



2026 NFHS SUMMER MEETING

Creating Inclusive Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in Activities

Explore practical strategies, innovative programs, and collaborative approaches that help create meaningful and inclusive activities opportunities for students with disabilities.



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Salt Lake City, UT

Presenters



Taryn Retzlaff

Assistant Director
tretzlaff@nsaahome.org

- Play Production
- Speech and Debate
- Music
- Journalism
- National Anthem Coordinator
- Student Advisory Committee
- NSAA *Above and Beyond* and *Champions for Coaches* Coordinator



Jenn Roberts-Uhlig

Associate Commissioner
jrobertsuhlig@chsaa.org

- Cross Country
- Gymnastics
- Spirit
- Track & Field
- Unified Bowling
- Sports Medicine
- Managing Partnerships



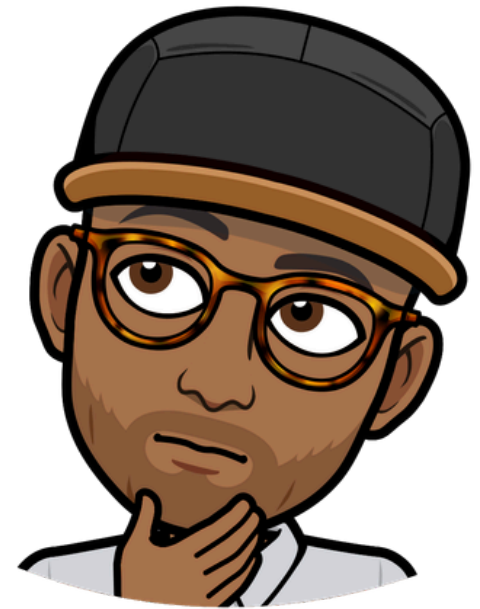
Rashaan Davis

Assistant Commissioner
rashaan@chsaa.org

- Esports
- Music
- Speech and Debate
- Student Leadership
 - Student Ambassadors
- Hall of Fame
- Middle Schools
- Sportsmanship



“Things that
make you go
hmmmm...”



Performing Arts are the easiest place for every student to belong.

- Success can look different for every participant
- Communication exists in many forms
- Inclusive opportunities strengthen school communities



The Power of Performing Arts

Students don't just learn how to perform. They learn they have something worth sharing.

- Voice
- Confidence
- Collaboration
- Connection



From 'Can they participate?' to 'How can they participate?'

Traditional Mindset



Inclusive Mindset

Can they keep up?

What supports are needed?

Will this work?

How can we adapt?

Are they ready?

How can everyone
contribute?



Nebraska's Unified Approach

- Unified Speech
- Unified Journalism
- Representation on NSAA SAC

The goal isn't to create separate experiences. The goal is shared experiences with meaningful roles for everyone.





Unified Speech: Communication without Limits

- **Students with and without intellectual disabilities compete together**
- **Partnerships are intentional and collaborative**
- **Focus on communication, connection, teamwork**
- **Students develop confidence, advocacy, and leadership skills**

Unified Journalism: Everyone Has a Story to Tell

- **Students work together to capture moments**
- **Students work together to tell stories**
- **Students work together to conduct interviews**
- **Students work together to collaborate as a team**

Eden's Journey



It's bigger than competition.

The hidden benefits



For Unified Students:

- Confidence
- Belonging
- Leadership
- New Opportunities

The hidden benefits



For Unified Partners:

- Empathy
- Advocacy
- Perspective
- Lifelong leadership skills

The hidden benefits



For Schools:

- Stronger culture
- Greater connection
- More student involvement



What We Have Learned



Start Small

Listen to Students

Overcommunicate Expectations

Celebrate Stories

Progress beats perfection

Relationships before Programs



Barriers Are Often Adult-Created

Students are often ready before adults are.

- Complex registration systems
- Rigid definitions of participation
- Lack of training
- Fear of doing it wrong
- Assuming inclusion requires huge budgets



Barriers

What barriers exist within our own systems?



Cultural

- *Low expectations*
- *Fear of failure*
- *Gatekeeping*

Communication

- *Complex registration process*
- *Information not reaching families*
- *Lack of translation services*

Structural

- *Eligibility policies*
- *Transportation limitations*
- *Participation fees*
- *Scheduling conflicts*

School-Based

- *Auditions*
- *Tryouts*
- *Leadership elections*

- *Travel opportunities*
- *Social events*
- *Team traditions*

- *Informal student groups*
- *Competitive selection process*

Steal These Ideas

- Partner with Special Olympics organizations
- Pilot one Unified activities event
- Create student leadership opportunities
- Tell participant stories publicly
- Measure belonging, not just participation numbers.



The Ripple Effect



One inclusive
opportunity



One student
participates



One friendship
forms



One school
cultures changes

= One state grows stronger



- **Access creates participation.**
- **Participation creates belonging.**
- **Belonging changes lives.**

Every student deserves a place to be seen, heard, and celebrated. All means all.



Let's Get Into the Work

State Association Plan

Identifying your Team

- Identify key stakeholders
- Schedule an in-person meeting with time to delve into the project
- Prepare all stakeholders prior to meeting

Identify the Goal

- Clearly define the goal - “Expanding Unified opportunities in activities”
- Allow your stakeholders opportunities for input
- Avoid “Scope Creep”
- Center positive school climate
- Inclusion, access, and opportunity

Supporting Schools

- State Championships or culmination event
 - Be specific with recognition
- Unified Student recognitions
- Media Features

Creating Sustainable Unified Programs

If diverse needs students' first experience of social belonging is in 9th grade, are we already too late?





SYSTEMS ARE CREATED TO GIVE US WHAT WE WANT

What are your systems giving you?

What activities in your state are most ready for an inclusion model?

What would a pilot program look like in your state within the next 12 months?



Inclusive Activities Participation

What does meaningful participation look like?

Participation has to be represented on the following levels:

Presence

- Participants have authentic roles

Participation

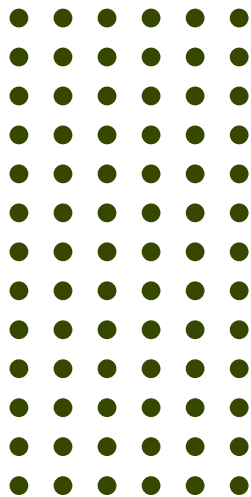
- Experience belonging
- Building relationships with teammates

Contribution

- Students have opportunities to influence outcomes

Leadership

- Students have opportunities to lead



How many of our current opportunities stop at participation rather than belonging?

Building Community Through Unified Esports

HST - April 2026 Edition



How Do We Celebrate Inclusion?

Recognition Matters

Students notice what schools celebrate.

- Varsity Letters
- Leadership Positions
- Banquets
- Team Awards

School Level

- State Championships
- Inclusion Awards
- Unified Student recognitions
- Media Features

State Level

National Level

- NFHS Recognition Programs
- National Inclusion Awards
- Student Leadership Opportunities

COVER STORY

Building Community Through Unified Esports

By Rashan Davis

At Smoky Hill High School in Aurora, Colorado, inclusion is not a slogan on a poster or a paragraph in a handbook. It is a lived experience - visible in hallways, echoed in assemblies and most recently celebrated with a state championship banner earned by the school's Unified Esports team.

When the team captured the inaugural state title sanctioned by the Colorado High School Activities Association, it marked more than a competitive milestone. It represented years of intentional work to ensure students of all abilities are not simply welcomed into the school community, but centered within it.

A Championship That Meant More

For Unified Esports Head Coach Kelson Coppinger, the title carried special weight.

"It was the first CHSAA state championship Smoky has had in a long time in any sport," he said. "Our kids brought that home. That's a big deal."

Unified teams at Smoky Hill have long experienced success through Special Olympics Colorado. But earning a CHSAA state championship placed Unified Esports squarely within the same competitive framework as every other sanctioned activity in the building. To the athletes, a title is a title; however, to the broader community, the CHSAA banner sent a clear message: Unified belongs.

That visibility is central to the mission of Special Olympics Colorado. Mariela Shukie, senior director of Unified Champion Schools, said sanctioned recognition is at the heart of the work. Unified programs strive to ensure students with intellectual disabilities have the same developmental opportunities as their peers - the chance to build character, experience joy and strive for excellence. When a Unified team brings home a CHSAA trophy, she noted, it reinforces that everyone belongs.

Assistant Coach Stephanie Sturm remembers the final moments vividly. The team had led throughout the competition, but a confusing on-screen display made it appear they were trailing.

"When we realized we'd won, we had this quiet moment, just the six of us," Sturm said. "It wasn't a huge celebration at first. But that quiet moment meant everything."

The next day, the celebration was anything but quiet. The championship was announced over the intercom. The team was

honored at an all-school assembly. Students filled the gym and cheered for minutes.

"They were celebrated just like any other championship team," Sturm said. "And that mattered."

From the Margins to the Mainstream

Principal Dr. Andre Bala believes the recognition reflects something deeper than a trophy.

"At Smoky, diversity is our greatest strength," Bala said. "When students walk into this building, we're not asking them to fit one mold. We're asking them to be themselves and contribute."

Unified programming, he explained, is not an add-on. "It's not, 'Oh, and we have Unified,'" Bala said. "Unified is part of the culture, and in many ways, it's leading the culture."

That leadership extends beyond esports. Unified athletes at Smoky Hill compete in basketball, flag football, track, golf and bowling. They run a school coffee shop. They lead World Awareness programming. They attend a Unified prom. Most importantly, they are recognized, publicly and proudly, for their accomplishments.

"They're treated like rock stars," Coppinger said. "Kids know their names. They high-five them in the hallway. That's acceptance."

Building the System

Unified success at Smoky Hill is not accidental. It is built on intentional systems, administrative support and a shared belief that every student deserves access to meaningful participation.

Coppinger credits school leadership for providing resources and trust. When the program needed equipment, including Nintendo Switch consoles for competition in Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, administrators approved purchases and supported fundraising efforts.

"There's a reason our Unified program thrives," Coppinger said. "We don't get pushback. We get support."

During the team's first season, unreliable internet connections disrupted competition. Working with district technology staff, the school created a dedicated esports Wi-Fi network to ensure smooth play during official matches.

"Figure out your internet before you get started," Sturm said with a laugh. "But also trust your athletes. They know the game."



Trust is central to the model. Coaches provide structure and emphasize sportsmanship, but once competition begins, student-athletes and their Unified partners take the lead.

"The competitive platform itself is designed with that partnership in mind."

Aaron Kelley, senior marketing manager for PlayVS, the provider for CHSAA Unified Esports, said Unified competition intentionally builds relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities. Partners are not "helpers," he emphasized, but genuine teammates - a structure that fosters authentic connections and strengths belonging across campus.

The Power of Partners

Unified sports rely on partnerships between students with and without intellectual disabilities. At Smoky Hill, those partnerships are intentionally cultivated. Coppinger recruits student-athletes from other varsity teams during their off-seasons; students who understand competition and model sportsmanship.

"They're not just there to check a box," he said. "They're there to compete, to mentor and to grow."

Interest has grown steadily. Sturm's Unified physical education class routinely fills. Students email counselors asking to join. Partners recruit friends, who often remain involved for the rest of their high school careers.

"It's not, 'those are ILC (Integrated Learning Center) students,'" Sturm said. "They're our peers. They're our friends."

Access Creates Opportunity

For Bala, the Unified Esports program reflects two essential principles of education-based activities: access and opportunity.

"Access means you have the resources, the space, the vision and the belief that kids can," he said. "If the door doesn't exist, build the door."

Opportunity follows access. Provide culturally relevant engagement, like esports, and students will respond.

"It's something kids want to do," Bala said. "So, let's create a mechanism for them to engage, compete and have fun."

Athletic department support is equally critical. Balancing space, staffing and scheduling requires coordination, but at Smoky Hill, Unified is viewed as equal to every other sport.

"If we say we're a school of inclusion and belonging, that has

to mean every kid has the same opportunity," Athletic Director David Benedict noted. "It's what needs to be done."

Lessons Beyond the Game

While championships generate headlines, the deeper impact of Unified Esports lies in the lessons it teaches the entire student body.

"Our Unified students show what they're capable of," Bala said. "That makes other students ask, 'What am I capable of?'"

During Smoky Hill's annual World Awareness events, Unified students present to peers about how they learn and how they want to be treated. Partners share how the experience has shaped their own growth.

"We're just like everyone else, we just learn differently," Coppinger said. "And it changes mindsets."

Those moments reflect growth that cannot be measured in trophies: confidence, voice and self-advocacy.

The Bigger Banner

The banner hanging in Smoky Hill's gymnasium tells only part of the story. Yes, it represents a state championship, but it also represents something more enduring: a school community that has chosen mainstream belonging.

At Smoky Hill, Unified students are not a separate program. They are the program. They compete. They lead. They are celebrated. In doing so, they challenge every student and adult in the building to expand their understanding of ability, potential and acceptance.

"Inclusion is everything," Bala said. "It's about all kids, every single kid who comes into this building."

The trophy may be large. The applause may be loud. But the most significant victory is quieter and more lasting: a culture where every student is seen, valued and empowered to compete - and to belong. HST

Rashan Davis has been assistant commissioner of the Colorado High School Activities Association since 2021 and oversees esports, music, speech and debate, and student leadership. Prior to coming to CHSAA, he spent 24 years working as a classroom teacher and campus administrator, including 17 years at Highlands Ranch High School in Colorado and three years at Englewood High School in Aurora, Colorado. Davis is a member of the NFHS High School Today Publications Committee.



Scan the code to read this story.



Disability Inclusion

- Special Olympics
- Best Buddies International
- Adaptive Sports Association

Economic Inclusion

- Boys & Girls Clubs of America
- Communities in Schools

Geographic Inclusion

- Rural education cooperatives
- Regional service agencies
- State departments of education

LGBTQ+ Inclusion

- The Trevor Project
- GLSEN

Racial Inclusion

- National Urban League
- United Negro College Fund

Religious Inclusion

- Interfaith youth organizations
- Community cultural centers

Building Partnerships that Matter

State Associations

Who should your state association partner with?



The Role of State Associations

State Association Responsibilities

Create Opportunities

- Sanction activities
- Host events
- Provide visibility

Remove Barriers

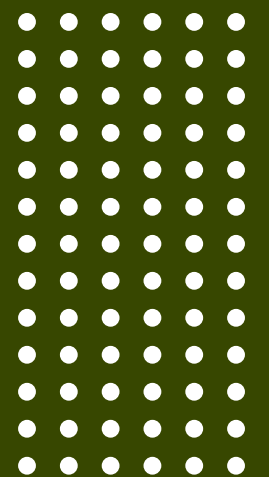
- Identify participation barriers
- Create adaptive competition structures
- Provide transportation support grants

Educate Leaders

- Coach training
- Advisor training
- Inclusion workshops

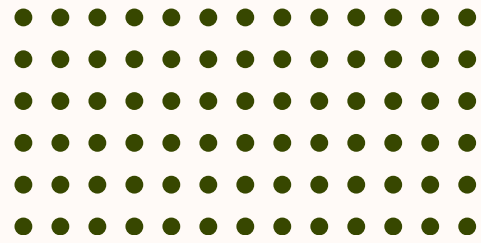
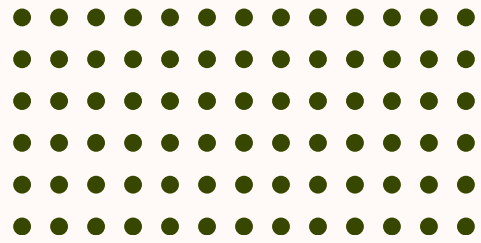
Celebrate Success

- Student Spotlight programs
- Awards
- Hall of Fame Recognition



Schools often need permission and support more than they need persuasion.





ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS?



Presenters



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