3
Students or Alumni with IDD	n/a	17
Students or Alumni without IDD	n/a	15