

## Creating school communities of acceptance, inclusion, and respect

USA – Special Olympics Arizona

### SUMMARY OF PROJECT

The goal of the Special Olympics Unified Strategy for Schools and Youth is to positively influence the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in educational settings and communities. It reduces bullying and exclusion, promotes healthy activities and interactions, combats stereotypes, eliminates hurtful language in schools, and engages young people in pro-social activities.

*“The Unified Movement empowers youth with and without intellectual disabilities to co-create school communities of acceptance, inclusion, and respect through youth-led advocacy, awareness, education, sports, and recreation.”*

—Mr. Isaac Sanft, Director of Support Programmes, Special Olympics Arizona

### FACTS & FIGURES

- 6,424 youth participated, including 932 youth leaders, at 184 Arizona schools in the 2014–2015 school year.
- 335,463 youth were exposed to awareness and advocacy messaging and activities in 2014.
- The programme experienced a 113% participation growth from 2013 to 2014.
- The programme will be further expanded to 215 schools and 8,000 participants by 2016.
- Special Olympics is currently operating in over 3,500 elementary, middle, and high schools across 45 states throughout the U.S.

### PROBLEMS TARGETED

In the United States students with cognitive disabilities are still mostly educated in separate classrooms and are often an invisible part of the student body. Beyond segregated academics, they also miss out on

normative and developmentally advantageous activities such as sports, clubs, and socialization with their non-disabled peers.

## **SOLUTION & METHODOLOGY**

The Unified Movement is implemented one school at a time by recruiting and empowering youth leaders with and without disabilities who, with the support of teachers and school administrators, establish inclusive social clubs (Unified Clubs). These leaders and club members carry the message of acceptance and unity to their peers through disability awareness campaigns and advocacy for respect, such as the elimination of hurtful slurs. The passion of the students to be a part of and drive the Movement has been the most powerful force in breaking down historical stereotypes and social stigma for youth with disabilities. In addition, teachers are trained as coaches for inclusive sports and to teach integrated health education as part of Unified Sports. Schools add an integrated physical education class to their course catalogues with district-approved curriculum provided by Special Olympics Arizona. The Movement is sustained within each school through a unique fundraising campaign tailored to their distinct needs, and is supported by local law enforcement and a state-wide network of mentors.

## **OUTLOOK & TRANSFERABILITY**

Special Olympics Arizona freely offers electronic versions of the guides and manuals necessary for state and national Special Olympics programmes to launch and grow the Unified Movement. Available materials include Unified Sports Curricula for elementary and high school, Healthy LEAP Curricula for elementary and high school, and a Youth Activation Programme Guide and Unified Clubs Guide. Youth and administrators from 19 Special Olympics state and national programmes have received guidance and resources to launch or grow their own Movement. Going forward, the Unified Movement website, to be launched in 2016, will streamline the marketing and distribution of all these materials, plus videos, sample letters, and testimonials.

Photo

Copyright: Special Olympics Arizona, Inc.

## **CONTACT**

Mr. Isaac SANFT

Special Olympics Arizona, Inc.

2100 S. 75th Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85043

+ 1.602.324.5667 & mobile: 1.602.881.4963

Isaac@SpecialOlympicsArizona.org

[www.SpecialOlympicsArizona.org](http://www.SpecialOlympicsArizona.org)

Nominated by: Ms. Tracy McCarty, Special Olympics Arizona, Inc.

tags: secondary schools, learning difficulties and intellectual disabilities, sports