



**Building a Unified
Champion School**



Welcome!

Welcome to the Special Olympics Alberta (SOA) Unified Sports® Program! Unified Sports® joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: ***training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.*** This programming creates an environment where everyone feels welcome, valued, and included both in school and in their local community.

This toolkit will be a resource in ensuring you feel comfortable and informed on how to build and sustain a successful Unified Sports® program. In addition to this resource, you will always have access the Unified Sports® Program Manager who is committed to supporting your Unified Sports program efforts. Each school is unique and may execute the Unified Sports® strategies in a different way. We believe that all Alberta students can be leaders and with the right opportunities, they can become a more unified generation.



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Special Olympics Alberta Overview

Since February 28, 1980, Special Olympics Alberta has built a tradition of support and opportunity for people in Alberta with intellectual disabilities. In 1980, the organization hosted its first Provincial Summer Games.

In 1986, Alberta took centre stage, hosting our first Special Olympics Canada Summer Games in Calgary. Over 1,000 athletes and coaches from across Canada were welcomed with cheering fans in McMahon Stadium. The flame of hope carried by over 12,000 Canadians across the country ignited not just the beginning of competition but an impassioned movement in Alberta. Today we serve over 3,000 athletes across the province.

For people with intellectual disabilities, the benefits of Special Olympics include:

- Improved physical fitness and motor skills
- Greater self-confidence
- A more positive self-image
- Lifelong friendships

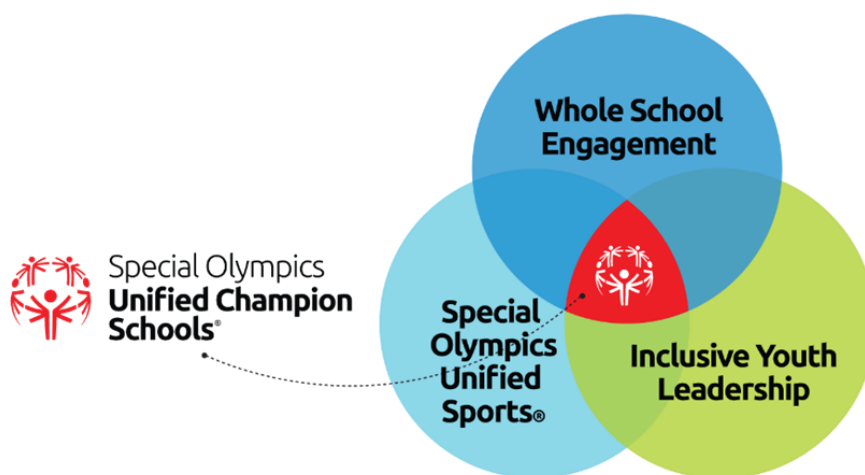
Special Olympics athletes carry these benefits into their daily lives at home, in the classroom, on the job and in the community. For Athletes, Special Olympics provides a gateway to empowerment, competence, acceptance and joy.

Special Olympics Alberta Partnership with School Sport Alberta

In Alberta, the Unified Sports program is delivered through a partnership between School Sport Alberta (SSA) - formerly recognized as Alberta Schools' Athletic Association (ASAA) and Special Olympics Alberta. Since launching in 2015, this collaboration has expanded Unified Sports to over 80 schools across the province. By combining the ASAA's school sport infrastructure with Special Olympics Alberta's inclusion expertise, the program fosters meaningful connections, respect, and a sense of belonging for all students through the power of sport.

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. In keeping with Special Olympics' mission, the Unified Champion Schools (UCS) strategy uses sport and wellness as a foundation in combination with two other major pillars, Whole School Engagement and Youth Leadership, to create an environment of acceptance and inclusion beyond the playing field. Unified Champion Schools prepare all students with lifelong tools and training. This school strategy builds a climate where students work and grow with each other through opportunity for all.



Unified Champion Schools is revolutionizing the school experience by fostering environments of inclusion and acceptance for all students.

Our program integrates three key pillars that work to create a culture where every student is valued and included:

1. **Unified Sports:** This program promotes social engagement and development by integrating students with and without intellectual disabilities into school sports.
2. **Youth Leadership:** UCS also works to develop youth leadership by empowering students to advocate for inclusion and change within their communities
3. **Whole-School Engagement:** Through activities and initiatives involving the entire school, we ensure that inclusion is a core value embedded in the school's daily life. With whole school engagement you are creating lasting change and fostering a Unified, accepting, and positive school community.

Unified Schools Requirements

What does it take to be a Unified Champion School?

For Unified programs to meet the criteria to be a **Unified Champion School** they must complete a minimum of 3 activities in each component. School lead coaches would need to be certified in Safe Sport and complete the midterm and final year end report updates to Special Olympics Alberta manager.

Unified Sports:

- ☐ **Unified program hosts or volunteers at one Unified event. (Ex: intramurals with neighbouring high school, try it event for feeder school, mini Unified league, Unified Jamboree/Championship, etc...)**
- ☐ Unified Sports is offered in at least two seasons of play throughout the school year (ideally at least one in each semester).
- ☐ Unified Sports participation occurs regularly over the course of each sport season or school term. Includes a minimum of 8 practices.
- ☐ **Unified team has own school jerseys or team uniform and is seen as a school team.**
- ☐ Schools Unified sports team attends at least one Unified event outside of their school.
- ☐ Unified Sports is recognized in your schools Athletic Awards Banquet, with awards given out as you would any other school sports team.
- ☐ Organize an in-school Unified Intramural League (open to all students)
- ☐ Organize a Unified team field trip outside of their regular practices (Ex: Ninja Course, Orienteering, Disc Golf, Fitness Challenge, etc...)
- ☐ Other: _____

Youth Leadership:

- ☐ Organize a Unified Club (of any kind) that includes students with and without a disability. Club members meet a minimum of once a month throughout the school year.
- ☐ Establish a Unified position within your schools student council or leadership team. This person represents the voices of Unified and ensures inclusive and accessible action is taken place during school events. Student can be person with or without disability.
- ☐ **Ensure all Unified partners complete a Unified leadership training session hosted by head coach or Unified Sports Manager.**
- ☐ Implement a Unified partner training or mentorship program. This could be within your occurring program or to your feeder schools.
- ☐ Present on Special Olympics Alberta - Unified Champion Schools to other schools, school boards, or schools Superintendent
- ☐ Have Unified partners and athletes attend a Leadership Youth Summit within your district or other athletic organization. (Ex: Impact Conference - hosted by School Sport Alberta)
- ☐ Other: _____

Whole School Engagement:

- ☐ Register as a 'Cool School' in partnership with Special Olympics Alberta's LETR team (Law Enforcement Torch Run) and participate in a school wide Polar Plunge.
- ☐ Participate and organize an Inclusion Week. This could incorporate a polar plunge, "Spread the Word" campaign, Fans in the Stands (Booster Club) games or other disability related initiatives.
- ☐ Organize a school wide Pep Rally where Unified Sports, teams and clubs are included.
- ☐ Donate your school facility for a SOA event (Ex: SOA game or practice).
- ☐ Integrate Unified projects into school courses and curriculums (Ex: Unified PE, construction, foods, etc - further description below).
- ☐ Create a plan for program sustainability.
- ☐ Other: _____

Through Unified Schools

- Schools and communities become more welcoming to people of all abilities
- Socially inclusive school climates become free from teasing, bullying and the exclusion of any group of students
- Students with disabilities are routinely included and feel a part of all social activities and opportunities
- Young people with and without disabilities are playing sports together and socially interacting
- Special Olympics is viewed as a school and community partner that offers inclusive programming that benefits all students

School Year Checklist

Stay on track with the Unified School Checklist

First Semester:

- September - get to know your students
- Meet Virtually with Unified Sports Manager and SSA Unified Zone Schools to discuss year zone goals and set tentative competition dates
- Host a Unified meeting for interested partners and club leaders
- Brainstorm whole-school engagement activities for school year
- Decide which sport(s) your team will participate in, set dates, start weekly practices and connect with division or partnering schools for games/tournament dates
- (Suggested Sem 1 Sports = Bocce, Floorball, Golf, Orienteering, other...)*
- October to mid-December compete in semester one Unified activities
- December - host themed Unified Intramural Games, all interested students to sign up
- January - complete mid-term report for Unified Program

Second Semester:

- February/March - begin your second season of play, check in with Unified team to ensure commitment for semester two
- Decide what sport(s) your team will participate in, set dates, etc and connect with division or partnering schools for games or tournament dates
(Suggested Sem 2 Sports = Cornhole, Basketball, Badminton, Track & Field)
- March to early-June compete in Unified Sports games, tournaments, Jamborees, etc...
- Host weekly practices and continue regular Unified Club meetings
- Plan SOA fundraiser for your Unified Sports team (Polar Plunge & Inclusion Week activities)
- Host your Whole School Engagement event
- June - Final Year Report Due to SOA Unified Manager

These are just guidelines! Build off your school's climate and interests. Be creative and have fun!



School Leadership Team

We highly encourage each Unified School to identify a School Leadership Team, made up of student leaders, staff liaisons and a school administrator, all dedicated to supporting Unified School activities

Staff Liaison

Every school is required to designate a staff liaison to support student leaders and serve as the primary contact for SOA/ASAA communication. Some schools may choose to have two staff liaisons, a primary and a co-liaison.

The staff liaisons can be any teacher, school counsellor, administrator, support staff, etc.

The primary liaison is responsible for completing the mid-term reporting (January) and the final year-end reporting (May/June).

The head coach or liaison must be certified in Safe Sport.

Student Leaders

Student leaders are the key in the success of a Unified Champion School. We encourage each school to identify at least one traditional education student and at least one special education student to help promote Inclusive Youth Leadership.

Student leaders can take the lead for planning and implementing Unified Champion Schools activities with support from the school liaison.

Other (optional)

Non-school staff (ex: parents, volunteers, community partners, etc.) can be involved with Unified Schools, however the primary liaisons must be official staff of the school.



Special Olympics
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Unified Sports®



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Unified Sports® Program

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is a component of the Unified Champion Schools® strategy that engages students with and without intellectual disabilities on the same sports team. Unified Sports® provides valuable social and inclusion opportunities for all teammates to build friendships, on and off the playing field

Unified Sports® is a unique and important program because it:

- Integrates athletes with and without disabilities in a setting where all teammates are challenged to improve their skills.
- Provides valuable sports opportunities to individuals with intellectual disabilities who may not be involved with Special Olympics
- Prepares athletes for participation in school and community sports.
- Increases public awareness of the spirit and inclusion for all abilities.

Goals of Special Olympics Unified Sports®

Sport Skill Development - under the direction of certified coaches, participants will have the opportunity to develop sport skills

Competition Experience - athletes benefit from physical and mental challenges participating in a variety of competitions organized by SOA

Meaningful Inclusion - Unified Sports® rules and guideline on age and ability ensures all teammates play an important, meaningful and valued roles on the team

Friendships and Socialization - this program provides a forum for positive social interactions



What Distinguishes Each of the Unified Sports Divisions?

There are two main divisions of Unified Sports. It is up to each school to choose which division or combination of divisions that will be the most beneficial for their athletes. These divisions provide a framework for guiding the implementation of Unified Sports in each school.

Competitive	Recreation/Player Development
- Students with and without intellectual disabilities train and compete on the same team. - All teammates should be of similar age and ability levels. - Teams adhere to training, competition and team composition requirements. - School-based teams often compete within an intramural setting, an interscholastic format, or through SSA tournaments.	<u>Player Development:</u> - Teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors, assisting teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics. - All teammates should be of similar age. - There is a non-competitive, less structured, cooperative team environment. <u>Recreation:</u> - Extends the concept of Unified Sports to noncompetitive recreational sports opportunities. This is the most flexible - model because it does not follow any prescribed training or team composition requirements. Recreation typically takes place solely on school property and does not advance into competitive competitions. Examples of Unified Recreation activities in schools - include Unified Fitness, Unified Field Day or a Unified Walking Club.

Note: Schools can choose to combine “Competitive” and “Player Development/Recreation” at events. However, the divisions compete separately.

Competition Types:

Typically Unified events occur throughout the school day ranging anywhere between the hours of 9:30 and 2:30. This is due to accommodating the adapted bus schedules and ensuring individuals with specialized bussing can get to and from school and to and from events.

For schools programs that require more travel due to programs located outside their area this time can vary.

Rural communities have been creative and flexible in navigating transportation to and from events.

We recommend that teachers/coaches have strong communication with transportation and student families to help support their student participation in Unified events when the schedules don't accommodate bussing schedules.

There are several types of competitions that you can attend and host:

Try It Event - can consist of one or multiple sports/activities completed throughout the day or block. Athletes and partners can be mixed and rotate around the stations provided. This is typically done in new programs who don't run their own Unified Programs yet.

In-school Unified Games or Intramural's - such as a PE class, this class mixed with students with disabilities and without come together to play adapted or Unified games or dedicate a time to have an Unified intramural's league.

Unified Mini-League - this can be in partnership with a few schools in your zone or across your city. Have teams compete in designated sport(s) for a duration of time. (Ex: Unified Basketball - a four team mini league that play once every two weeks for two months)

Unified Tournaments/Jamborees/Championships - a large Unified half or full day event that is open to all the schools in your zone. It would have one or multiple sports being played where both recreation and competitive divisions may be offered. Hosting large events can come with funding support from Special Olympics Alberta and the Every Kid Can Play Grant through SSA.



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Inclusive Youth Leadership



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Inclusive Youth Leadership

Inclusive Youth Leadership offers opportunities for young people of all abilities to be leaders in their schools and communities by promoting equity and acceptance. These leadership activities help students fund their voices by teaching them to become change agents, striving for respect and inclusion.

Inclusive Youth leadership is an important component because it:

- Brings together students with and without intellectual disabilities as leaders in their school, creating a socially inclusive environment in which lasting friendships can form
- Helps fundraise for your Unified Sports® team and raises awareness with your whole school
- Provides students with and without intellectual disabilities the knowledge, skills and dispositions to take on leadership roles in their school
- Encourages co-leadership opportunities that promote a deeper understanding of the strengths, gifts and skills of all students

Inclusive Youth Leadership Opportunities Breakdown:

Unified Clubs:

Clubs established can be sport or non sport related and meet year round. Students with and without disabilities should be included in the club. Club Ideas - health and wellness, school spirit, volunteer and fundraising, games club, etc...

School Council:

A position on school leadership./council that is dedicated to ensuring the whole school commitment to inclusion. Their lense and voice should come from a place of social inclusion and belonging and ensuring that every school event is inclusive.

Unified Partner Training:

Lead by the coach, school liaison or student leader, ensure all partners of a Unified athlete have a training session. It is important for partners to understand their role, learn some of the language and ask questions. Things to note:

Unified Sport Mentorship:

Provide opportunities for your Unified team to plan and lead inclusive activities. This could be for your student body; those students that are not yet involved in Unified.

Or host/attend your Jr. High feeder schools Unified practice/game. Share with them the importance of Unified Sports, and how it has impacted your school community, school sports team culture and more.



Inclusive Youth Leadership Best Practices

- Consider having a disability awareness training as part of one of your first few meetings to ensure all partners have a clear understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with various disabilities – knowing this, students can better support each other.
- Meetings should be led by the Unified club's leadership but try to find opportunities for all students to take a leadership role within the meetings.
- Encourage students to continue their growth through province-level opportunities like Leadership Youth Summits.

Whole School Engagement



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Whole School Engagement

An important feature of creating a socially inclusive school culture is engaging the entire school community in the process. With tools such as Inclusion Week, Cool School and Unified Sports Days, youth raise awareness and begin creating an educational environment where respect and acceptance are the norm. All students feel included and engaged!

Whole School activities engage students, teachers, staff, community leaders and others to increase their social inclusion knowledge, skills and dispositions and support a socially inclusive school climate.

Whole School engagement is a unique and important component because it:

- Engages the entire staff and student body in building awareness and understanding the benefit to all when the assets and contributions of each individual are recognized, honoured and supported
- Energizes social inclusion efforts and expands stakeholder involvement beyond a passionate few
- Is a critical component to creating socially inclusive school culture
- Provides an opportunity for the most engaged students to a Unified School to create a ripple effect from their actions and advocacy

Goals of Whole School Engagement:

- Students without disabilities will hold more positive attitudes toward their peers with intellectual disabilities
- Schools will become communities of acceptance where students with intellectual disabilities feel welcomed and are routinely included in and feel a part of all school activities, opportunities and functions



“Cool School” - LETR Polar Plunge

The *Cool School* Law Enforcement Torch Run (LETR) Polar Plunge is a fun and impactful fundraising event where students and staff take the plunge to support their school’s Unified Sports programs.

How it Works

Teams of students and staff raise funds, then brave a cold-water plunge — with a pool provided by the LETR team. Not ready for the full plunge? Schools can choose exciting adaptations like the Firehose Splash or the Ice Bucket Challenge.

Our Partners

The event is hosted in partnership with local law enforcement and Special Olympics Alberta (SOA). Officers and SOA staff join in the plunge and provide your school with a Cool Kit filled with resources, prize incentives, and tools to kickstart your fundraising.

Where the Money Goes

Funds raised directly support Unified Sports in your school — giving students of all abilities opportunities for year-round training, competition, leadership, and personal growth.

- ___% supports your school’s Unified Sports program.
- ___% supports the LETR program.
- ___% supports SOA’s provincial Unified initiatives.

Together, these funds strengthen programs locally and across Alberta.
(Note: the exact funding plan is still being developed.)

Why It Matters

The Cool School Polar Plunge builds school spirit, celebrates inclusion, and shows what it means to come together for a great cause. By participating, your school helps create communities where every student belongs — on the field, in the classroom, and beyond.

Inclusion Week

An important feature of creating a socially inclusive school climate is engaging the entire school community in the process. With tools such as Inclusion Week, Spread the Word Campaign, Fans in the Stands and Unified Sports Days, youth raise awareness and begin creating an educational environment where respect and acceptance are the norm. All students feel included, welcomed and engaged!

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Unified Champion Schools: Spread the Word Inclusion Week!

Day:	Activity:	Budget, logistics, people needed...
Monday: March 23rd, 2026	Airbrush Tattoo Fundraiser at lunch. \$1 a piece. Find a buddy to match with.	\$150/hour for local artists. Connect with social circle or advertise a fundraiser to get cost or artist lowered. Have only a few selections to make it easy on artists and design. 1 person collecting money, 1-2 artists.
Tuesday: March 24th, 2026	Trivia - at lunch host a trivia challenge trivia challenge that talks about Special Olympics and the Unified Generation movement.	Create teams, have prizes (designed by the unified athletes at your school). Need 2 people to run tech and create questions. Connect with Unified Manager to help develop questions. Players can use phone to submit answers and score.
Wednesday: March 25th, 2026	"Fans in the Stands" Event. Whole school fills the stands to cheer on the event.	Unified Teams and the Senior Basketball teams will combine and make 4 teams to compete in the ultimate relay race. Display 3-4 sports played by the Unified team. Invite your local SOA team to meet and greet.
Thursday: March 27th, 2026	Sign the Pledge - A Unified Movement!	During the lunch hour students can sign the pledge banner "Choose to Include" and after they sign they can design their own inclusion pin. Borrow pin maker from school.
Friday: March 28th, 2026	Polar Plunge	Connect with your local LETR Program Manager and schedule the polar plunge tank in advance. Teams must raise ____ \$ to plunm

Most activities should not cost anything. If there is a cost, discuss with your teacher lead.

Funding and Fundraising

Our program is primarily supported through grants, which provide crucial funding for many of our Unified initiatives. However, there are some expenses and activities related to our Unified program that are not fully covered by these grants that requires schools to cover costs for.

To help bridge this gap, schools are encouraged to engage in fundraising efforts. Fundraising can play a vital role in supporting:

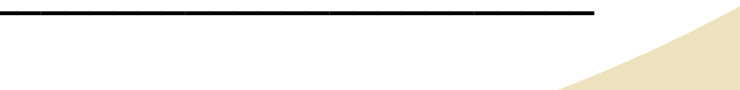
- supplying team jerseys
- purchasing new equipment
- bussing and transportation costs related to attending multiple Unified events

By participating in fundraising activities, schools can ensure that they have the necessary resources to fully support and sustain their Unified programs and other related needs. We appreciate and encourage all schools to explore creative and effective ways to raise funds to support their Unified programs.

Unified Sports Inspires:

Unified Sports not only enhances inclusive school sports but also can support other classes in your school by adding new projects or objectives and can even meet curriculum goals.

- Unified PE - PE class that focuses on the adaptation and leadership aspects of inclusion in sport and wellness
- Construction - new projects; making own corn hole boards
- Fashion/Sewing - making own/new corn hole bags or designing team shirts/jerseys
- Digital Media or Art - designing posters, logos, social media posts for unified events
- Foods - incorporating your foods program into your unified events by hosting lunch or snack during school wide events
- Music/Band - have your band or music class play O'Canada for a unified event hosted at your school





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