



# **Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: 2023-2024 Report**

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## One-page Report Highlights and Recommendations

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) has completed its 16<sup>th</sup> year of implementation in K-12 schools across the United States and the world. The Center for Social Development and Education's Annual UCS Evaluation continues to find that Special Olympics UCS has a continued positive impact for students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), educators, and the school community. Four key questions guided this year's Annual UCS Evaluation.

### 1. What did UCS implementation look like in the 2023-2024 school year?

- Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, there is a continued increase in the total number of schools that implement UCS and the number of schools that start as three-component schools.
- There is continued growth in the percentage of schools that offer each core experience or component of UCS (Special Olympics Unified Sports®, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school events).

### 2. What do indicators of quality programming look like in UCS schools in 2023-2024?

- UCS schools continue to receive much support from their schools, from their state Special Olympics Program, and from Special Olympics North America.
- Within UCS schools, three key indicators of UCS quality were found: having a leadership team, the integration of UCS within the school community, and the awareness of UCS activities or events within the school community. These indicators relate to higher quality UCS programming and increased benefits for students and schools.

### 3. What are the continued reach and benefits for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS?

- The overwhelming majority of students who participate in UCS are highly engaged when they participate in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership events.
- Students who participate in UCS continue to report more positive attitudes towards students with IDD, think that their school is more inclusive for students with IDD, and a more positive conceptualization for what it means to have a disability.
- Liaisons also noted many benefits for themselves and their school community.

### 4. How does a student's participation in UCS activities within their school impact their sense of belonging with their school and their positive identity development?

- UCS provides opportunities for students with and without IDD to belong within their school—whether it's directly with their school or through spaces created by UCS activities.
- UCS helps students develop a positive identity through increased social interactions, the perception of safe spaces within their school, accomplishments and the immense sense of pride that comes from their accomplishments, and social skill development.

The Center for Social Development and Education offers the following recommendations for Special Olympics UCS as it embarks on its 17<sup>th</sup> year of implementation:

- Help state Special Olympics Programs promote and support the implementation of inclusive youth leadership activities within new and existing schools.
- Help schools organize UCS leadership teams that include important stakeholders of a school community.
- Help state Special Olympics Programs increase support for one and two component schools
- Clarify the processes involved in sharing resources, trainings, and professional development opportunities with state Special Olympics Programs and UCS liaisons.

## Executive Summary

Special Olympics (SO) Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is one of the many ways that Special Olympics supports inclusive communities for students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across the world. UCS is an evidence-based strategy for PreK-12 schools, colleges, and universities to prioritize **social inclusion** and equity for students with IDD and an inclusive school culture. As a youth-led strategy, 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 athletes (e.g., youth with IDD) and partners (e.g., youth without IDD) to learn, play, and grow within three core experiences:<sup>1</sup>

- **SO Unified Sports**<sup>®</sup>: opportunities that bring students together to participate in competitive and inclusive recreational sports activities;
- **Inclusive youth leadership**: opportunities for students to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other Special Olympics and related inclusive activities throughout the school year; and
- **Whole school engagement**: opportunities for all students in the school to participate in UCS awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population.

### Overview of the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation

To support an evidence-based approach to program implementation that maximizes impact for schools and students, Special Olympics has partnered with the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Since 2008, CSDE has conducted an extensive annual evaluation focused on understanding how UCS is implemented across K-12 schools. Furthermore, CSDE has evaluated the impact that UCS has for students with and without IDD, school staff and administrators, families, and the school community. This year, CSDE focused on three evaluation questions that this year's evaluation report will discuss in more detail:

1. What did UCS implementation look like in the 2023-2024 school year?
2. What do indicators of quality programming look like in UCS schools in 2023-2024?
3. What are the continued reach and benefits for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS?
4. How does a student's participation in UCS activities within their school impact their sense of belonging with their school and their positive identity development?

To address these questions, CSDE once again conducted a multi-method evaluation of different stakeholders that participate in Special Olympics UCS:

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<sup>1</sup> See the supplemental material titled "[Special Olympics Guidelines](#)" for a more thorough description of key aspects of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools.

- CSDE collected data from 5,696 UCS liaisons as part of the 2024 Annual Liaison Survey. CSDE supplemented this data through interviews with 16 UCS liaisons, school staff, and school administrators.
- CSDE collected both student survey and student interview data from 2,137 students from 13 schools. Eight schools were recruited for the student survey aspect of this year's Annual UCS Evaluation, and five additional schools were recruited for the student interview portion of this year's evaluation.

## Main findings

### *What did UCS implementation look like in the 2023-2024 school year?*

UCS implementation continues to grow since the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an increase in the total number of UCS schools, the number and percentage of three-component schools, and the number of new schools that have started as three-component UCS schools. There is also continued growth in the percentage of schools that offer each component of UCS. However, although there is growth in the percentage of schools that have offered inclusive youth leadership activities within their school, it remains as the least implemented component.

### *What do indicators of quality programming look like in 2023-2024?*

Overall, the indicators of UCS school quality are positive. UCS schools continue to receive support from their own school, state Special Olympics Programs, and Special Olympics North America. Eight-two percent of liaisons report receiving support from their state Special Olympics Program, and 60% of schools receive funding from their state Special Olympics Program.

This year, three indicators of quality UCS programming were identified. Leadership teams—or teams that exist within a UCS school to help manage the administration of UCS within schools—have been shown to benefit UCS implementation within schools. This year, 32% of liaisons reported that their school had a UCS leadership team. Two additional indicators include the integration of UCS within the school community and the awareness of UCS activities within their school. Schools that had a leadership team, had higher program integration, or had higher program awareness had both higher quality UCS implementation and more positive outcomes for students and their school community.

### *What are the continued reach and benefits for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS?*

This year, student-level data provided CSDE with the opportunity to assess the reach and impact of UCS participation within their schools. The percentage of students who participate in UCS activities in their school is higher than the last time CSDE assessed student-level participation. Encouragingly, 96% of the students who participate in Unified Sports and 92% of the students who participate in inclusive youth leadership events are



highly engaged in their participation. Lastly, more students are aware of UCS activities in their school now than they were in the 2015-2016 school year (which was the last time CSDE asked about awareness of UCS activities in their school).

Students with and without IDD who participate in UCS continue to report positive benefits from their participation. Students without IDD report more favorable attitudes towards students with IDD and think that their school is more inclusive for students with IDD. Students with and without IDD also report increased social interactions and a better conceptualization of what it means to have a disability. This view was supported by UCS liaisons and school staff, who also noted benefits for students, their school community, and their own professional development.

***How does a student's participation in UCS activities within their school impact their sense of belonging with their school and their positive identity development?***

This year's Annual UCS Evaluation found that UCS participation leads to an increased sense of belonging within their school—whether it's directly with their school or through spaces created by UCS activities. A student's increased sense of belonging from UCS participation helps students develop a positive identity through increased social interactions, the perception of safe spaces within their school, accomplishments and the immense sense of pride that comes from their accomplishments, and social skill development. These benefits occur for students with and without IDD.

**Overall findings and recommendations**

Overall, the Center for Social Development and Education's 2023-2024 Annual Unified Champion Schools' (UCS) Evaluation found that Special Olympics UCS continues to have a meaningful impact for students with IDD, students without IDD, and for the entire school community. CSDE was able to identify findings and provide insights into the four questions that guided the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation.

The Center for Social Development and Education offers the following recommendations for Special Olympics UCS as it embarks on its 17<sup>th</sup> year of implementation:

- Help state Special Olympics Programs promote and support the implementation of inclusive youth leadership activities within new and existing schools.
- Help schools organize UCS leadership teams that include important stakeholders of a school community.
- Help state Special Olympics Programs increase support for one and two component schools
- Clarify the processes involved in sharing resources, trainings, and professional development opportunities with state Special Olympics Programs and UCS liaisons.

## Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: 2023-2024 (Year 16) Annual Evaluation Report

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (SOUCS) is one of the many ways that Special Olympics supports inclusive communities for students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) across the world. UCS is an evidence-based strategy for schools PreK-college to prioritize social inclusion for students with IDD and an inclusive school culture. As a youth-led strategy, 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 be changemakers in their school and community by uniting athletes (e.g., youth with IDD) and partners (e.g., youth without IDD) to learn, play, and grow within three core experiences:<sup>2</sup>

- **Special Olympics Unified Sports®:** opportunities that bring students together to participate in competitive and inclusive recreational 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 to gain the skills and experience to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other Special Olympics and related inclusive activities throughout the school year (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 awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population (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 UCS implementation that maximizes impact for schools and students, Special Olympics has partnered with the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Since 2008, CSDE has conducted an extensive annual evaluation focused on understanding how UCS is implemented across K-12 schools and its impact on students with and without IDD, school staff and administrators, families, and the overall school community. This year, CSDE framed the 2023-2024 annual evaluation around the following evaluation questions:

1. **What did UCS implementation look like in the 2023-2024 school year?** This includes both findings from this school year and an analysis of findings from more recent years.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Appendix titled “Special Olympics Guidelines” for a more thorough description of key aspects of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools.

2. **What do indicators of quality programming look like in UCS schools in 2023-2024?** This includes both a description of factors influencing quality in the 2023-2024 school year and an analysis of the relationship between quality indicators across school years.
3. **What are the continued reach and benefits for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS?** This includes findings from students with and without IDD as well as educators and school administrators relating to whether students experience the same impacts that prior students described in past evaluation reports (e.g., more positive attitudes towards students with IDD, increased visibility of students with IDD within their school, and more social interactions between students with and without IDD).
4. **How does a student's participation in UCS activities within their school impact their sense of belonging with their school and their positive identity development?** Last year's Annual UCS Evaluation (Ramdass et al., 2023) laid the groundwork to investigate how students who participate in UCS activities and events relate to a positive identity development and a sense of belonging within their school. This year's evaluation used more in-depth survey and qualitative methodologies to build upon work that started in the 2022-2023 Annual UCS Evaluation.

To address these questions, CSDE conducted a multisource mixed methods evaluation using data collected during the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>3</sup> The 2023-2024 Annual Liaison Survey—a survey of all UCS liaisons in K-12 schools—provided information related to the implementation of UCS in 2023-2024. In depth interviews with liaisons, school staff, and school administrators were used along with this year's Liaison Survey to assess indicators of quality UCS schools. The 2023-2024 Liaison Survey was completed by 5,696 UCS liaisons across all state Programs<sup>4</sup> that have at least one active UCS school.

Student impacts were assessed by recruiting students from 12 UCS schools with strong three-component programs as well as one school who previously participated in the UCS intervention study in 2014-2016 (Jacobs et al., 2017; McDowell et al., 2017). This allowed CSDE to use multiple methods to assess student impact including a three-part qualitative study focusing on the role UCS has on a student's positive identity development, a student survey that assessed students' participation in UCS activities and events in their school as well as outcomes of UCS participation, and staff interviews that discussed the benefits of UCS implementation. Results were supplemented by questions

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<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix: "Full Methods Used for the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation" for an in-depth description of the methodology used in the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> California has two State Programs: Northern California and Southern California. Puerto Rico and Washington, DC also have state Special Olympics Programs underneath the region covered by Special Olympics North America.

from the Annual Liaison Survey. Data were collected from 2,137 students and 16 school staff from 13 schools across nine state Special Olympics Programs.<sup>5</sup>

## **UCS Implementation in 2023-2024: What did UCS Implementation Look Like this year?**

In the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation, the Liaison Survey was the primary source of information for assessing UCS implementation in the 2023-2024 school year. UCS liaisons are pivotal to understanding UCS programming across schools, and liaisons are the key source for data on program scope nationwide. Between April and June 2024, CSDE contacted liaisons at 8,301 UCS schools across 51 State Programs. CSDE received responses from 5,696 school liaisons who self-reported at least one UCS activity in their school in 2023-2024,<sup>6</sup> which was a national response rate of 69%.<sup>7</sup>

The demographics of UCS liaisons are similar to previous years. Overall, more liaisons were women (78%) than men (22%), and most were special education teachers (49%) or staff within special education roles (11%). A more thorough description can be found in Table UCSA3 in the [Appendix: Additional 2023-2024 Liaison Survey Tables](#).

Consistent with past evaluation findings, UCS was mostly implemented at the high school level (45%), followed by elementary schools (29%) and middle schools (18%). As self-reported by UCS liaisons, most schools (74%) had between 1 and 30 students with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) enrolled in their school. As described by the National Center for Education Statistics, 64% of schools were described as Title I schools. A more comprehensive breakdown of school demographics can be found in Table UCSA4 the [Appendix: Additional 2023-2024 Liaison Survey Tables](#).

### **UCS Core Experiences**

This year, SONA changed how UCS schools were classified. Between 2014 and 2023, SONA UCS classified schools based on the specific combination of components that an UCS school implemented within their school. Starting with the 2023-2024 school year, SONA UCS aligned its evaluation data with state Special Olympics Programs by describing UCS schools based on the number of core experiences that are implemented within a school. Table UCS1 expands upon these differences.

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<sup>5</sup> State programs for further in-depth data collection efforts included Arizona, Northern California, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oregon. Eight schools participated in the student survey portion of this year's Annual UCS Evaluation, and five additional schools participated in the student interview portion of this year's Annual UCS Evaluation.

<sup>6</sup> 272 UCS liaisons indicated that no UCS activities occurred during the 2023-2024 school year in their school.

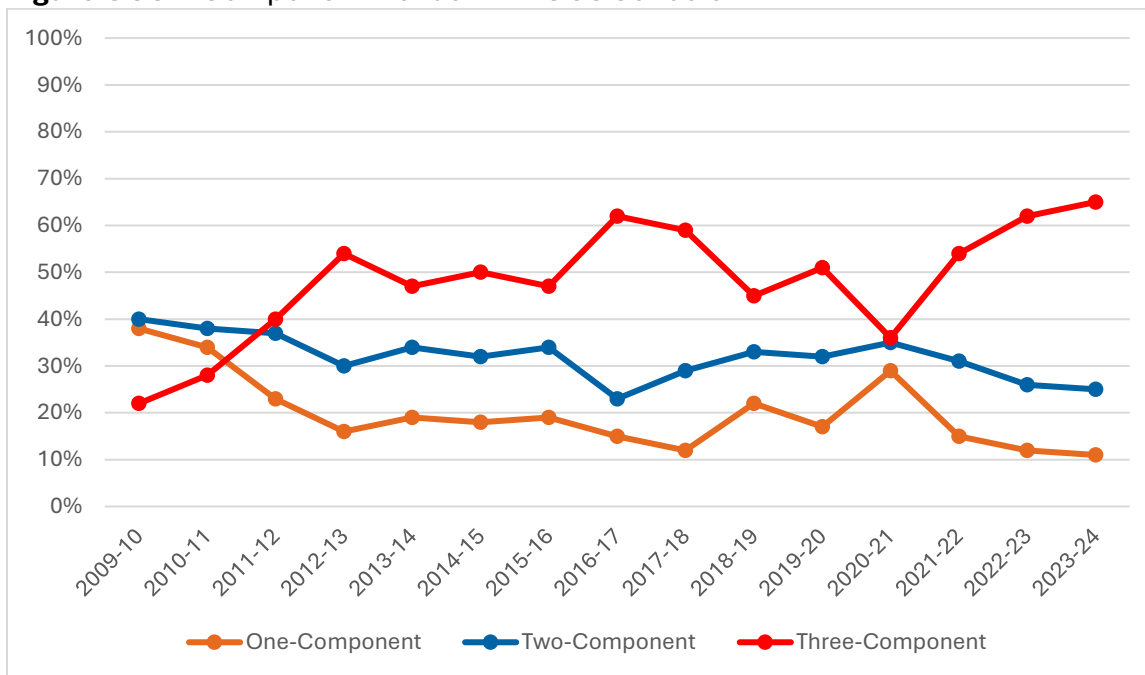
<sup>7</sup> See Tables UCSA1 and UCSA2 in the [Appendix: Additional 2023-2024 Liaison Survey Tables](#) for response rates by state Program.

**Table UCS1.** How UCS Schools are categorized in the 2023-2024 school year compared to how they were categorized between the 2014-2015 and 2022-2023 school years.

<b>2023-2024 School Year (By Components)</b>	<b>2014-2015 to 2022-2023 School Years (By Implementation Level)</b>
<b>Three-component schools</b> implement at least one activity or event from each of the three core experiences.	<b>Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools</b> implement at least one activity or event from each of the three core experiences.
<b>Two-component schools</b> implement at least one activity or event from any two core experiences.	<b>Developing Unified Schools</b> implement activities from Unified Sports and one other core experience.
<b>One-component schools</b> implement at least one activity or event from any one core experience.	<b>Emerging Unified Schools</b> implement activities from both Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement, or from just one of the three core experiences.

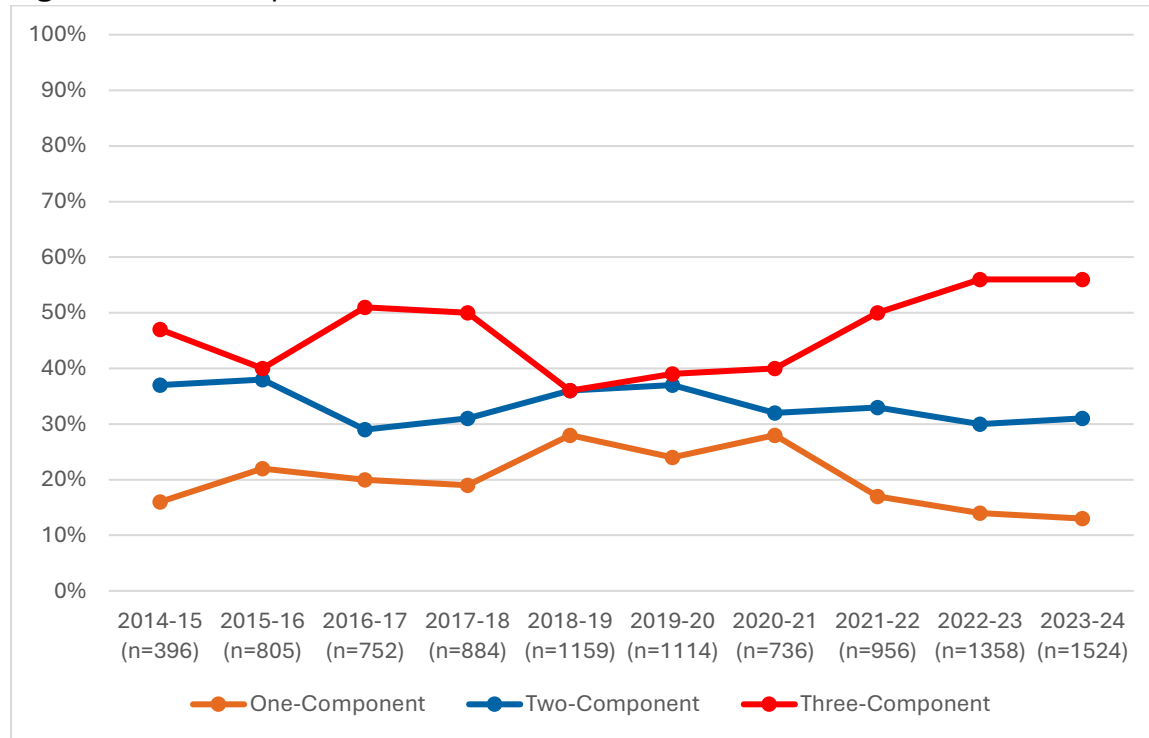
UCS implementation is similar in 2023-2024 compared to prior years. Most schools were three component schools (65%), followed by two component schools (25%) and one component schools (11%). As seen in Figure UCS1, after a dip due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year, the trend is that UCS schools are increasingly 3-component schools.

**Figure UCS1.** Component Trends in All UCS Schools



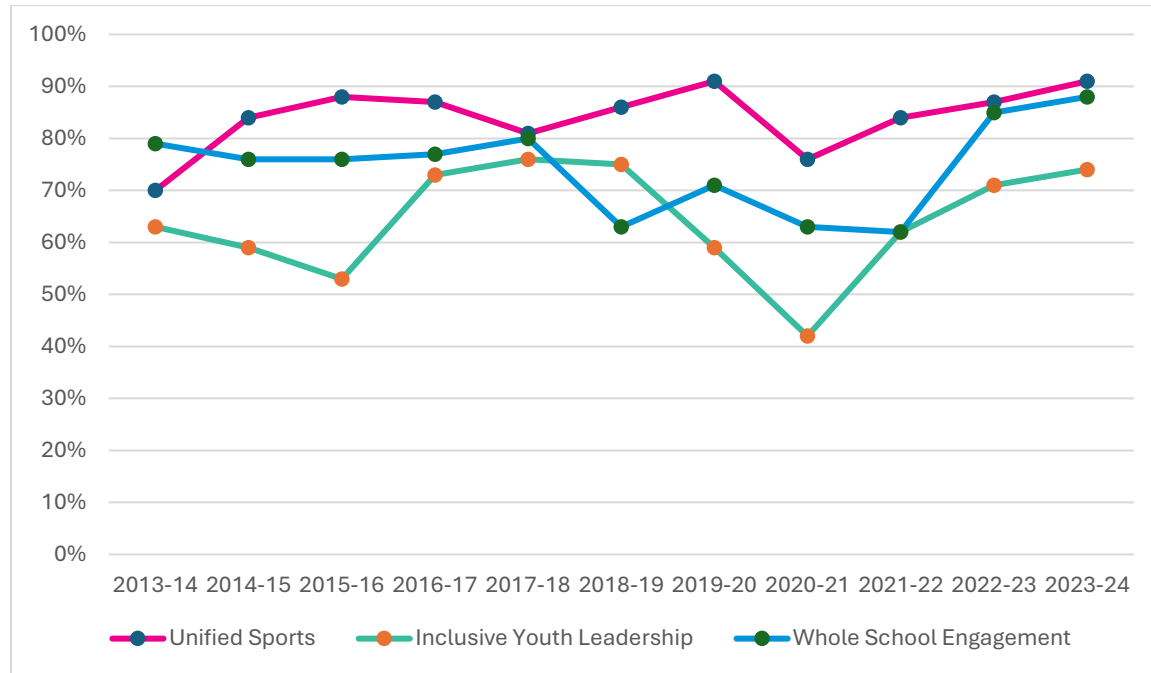
Liaisons from 23% of schools reported that they were in their first year of UCS implementation in the 2023-2024 school year. The majority of new UCS schools are three-component schools (56%), followed by two-component (31%) or one-component schools (13%). As seen in Figure UCS2, most schools continue to start as three-component UCS schools.

**Figure UCS2.** Component Trends in New UCS Schools



Lastly, there has been continued growth in all three core experiences since 2021-2022. As seen in Figure UCS3, the rebound first observed in the 2021-2022 school year (e.g., after the COVID-19 pandemic) has been maintained across the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years. The implementation of each core experience has either returned or surpassed pre-pandemic levels.

**Figure UCS3.** Percent of UCS schools implementing each of the UCS core experiences between 2013-2014 and 2023-2024.



Combined, there is sustained growth in the percentage of schools that are three-component schools as well as the percentage of schools that start as three-component schools. Concurrently, there is growth in the number of schools offering each component. Taken together with the overall increase in UCS schools across the United States (now over 10,000 schools), these findings signal quality growth among UCS schools. The next section will discuss the implementation of each core experience in more detail.

**Special Olympics Unified Sports®**

Unified Sports are opportunities that bring students together to participate in inclusive competitive and recreational sports activities. Table UCS2 describes the implementation of Unified Sports in elementary, middle, and high schools during the 2023-2024 school year. Unified Sports teams and Unified PE were the most implemented Unified Sports activities. While more high schools than middle or elementary schools implemented Unified Sports teams, the implementation of Unified PE was consistent across all elementary, middle, and high schools (approximately 60%).

**Table UCS2.** Percent of schools with Unified Sports implementing each Unified Sports activity.

<b>Unified Sports Activity</b>	<b>All Schools (n = 5,208)</b>	<b>Elementary (n = 1,432)</b>	<b>Middle (n = 954)</b>	<b>High (n = 2,455)</b>
Unified Sports team	73%	47%	74%	89%
Unified PE	60%	62%	61%	59%
Unified Fitness	21%	26%	21%	18%
Unified Esports & Fitness	7%	4%	5%	8%
Young Athletes	41%	41%	--	--
Unified Developmental Sports	28%	35%	19%	--

UCS liaisons were asked if coaches who helped facilitate or coach Unified Sports activities in their school completed trainings provided by SONA UCS. As seen in Tables UCS3 and UCS4, whether coaches received training differed based on whether the coach was in elementary, middle, or high school. Liaisons from high schools reported that their coaches were trained more often than coaches from elementary or middle schools.

**Table UCS3.** Percent of Coaches Who Received Any Training for Unified Sports from Special Olympics North America or their State Special Olympics Program.

	<b>All Schools (n = 5,176)</b>	<b>Elementary (n = 1,423)</b>	<b>Middle (n = 946)</b>	<b>High (n = 2,446)</b>
Yes	66%	52%	60%	76%
No	34%	48%	40%	24%

Note: these results include any school that said they did any activity that falls under the Unified Sports core experience.

**Table UCS4.** Percent of Coaches who Completed the Online *Coaching Unified Sports* Course.

	<b>All Schools (n = 5,174)</b>	<b>Elementary (n = 1,421)</b>	<b>Middle (n = 947)</b>	<b>High (n = 2,445)</b>
Yes	53%	33%	46%	67%
No	47%	67%	54%	33%

Note: these results include any school that said they did any activity that falls under the Unified Sports core experience.

Another focus of this year's Liaison Survey involved use and awareness of the styles of play that they implemented within their school's Unified Sports teams. Unified Sports teams can fall into one of four styles of play:

- **Competitive teams**, where athletes with IDD and their non-IDD partners of similar age and ability compete under standard sports rules;
- **Player Development teams**, which allow for varying ability levels among players and include modifications to sports rules;



- **Hybrid teams**,<sup>8</sup> combining elements of both Competitive and Player Development models to balance competition and skill development; and
- **Recreation teams**, which focus on inclusive participation, enjoyment, and social interaction rather than formal competition.

The use of play styles varies across different school levels (see Table UCS5). Elementary schools mostly used the Recreation Teams model. A hybrid of the Competitive and Player Development teams was more commonly utilized in middle and high schools. Although Player Development and Competitive teams were similarly implemented overall, Competitive teams were mostly implemented at the high school level. Player Development teams were similarly implemented across elementary, middle, and high schools. These variations highlight how schools tailor Unified Sports to suit the developmental and social needs of different age groups as well as tailoring the play style to match their team's needs.

**Table UCS5.** Percent of schools with Unified Sports teams implementing each style of play, by school level

<b>Styles of Play for Unified Sports</b>	<b>All Schools (n = 3,795)</b>	<b>Elementary (n = 660)</b>	<b>Middle (n = 700)</b>	<b>High (n = 2,178)</b>
Competitive Teams	17%	6%	9%	23%
Player Development Teams	18%	20%	21%	17%
Hybrid of Competitive and Player Development Teams	34%	20%	32%	39%
Recreation Teams	28%	50%	36%	19%

Note: Percentages for each school level column do not sum to 100% due to “other” responses or missing school level information from NCES.

Although the use of play styles differed by school level, most liaisons were aware of the style of play that a Unified Sports Team could have. As seen in Table UCS6, liaisons from high schools were more aware about UCS styles of play compared to middle and elementary schools.<sup>9</sup> Concurrently schools that have participated for more than two years were more aware of the styles of play than schools in their first year of UCS implementation.<sup>10</sup> Further information related to the styles of play can be found in Tables UCSA15 and UCSA16 in the [Appendix: Additional 2023-2024 Liaison Survey Tables](#).

<sup>8</sup> A hybrid team is not an official style of play within Unified Sports, but it has been used by many Unified Sports teams.

<sup>9</sup>  $\chi^2(2)=30.00, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .09$

<sup>10</sup>  $\chi^2(1)=30.37, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .09$

**Table UCS6.** Awareness of styles of play.

	<b>Aware</b>	<b>Not Aware</b>
Overall	83%	16%
School level		
Elementary	77%	21%
Middle	82%	17%
High	86%	13%
Was the school in their first year of UCS implementation?		
Yes	77%	22%
No (they have participated for 2 or more years)	86%	14%

Note: The differences in percentages for school level and whether the school was in their first year of UCS implementation were statistically significant.

### ***Inclusive Youth Leadership***

Inclusive youth leadership activities are opportunities for students to gain the skills and experience needed to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other Special Olympics and related inclusive activities throughout the school year. Table UCS7 describes the implementation of inclusive youth leadership activities in elementary, middle, and high schools during the 2023-2024 school year. Like previous school years, within-school inclusive youth leadership activities were more commonly implemented than other activities. Out of these activities and like previous years, Unified Club was the most implemented inclusive youth leadership activity this year.

**Table UCS7.** Percent of schools with inclusive youth leadership implementing each inclusive youth leadership activity.

<b><i>Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity</i></b>	<b><i>All Schools (n = 4,230)</i></b>	<b><i>Elementary (n = 1,119)</i></b>	<b><i>Middle (n = 752)</i></b>	<b><i>High (n = 2,047)</i></b>
Unified Club	73%	56%	80%	81%
Inclusive Leadership Training/ Class	40%	40%	42%	40%
Young Athletes Volunteers	37%	58%	28%	27%
SO Youth Summit	23%	6%	14%	36%
SO Youth Activation Committee	11%	4%	7%	15%

The percentage of UCS schools that offer at least one inclusive youth leadership activity has increased since the 2020-2021 school year. Inclusive youth leadership, as a component, has a similar rate of growth compared to the Unified Sports and whole school

engagement components. However, inclusive youth leadership activities continue to be the least implemented UCS core experience. A possible reason why this may occur is that fewer two-component schools (36%) offer inclusive youth leadership as one of their two components, and only 7% of one-component schools offer inclusive youth leadership as their only component. Compared to Unified Sports activities and whole school events, inclusive youth leadership activities appear to be added to already existing UCS schools or as part of a multicomponent UCS school.

In looking at schools that offered either a Unified Sports team or Unified Club within their school, 61% of schools offered both a Unified Sports team and a Unified Club. Out of the remaining schools, 31% of schools implemented Unified Sports team and only 9% implemented Unified Club. A potential reason for this may be that a UCS liaison often has many roles within their school related to UCS implementation. 2,361 liaisons—or 41% of all liaisons who responded to the Annual Liaison Survey—reported that their school had both a Unified Club and Unified Sports team. Table UCS8 shows whether a liaison is either a coach for their school’s Unified Sports team or their Unified Club Advisor. Most liaisons are both a Unified Sports coach and Unified Club advisor at their school.<sup>11</sup> A potential reason for why inclusive youth leadership is less implemented than other components is that UCS liaisons are either serving both roles within a school or are more easily able to find someone to coach a Unified Sports team than to be a club advisor.

**Table UCS8.** Liaison’s roles within their school’s Unified Sports Team and Unified Club.

	<i>Is the liaison their school’s Unified Club Advisor</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Is the liaison a Unified Sports team coach at their school?		
Yes	61%	9%
No	18%	12%

### **Whole School Engagement**

Lastly, whole school engagement provides opportunities for all students in the school to participate in UCS awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach much of the school population. Liaisons reported the number of whole school engagement events that occurred in their school during the 2023-2024 school year. Similar to previous years, the Spread the Word Inclusion/Respect/disability Awareness Campaign continued to be the most implemented activity, followed by Fans in the Stand and fundraising activities (see Table UCS9). Fundraising and Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally were more likely to occur in high schools, and Unified Sports Day or Festival were more likely to occur in elementary schools.

<sup>11</sup>  $\chi^2(1)=229.00, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .31$

**Table UCS9.** Percent of schools with whole school engagement implementing each whole school engagement activity.

<b>Whole School Engagement Activity</b>	<b>All Schools (n = 5,033)</b>	<b>Elementary (n = 1,417)</b>	<b>Middle (n = 917)</b>	<b>High (n = 2,331)</b>
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	77%	83%	79%	72%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	52%	34%	49%	66%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	36%	43%	30%	33%
Fundraising events and activities	43%	28%	39%	55%
SO Play/Performance	13%	17%	12%	11%
Unified Fitness Challenges	11%	9%	10%	12%

### Summary

Based on the 2023-2024 Liaison Survey, there are many continued trends that are promising for the increased implementation of UCS within schools across the United States. As the total number of schools implementing UCS has grown in the 2023-2024 school year, the school demographics remain consistent in the types of schools that implement UCS. The majority of UCS liaisons that completed the Liaison Survey also reported that their school offers all three components of UCS, and the vast majority of new UCS schools are starting as three-component schools. The increase of (1) the total number of three-component schools and (2) the schools that start as three-component schools indicates a promising direction for Special Olympics to meet its goal of being in 20,000 schools by 2030.

The implementation of each UCS component or core experience is higher this year compared to prior years. Furthermore, there is an increase in the number of Unified Sports teams offered this year and consistency in other UCS activities or events offered within schools. However, although there has been growth in the number and percentage of schools that offer inclusive youth leadership activities, inclusive youth leadership is still the least implemented component. An area for improvement is increasing the capacity for schools to offer inclusive youth leadership events in one- and two-component schools.

## Support from Special Olympics: State Programs and Resources and Professional Development

UCS schools receive support from their state Special Olympics Program. Furthermore, resources and professional development opportunities provided by SONA help both state Special Olympics Programs and UCS schools in the implementation of UCS activities and events within their school. This section will briefly discuss the support from state Special Olympics Programs and SONA.

Schools relied on state Special Olympics Programs for guidance and funding to implement and sustain their activities. Overall, 82% of schools reported receiving support from their state Program. Fifty-seven percent of UCS liaisons were in contact at least once per month, 35% were in contact between two to three times per year, and 6% were in contact only once per year. Two percent of liaisons reported that they were not in contact with their state Special Olympics Program in the 2023-2024 school year. Of those UCS liaisons that reached out to their state Special Olympics program for logistical, guidance, or technical assistance, the overwhelming majority stated that the state Program provided the needed support. Lastly, 60% of UCS schools received funding from their state Special Olympics Program to support UCS implementation within their school.

This year's Liaison Survey also asked UCS liaisons where they looked for resources related to UCS implementation within their school (see Table UCS10). The most common place where liaisons looked for resources was the SONA website. More liaisons from three component schools looked for resources compared to two or one component schools.

**Table UCS10.** Locations where liaisons look for resources.

Resource	Overall	One component (n = 554)	Two component (n = 1,306)	Three component (n = 3,429)
Special Olympics Website	78%	62%	71%	83%
Colleagues at their school or district	59%	44%	55%	62%
The liaison made their own resources	52%	32%	46%	57%
State Program website	50%	36%	43%	54%
State Program staff	39%	25%	32%	44%
Generation Unified website	39%	23%	28%	45%

Note: In Table UCSA5, 53% of UCS liaisons report that they use the Generation Unified website as a resource. The difference in percentages may be due to how the two questions were asked.

As in previous years, this year's Liaison Survey also asked about the awareness and use of resources developed by SONA. As seen in Table UCSA5, the resources that liaisons were most aware of and used the most continue to be the UCS Playbooks, Unified Classroom lessons and activities, and the Generation Unified videos, YouTube channel, and website. Encouragingly, there has been an increase in both Unified Classroom lessons and activities and the Generation Unified videos compared to the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years.

Most liaisons who used resources created by SONA thought that the resources were useful in helping them implement UCS in their school. Liaisons who used a resource developed by SONA but found it *not useful* were asked why the resource was not useful. Encouragingly, out of the 29,318 ratings for resource use across this year's Annual Liaison Survey, only 339 total ratings (1%) were rated as *not useful*. Among these very few liaisons their rationale fell into one of four reasons: the content did not fit with current practices within the school, the school did not have time to implement the activities described in the resource, the school did not have the staff or capacity to implement the resource, or the content was too abstract.

### **Indicators of UCS Quality: What do Indicators of Quality Programming look like in UCS Schools in 2023-2024?**

In addition to the support Special Olympics provides to UCS schools, there are two key quality indicators of UCS schools at the school level: whether their school has an UCS leadership team to facilitate UCS implementation within their school, and the level of UCS integration and awareness within their school. UCS schools vary in whether they have a leadership team and how integrated UCS is within their school, and both indicators relate to the quality of UCS programming within schools. This section will first discuss UCS leadership teams and program awareness and impact before going into why outcomes matter.

#### **Leadership Teams**

An UCS leadership team is a formalized group of students with and without IDD, general and special education teachers, school administrators, and members of the school community who work together to manage the implementation of UCS activities and events within their school. This is a meaningful way to manage the coordination of UCS implementation within a school.

The presence of a leadership team has been consistent but low over the years, hovering around one third of schools. In 2023-2024, 32% of liaisons reported that their school had a leadership team, which is in line with rates over the last four years (ranging from 26% to 38% in a given year). The presence of a leadership team did not vary

significantly across elementary, middle, and high school levels. However, having a leadership team was more common in three-component schools (45%) compared to two-component (17%) or one-component (7%) schools.

Leadership teams also may differ in practice based on the stakeholders within a school community that are a part of the leadership team. Leadership team presence can be categorized into three types based on the definition and description of leadership teams provided in the UCS playbooks:

- **Ideal Structure:** Leadership teams that included each of the following members: general educators, special educators, school administrators, both students with and without IDD, and families of students with or without IDD;
- **Modified Structure:** Leadership teams that did not have all roles listed in the ideal leadership team structure; and
- **No Leadership Team:** Liaisons that stated that they did not have a leadership team.

Out of all UCS schools with a leadership team, 42% met the criteria for the ideal leadership team structure. An ideal leadership team was more common in three component schools (45%) compared to two-component (23%) or one component schools (11%).

## Funding

UCS schools may also differ in the amount of funding that they receive from sources within their school and externally. As seen in Table UCS11, 60% of UCS schools received funding from their state Special Olympics Program. Out of these schools, 68% were satisfied with the funding that they received from their state Special Olympics Program. Additional analyses investigated whether there were any differences in schools that received or did not receive funding from their state Special Olympics Program. Whereas there were no differences between the percentage of one-component<sup>12</sup> or two-component schools<sup>13</sup> that received funding from their state Special Olympics Program, a much higher percentage of three-component schools received funding from their state Special Olympics Program (65%) compared to those that did not (35%).

The median UCS school has funding from two sources (including their state Program). They also receive 75% of their total funding from their state Special Olympics Program. When considering their funding from all sources, 74% of liaisons felt that funding was sufficient for their program needs in 2023-2024. Furthermore, 67% of liaisons thought that funding would be consistent through the 2026-2027 school year (i.e., over the next three years).

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<sup>12</sup> For one-component schools, 47% received funding from their state Program while 53% did not.

<sup>13</sup> For two-component schools, 52% received funding from their state Program while 48% did not.

**Table UCS11.** Funding sources for UCS.

Source	<i>N</i>	%
State Special Olympics Program	3,231	60%
School budget	2,443	45%
Fundraising	1,620	30%
Personal donations	1,615	30%
Funding from local businesses or community organizations	1,086	20%
PTA donations	498	10%

### UCS Program Awareness and Integration

UCS schools may also differ how much school community stakeholders are aware of UCS activities and events within their school and whether the UCS liaison believes that UCS is integrated within their school community. Building from prior evaluation efforts as part of the 2022-2023 Annual UCS Evaluation, this year's evaluation assessed both program integration and overall awareness of UCS activities.

Overall, liaisons thought that UCS was integrated within their school community and that school stakeholders were aware of UCS within their school. Table UCS12 shows specific comparisons by school and UCS characteristics. Both integration<sup>14</sup> and awareness<sup>15</sup> were higher in three-component schools than one- or two-component schools. Concurrently, schools that had an ideal leadership team structure had higher program integration<sup>16</sup> and awareness<sup>17</sup> than schools with a modified leadership team structure or schools without a leadership team.

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<sup>14</sup>  $F(2, 1,388) = 254, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$

<sup>15</sup>  $F(2, 1,312) = 379, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$

<sup>16</sup>  $F(3, 1,412) = 232, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$

<sup>17</sup>  $F(3, 1,482) = 242, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$



**Table UCS12.** UCS program integration and awareness, separated by key demographic information.

	<i>Program integration</i>		<i>Program awareness</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Average (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Average (SD)</i>
Overall	5,302	7.81 (2.40)	5,374	7.00 (1.70)
School Level				
Elementary	1,645	7.69 (2.34)	1,645	6.75 (1.71)
Middle	1,053	7.69 (2.36)	1,053	6.97 (1.93)
High	2,578	7.91 (2.44)	2,578	7.15 (1.64)
<b>Component level</b>				
<b>One-component</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>6.35 (2.11)</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>5.58 (1.74)</b>
<b>Two-component</b>	<b>1,417</b>	<b>7.14 (2.18)</b>	<b>1,417</b>	<b>6.47 (1.66)</b>
<b>Three-component</b>	<b>3,678</b>	<b>8.28 (2.37)</b>	<b>3,678</b>	<b>7.42 (1.52)</b>
Locale				
Urban	1,481	7.63 (2.37)	1,481	6.76 (1.73)
Suburban	2,012	8.02 (2.40)	2,012	7.18 (1.62)
Town	643	7.63 (2.35)	643	6.95 (1.78)
Rural	1,312	7.76 (2.42)	1,312	7.02 (1.69)
<b>Leadership team</b>				
<b>An ideal team structure</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>9.52 (2.12)</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>8.05 (1.27)</b>
<b>A modified team structure</b>	<b>1,024</b>	<b>8.24 (2.32)</b>	<b>1,024</b>	<b>7.53 (1.46)</b>
<b>No leadership team</b>	<b>3,318</b>	<b>7.25 (2.28)</b>	<b>3,318</b>	<b>6.63 (1.71)</b>
Banner school				
Banner school	149	9.91 (2.19)	149	8.30 (1.11)
Non-banner three-component school	3,529	8.21 (2.35)	3,529	7.38 (1.52)

Note: Bolded rows indicate a statistically significant relationship or difference.

The total number of schools included in the program integration and awareness calculations is based on respondents who provided ratings for all survey items. Integration scores had a possible range from 4 to 12, and awareness scores had a possible range from 3 to 9.

Program integration and awareness is also related to other indicators of high-quality UCS schools. UCS schools with higher integration and awareness also had more funding from both internal and external sources,<sup>18</sup> stated that they were very likely to continue programming next year overall<sup>19</sup> and without the direct involvement of the UCS liaison,<sup>20</sup> and rated their program as more self-sustainable<sup>21</sup> (see Table UCS13). This suggests a

<sup>18</sup> For integration:  $F(2, 4,324) = 84.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . For awareness:  $F(2, 4,348) = 91.66, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$

<sup>19</sup> For integration:  $F(2, 5,287) = 226, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . For awareness:  $F(2, 4,324) = 444, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ .

<sup>20</sup> For integration:  $F(2, 5,283) = 354, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ . For awareness:  $F(2, 5,353) = 265, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ .

<sup>21</sup> For integration:  $F(2, 5,278) = 540, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ . For awareness:  $F(2, 5,353) = 500, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ .

reciprocal relationship between how integrated UCS is within a school, how much awareness occurs within a school, and indicators related to program quality.

**Table UCS13.** UCS program integration and awareness based on different quality indicators.

Quality Indicator	<i>Program integration</i>	<i>Program awareness</i>
	<i>Average (SD)</i>	<i>Average (SD)</i>
Funding Source		
Funded internally	7.6 (2.4)	6.8 (1.7)
Funded externally	7.4 (2.3)	6.8 (1.7)
Funded both internally and externally	8.4 (2.3)	7.5 (1.5)
Perceived Sustainability		
UCS continuation next year		
Very likely	8.1 (2.3)	7.3 (1.5)
Somewhat likely	6.7 (2.1)	5.9 (1.6)
Not likely	5.7 (2.2)	5.2 (1.9)
UCS continuation without liaison direct involvement		
Very likely	8.7 (2.3)	7.5 (1.6)
Somewhat likely	7.7 (2.2)	7.0 (1.6)
Not likely	6.6 (2.2)	6.2 (1.8)
School's self-sustainability		
Very likely	8.9 (2.3)	7.7 (1.5)
Somewhat likely	7.5 (2.1)	6.8 (1.6)
Not likely	6.1 (2.1)	5.8 (1.7)

*Note:* All differences presented in this table are statistically significant.

The total number of schools included in the program integration and awareness calculations is based on respondents who provided ratings for all survey items. Integration scores had a possible range from 4 to 12, and awareness scores had a possible range from 3 to 9.

## Summary

The indicators of quality show that UCS is in a strong position to maintain its impact within schools for youth with and without IDD. UCS liaisons reported that the funding needed to implement UCS within their schools is sufficient. Concurrently, UCS liaisons report that school stakeholders are aware of UCS activities within their school and that UCS is integrated within their school community. This is encouraging for maintaining and expanding high-quality UCS schools for years to come.

Leadership teams continue to be beneficial for UCS schools. Schools that had a leadership team—and especially schools that have an ideally structured leadership team—reported more integration and awareness of UCS within their school. They also reported receiving funding from internal and external sources compared to schools that

had a modified leadership team structure or did not have a leadership team. However, the number of UCS schools that had any leadership team continues to be between 26% and 38% depending on the year (with 32% liaisons reporting that their school had a leadership team in 2023-2024). An opportunity exists for UCS to increase the number of schools with leadership teams to increase the program quality of UCS schools and the benefits from UCS implementation.

## The interplay between UCS Implementation and Indicators of UCS School Quality

A UCS school can vary in both the number of components that they offer and in the indicators of program quality. This co-occurrence of how programs can vary matters in two important ways. First, schools can increase or decrease the number of components that they offer across school years. Second, Banner Schools—or schools recognized as part of the National Recognition Program for their commitment to UCS—exemplify high quality UCS programs (as measured by indicators of program quality in the standards determined by the National Recognition Program’s Certifying Body). This section will discuss both aspects in more detail.

### Schools that Increased or Decreased the Number of Offered UCS Components in 2023-2024

Due to the annual nature of the UCS Liaison Survey, when a school liaison responds consistently, each year, CSDE can analyze certain data over time and examine trends. In looking at the number of components implemented in a school over the last two years (2022-2023 and 2023-2024) most schools (66%) offered the same number of components in the last two school years. Out of the remaining 34% of schools, 20% increased the number of components that they offered and 14% decreased the number of components that they offered.

Table UCS14 shows the similarities and differences between schools that increased or decreased the number of components that they offered in the 2023-2024 school year. Schools did not differ based on school level, the number of students with IDD, support from the community, or funding sources that their school utilized for UCS implementation. However, there were more schools with a leadership team in schools that increased the number of components than in schools that decreased the number of components.<sup>22</sup> Concurrently, schools that increased the number of components that they offered reported more program integration<sup>23</sup> and awareness<sup>24</sup> than schools that decreased the number of components that they offered. Lastly, more schools that decreased the number of components that they offered in 2023-2024 said that UCS was somewhat likely or not likely to continue in 2024-2025 compared to schools that increased the number of components

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<sup>22</sup>  $\chi^2(2) = 39.87, p < .001, Cramer's V = .22.$

<sup>23</sup>  $t(946.26) = 2.67, p = .008, d = .17.$

<sup>24</sup>  $t(902.51) = 4.66, p = .008, d = .29.$

that they offered.<sup>25</sup> This shows further support for the importance of leadership teams, UCS integration, and awareness of UCS activities within a school in relation to schools that increase or decrease implementation of UCS activities across school years.

**Table UCS14.** A description of schools that increased or decreased the number of components that they offered in the 2023-2024 school year.

	Increased Components	Decreased Components
Overall	664 (20%)	472 (14%)
Leadership team		
Any leadership team	170 (30%)	52 (13%)
No leadership team	409 (71%)	355 (87%)
Program integration (Average, SD)	7.5 (2.3)	7.1 (2.2)
Program awareness (Average, SD)	6.9 (1.7)	6.4 (1.8)
Perceived Sustainability		
UCS continuation next year		
Likely	497 (77%)	314 (70%)
Not likely	141 (22%)	135 (30%)
UCS continuation without liaison direct involvement		
Likely	264 (41%)	171 (38%)
Not likely	375 (58%)	281 (62%)
School's self-sustainability		
Likely	232 (36%)	147 (33%)
Not likely	405 (64%)	303 (67%)

### Banner Schools

Banner Schools are schools that are formally recognized as part of the National Banner Recognition Program for their exemplary implementation of UCS within their school. This subsection will describe how Banner Schools differ from other UCS schools in implementation of UCS activities and indicators of program quality.

Based on this year's Liaison Survey, most Banner Schools are suburban high schools with less than 50% of students having free or reduced lunch. Banner schools implemented more activities across each UCS core experience compared to schools not recognized under the National Recognition Program. As seen in Table UCS15, Banner

<sup>25</sup>  $\chi^2(2) = 8.94, p = .011, \text{Cramer's } V = .09.$

schools implemented more activities than three-component schools that were not recognized as part of the National Recognition Program.

**Table UCS15.** Average Number of Activities Implemented in UCS Banner Schools and Three-component Schools that are Not Recognized Under the National Recognition Program.

Component	Banner Schools	Three-component Schools Not Recognized as a Banner School
Unified Sports	2.6	2.2
Inclusive youth leadership	2.7	1.9
Whole school events	3.3	2.5

Compared to other schools, Banner Schools also differed based on indicators of program quality. More Banner Schools (63%) had a leadership team compared to one-component schools (20%), two-component schools (74%), or three-component schools that were not recognized as a Banner School (51%).<sup>26</sup> Liaisons from Banner Schools also reported more integration<sup>27</sup> of UCS within their school and awareness<sup>28</sup> of UCS activities by others in the school community compared to one-, two-, or three-component schools that were not recognized as a Banner School.

Overall, the findings from UCS Banner Schools support findings from other aspects of the 2023-2024 Liaison Survey. More UCS liaisons from Banner Schools reported that they had a leadership team. Furthermore, they reported that UCS was integrated into their school community and that school stakeholders were aware of UCS activities within their school. They also reported having more UCS activities or events within their school compared to three-component schools that did not.

### Impact of UCS Implementation

The 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation asked students and adult educational stakeholders why students participate in UCS activities as well as the effects of their participation. Responses provided CSDE with the opportunity to assess whether past findings related to the reach of UCS implementation and the positive impacts for students with and without IDD. Additionally, student-level data afforded CSDE the opportunity to expand the understanding of how UCS participation relates to their sense of belonging within their school and whether UCS participation helps students with and without IDD develop a positive identity.

<sup>26</sup>  $\chi^2(9) = 595, p < .001, Cramer's V = .18.$

<sup>27</sup>  $F(3, 590) = 200, p < .001, eta^2 = .09$

<sup>28</sup>  $F(3, 607) = 297, p < .001, eta^2 = .14$

## Student Participation in UCS Activities

Student survey data from eight schools<sup>29</sup> assessed student participation in UCS activities across each core experience in their school. Across all schools, 64% of students reported that they participated in at least one UCS activity or event. Compared to the last times that student participation was measured, the 64% of students who participated in these schools were similar to the percentage of students who participated in the 2017-2018 school year (69%). Furthermore, this represents a higher level of participation in schools than the percentage of students who previously participated during the 2014-2015 (53%) and 2015-2016 (50%) school years. Schools that implement UCS for many years have a higher percentage of students who participate in UCS activities within their school.

Students from these schools stated the components that they participated in within their school. As seen in Table IS1, most students participated in whole school engagement activities within their school. Encouragingly, more students participated in each component compared to the last student surveys in 2018-2019 (Jacobs et al., 2019).

**Table IS1.** Student Participation in Unified Champion Schools Activities In 2023-2024 And 2018-2019.

Component	Percent of students who participated in 2023-2024	Percent of students who participated in 2018-2019
Whole school engagement	58%	47-50%
Unified Sports	24%	10%
Inclusive youth leadership	16%	8%

Note: In the 2018-2019 (Year 10) report, student participation for whole school activities were separated by activities or events instead of by component.

This year's Annual UCS Evaluation assessed student participation using a revised methodology compared to previous evaluations. For Unified Sports and inclusive youth leadership components, students were asked if they participated in any activities offered at their school within the past few years. If they had participated, they then rated their level of engagement in these UCS activities.<sup>30</sup> This resulted in three participation levels:

- No Participation: Students did not participate in any Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities.
- Lower Engagement: Students participated in these activities but reported lower levels of engagement.

<sup>29</sup> The eight schools include three schools that participated in CSDE's and Special Olympics' previous intervention study (Jacobs et al., 2017; McDowell et al., 2017) and five schools that were recruited as comparison schools for those that participated in the intervention study.

<sup>30</sup> A description of the methodology used to measure student engagement is provided in the [Student Surveys](#) section of the [Appendix: In-Depth Methodology for the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation](#)

- Higher Engagement: Students participated in these activities and reported high levels of engagement.

Encouragingly, most students who participated in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities in their school are highly engaged in their participation (see Table IS2). Only a few students who participated in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities report a lower engagement when they participate. Later sections of this report will describe how the level of participation relates to student outcomes.

**Table IS2.** Counts Of Students Who Participated in UCS activities In Their School, Separated by Their Level of Participation.

Component	Number of students	Percent of those who participated	Percent overall
Unified Sports			
Higher engagement	471	96%	23%
Lower engagement	22	4%	1%
Did not participate	1,582	--	76%
Inclusive youth leadership			
Higher engagement	272	92%	14%
Lower engagement	24	8%	1%
Did not participate	1,595	--	84%
Whole school engagement			
3 or more events	308	--	15%
2 events	415	--	20%
1 event	452	--	22%
0 events	848	--	42%

Note: One school did not have any inclusive youth leadership activities or events.

Students who did not participate in a core experience within their school were asked whether they were aware of activities or events in their school. As seen in Table IS3, most non-participating students were aware of UCS activities that occurred in their school. This contrasts with 2015-2016, where students who did not participate in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities were less aware of those activities in their school. Compared to schools in their first few years of UCS implementation, students from these schools reported being aware of UCS implementation within their school.

**Table IS3.** Students’ Awareness of UCS activities in their School.

	Percent Aware in 2023-2024 (Year 16)	Percent Aware in 2015-2016 (Year 8)
Whole school engagement	68%	--
Inclusive youth leadership	61%	41%
Unified Sports	83%	38%

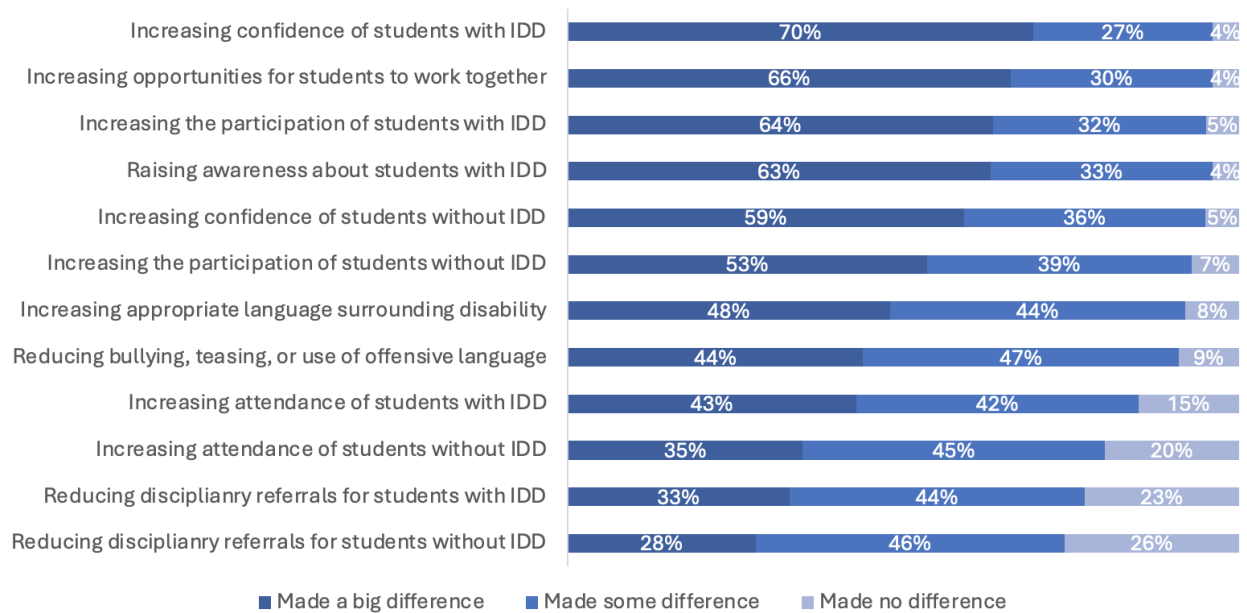
Note: The 2015-2016 end-of-year survey asked about awareness of Unified Sports and inclusive youth leadership activities. The end-of-year survey did not ask about awareness of whole school events.

**UCS Continues to Demonstrate its Impact on Student Visibility, Social Interactions Between Students with and Without IDD, and Attitudes towards Students with IDD**

Findings from the Annual Liaison Survey, student surveys, and staff interviews support the continued positive influence of UCS activities in increasing the visibility of students with IDD within their school.

Figure IS1 shows UCS’s liaisons perceptions for how much of an impact UCS has had for students with and without IDD, as reported in this year’s Annual Liaison Survey. Like previous years, liaisons reported that UCS is impactful for students with and without IDD.

**Figure IS1.** UCS Liaisons’ perception Of UCS Impact on Students.



Note: The original survey questions employed 6-point Likert scale, in which 1 means “The Unified Champion Schools activities did not make a difference” and 6 means “The Unified Champion Schools activities made a big a difference.” In the analysis, the scale was combined in ways that 6 and 5 mean “Made a big difference,” 4 and 3 means “Made some difference,” and 2 and 1 mean “Made no difference.”



Additional data was collected from students and school staff related to student visibility, social interactions between students with and without IDD, and attitudes towards students with IDD. As seen in Table IS4, students without IDD reported that students with IDD were visible in all aspects of a school community. Visibility was higher this year compared to prior evaluative findings (as reported in Siperstein et al., 2019)—likely because these schools have implemented UCS for many years.

**Table IS4.** School Visibility in 2023-2024 Compared to 2014-2015.

<b>Location</b>	<b>2023-2024 Evaluation</b>	<b>Siperstein et al. (2019)</b>
Hallway	99%	94%
Cafeteria	96%	85%
Academic classes	63%	38%
Non-academic classes	74%	65%
Special education classrooms	93%	--
Playing on a sports team	69%	--
Extracurricular activities	69%	41%
School events	91%	--
Traveling to or from school	70%	--

Prior evaluation findings (Siperstein et al., 2017, 2019) found that UCS participation led to more social interactions between students with and without IDD. As seen in Table IS5, this year's evaluation found similar results. Compared to students who do not participate in UCS activities within their school, students who reported higher engagement in Unified Sports, students who reported higher engagement in inclusive youth leadership activities, and those who attended three or more whole school engagement events reported increased interactions with students with IDD in their school. As in prior evaluation findings (Jacobs et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019), these effects were found when accounting for student demographics and the school that the student attended. UCS participation—whether it occurs through attending multiple whole school events or through highly engaged participation in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities—continues to lead to more social interactions between students with and without IDD.

**Table IS5.** Student with IDD Interactions with Students with IDD as Predicted by Their Participation in UCS Activities.

UCS Component	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Unified Sports			
Lower engagement	0.12	0.15	.412
Higher engagement	<b>0.24</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Inclusive youth leadership			
Lower engagement	0.21	0.13	.118
Higher engagement	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Whole school engagement			
1 event	0.05	0.04	.186
2 events	0.08	0.04	.059
3 or more events	<b>0.31</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>

Note: students' age, grade, gender, self-reported disability, race or ethnicity, how visible students with IDD were in their school, and the school that they attended.

School staff interviewed as part of this year's Annual UCS Evaluation similarly stated that UCS participation was associated with increased visibility and interactions for students with IDD. One special education teacher who participated in the staff interview portion of this year's evaluation—but who was not an UCS liaison—exemplified this point:

Before we were partners with UCS, it was just me with my students [in my special education class]. They didn't have friends before, but they have friends now. They feel comfortable. Hanging out with others on the weekend and even with each other... has increased friendships and confidence.

Students with and without IDD made similar points. One student with IDD who participated in a different aspect of the Annual UCS Evaluation, in discussing the social interactions between students with and without IDD, said: "You just have to just play together and get to know each other, and then you'll find a friendship between you and the person." When asked what makes social interactions, they said: "You just have to carry a conversation to see where it goes. And then if you see something you [have in common], you can get to know each other from there."

This year's evaluation also examined whether UCS participation led to more positive attitudes toward students with IDD and a more positive perception of how inclusive their school is for students with IDD. Compared to students who do not participate in UCS activities within their school, students participating in UCS activities demonstrated more positive attitudes toward their peers with IDD. Consistent with prior evaluation findings from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years (Siperstein et al., 2017, 2019), increased social interactions with students with IDD fostered more positive attitudes towards

students with IDD. Students with a higher sense of belonging with their school<sup>31</sup> reported more positive attitudes towards students with IDD (see Table IS6).<sup>32</sup>

**Table IS6.** Students' Attitudes Towards Students With IDD.

Component	Without Social Interactions and Sense of Belonging			With Social Interactions and Sense of Belonging		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Sense of belonging				<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>.001</b>
Social interactions				<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Unified Sports						
Lower engagement	0.01	0.11	.997	0.01	0.11	.972
Higher engagement	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>.023</b>	0.03	0.03	.282
IYL						
Lower engagement	0.02	0.09	.816	0.02	0.10	.807
Higher engagement	-0.02	0.04	.511	-0.05	0.04	.171
WSE Events						
1 event	0.05	0.03	.070	0.04	0.03	.234
2 events	0.07	0.03	.051	0.03	0.03	.291
3 or more events	0.04	0.04	.318	-0.03	0.04	.480

Note: *b* = unstandardized regression weight, *p* = the chance of obtaining these results if UCS had no effect on student attitudes towards students with IDD.

Compared to students who do not participate in UCS activities within their school, students who had a higher sense of belonging with their school also reported that their school was more inclusive for students with IDD (see Table IS7). Surprisingly, the *very few* students who reported lower engagement in Unified Sports activities also reported *lower* perceptions of how inclusive their school is compared to students who did not participate in Unified Sports.<sup>33</sup> Future evaluative work should investigate whether this is a spurious

<sup>31</sup> A student's sense of belonging was a focal point of the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation. The subsection "A Sense of Belonging and Positive Identity Development" will go into more detail about how UCS activities leads to an increased sense of belonging for students with and without IDD.

<sup>32</sup> When not including social interactions or a sense of belonging with their school, students who had higher engagement in Unified Sports reported more positive attitudes toward students with IDD.

<sup>33</sup> Further analyses on these few students showed no consistent pattern across students who had lower engagement in Unified Sports. They comprised of no more than four students per school and comprised no more than 1% of the total sample of surveyed students.

finding or if students who are less engaged in Unified Sports activities in their school have lower attitudes towards students with IDD.

**Table IS7.** Students' Attitudes Towards School Inclusion for Students with IDD.

Component	Without Social Interactions and Sense of Belonging			With Social Interactions and Sense of Belonging		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Sense of belonging				<b>.31</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Social interactions				.02	.02	.276
Unified Sports						
Lower engagement	-.25	.13	.054	<b>-.26</b>	<b>.12</b>	<b>.030</b>
Higher engagement	.04	.04	.267	-.02	.03	.457
IYL						
Lower engagement	-.10	.11	.353	-.15	.10	.159
Higher engagement	.02	.04	.674	-.02	.04	.669
WSE Events						
1	-.02	.03	.580	-.04	.03	.261
2	<b>.09</b>	<b>.04</b>	<b>.024</b>	.05	.04	.152
3 or more events	.07	.05	.152	-.01	.04	.894

Note: *b* = unstandardized regression weight, *p* = the chance of obtaining these results if UCS had no effect on student attitudes towards how inclusive their school is for students with IDD.

Prior evaluation efforts also investigated whether students who did not participate in any UCS activity within their school still reported benefits of UCS participation within their school. Students who were aware of UCS within their school but did not participate in any UCS activity or attend any event still reported more favorable attitudes towards students with IDD, thought their school was more inclusive for students with IDD, and had more social interactions with students with IDD.<sup>34</sup> The only exception is that students who were aware of inclusive youth leadership events in their school did not have more favorable attitudes towards students with IDD in their school.<sup>35</sup>

Prior evaluation reports (Jacobs et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2023) demonstrated that UCS programming helps students with and without IDD understand and contextualize what it means to have a disability. This year's evaluation further supports these findings. Exemplar student responses from students with IDD include: "it really doesn't mean much

<sup>34</sup> *t*-scores > 2.01, *ps* < .045, *ds* > 0.18

<sup>35</sup> *t*(625) = 1.40, *p* = .161, *d* = 0.11

to my identity”, “it really doesn’t matter what I have or don’t,” “it’s matters what I think,” and “this is who I am.” When asked what their disability means to them, a common response from students with IDD was that their disability was a part of who they are but did not fully define them. Students with IDD also acknowledged the need for different types of support compared to their peers without IDD.

Students without IDD mentioned how having interactions with students with IDD helps them reconceptualize what it means to have a disability, how life may be different for students with IDD, and how society can become more inclusive for students with IDD to thrive within their school. As evidenced by student surveys and prior evaluation findings, this positive shift in understanding, attitudes, and perceptions stems from increased visibility of and social interactions with students with IDD.

Lastly, this year’s Annual Liaison Survey and in-depth interviews with UCS liaisons and school staff asked liaisons to expand on why they thought UCS implementation may not have made a difference for students. Liaisons mentioned that a lack of overall activities, a separation between special and general education classrooms, a lack of resources, or a lack of support from school stakeholders were associated with a perception of UCS not making a difference in their school. Some liaisons also mentioned that UCS was new in their school and that it was too soon to see an impact. These findings further support the need for program awareness and integration within their school to best promote the impact of UCS for students.

### **A Sense of Belonging and Positive Identity Development**

Continuing to demonstrate the positive impact that UCS has for students with and without IDD, the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation expanded its focus on two additional outcomes: (1) how UCS participation leads to a student’s increased sense of belonging with their school, and (2) how UCS participation can support and promote the development of a student’s positive identity. Findings from both student surveys and student interviews demonstrate that UCS participation is associated with a higher sense of belonging and positive identity development.

#### ***UCS and Sense of Belonging***

Students who participate in UCS activities had a higher sense of belonging with their school.<sup>36</sup> As seen in Table IS8, students who had higher engagement in Unified Sports and who attended two or more whole school events reported the highest sense of belonging with their school.

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<sup>36</sup> Students reported an average of 28.20 ( $SD = 6.30$ ) on a 10-question scale used to measure a student’s sense of belonging with their school (1: *not at all true*, 4: *completely true*). Possible values ranged from 10 to 40.

**Table IS8.** Students' Sense of Belonging with Their School.

UCS Component	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>P</i>
Unified Sports			
Lower engagement	0.16	0.14	.278
Higher engagement	<b>0.14</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
Inclusive youth leadership			
Lower engagement	-0.01	0.13	.974
Higher engagement	-0.08	0.05	.109
Whole school engagement			
1 event	0.03	0.04	.472
2 events	<b>0.10</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>.024</b>
3 or more events	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>.012</b>

A somewhat surprising finding from the student survey data is that a student's participation in inclusive youth leadership activities was not directly related to an increased sense of belonging to their school. Student interviews from the five additional schools that participated in the UCS and positive identity development aspect of this year's Annual UCS Evaluation provided insight into why this may have occurred. Students with and without IDD stated that UCS participation provided them with a place to belong within their school through Unified events and activities. UCS may help students feel like they belong within their school while also providing students a space within their school where they can have positive social interactions and relationships.

Students with and without IDD who participate in UCS activities provided many explanations for why UCS is a space where they can have a higher sense of belonging. One reason is that students view UCS activities as safe spaces. One student with IDD exemplified this point:

To me, [Unified is] kind of a more comfortable space. It's easier to talk to people [in Unified classrooms] versus other classes. It's like, "Oh, you just feel like you're constantly being judged about something." But in Unified, it's like, no one's going to judge you because we're pretty much all like the same.

A student without IDD who was the president of their Unified Club offered a similar point: "no matter what bad of a day I was having or whatever was going on at school, I always had a place that I was accepted and loved." They continued: "I don't have to hide anything about me. Being able to be in a place that accepts me no matter what... is something that is really special to me."

Additionally, and consistent with its mission, the structure, design, and implementation of UCS helps students fully participate in multiple types of intentionally inclusive activities and events within their school. This finding is well-established and has emerged in almost every prior annual evaluation conducted by CSDE (Jacobs et al., 2020;

Ramdass et al., 2023). This year's Annual UCS Evaluation found that students do not differentiate among UCS activities within their school. Instead, they see all activities associated with UCS as a place that is socially inclusive for students. This is important because intentionally inclusive, welcoming, and safe spaces are conducive to youth having positive thoughts and interactions, which in turn leads to their positive identity development (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

### *UCS and Positive Identity Development*

The last section focused on how students who participate in UCS activities within their school have a higher sense of belonging with their school or with Unified events at their school. Additionally, findings from the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation show that meaningful UCS participation leads to positive identity development for students with and without IDD. To start, the inclusive nature of UCS activities allowed students with and without IDD to feel like they can be themselves and form meaningful connections. In a focus group, three students without IDD described this point:

Student 1: I think [students with IDD] bring out a different side of us, we can be ourselves with them. They make us laugh. We can tell them things. They can tell us things. It's just honestly like a real good friendship.

Student 2: It feels like there's no judgment. It feels open.

Student 3: You can just see the different side of not only us, but them too. When they're with us, a lot of them seem a lot happier. They can be themselves, too.

This inclusive environment helped students experience a sense of discovery through their participation in UCS. These activities and events provided opportunities for students with and without IDD to have normative high school experiences within an inclusive environment. Students tried new things, succeeded in doing things that they did not expect to succeed in, and experienced an immense sense of pride in their accomplishments. These experiences helped students figure out who they are and what they are capable of—processes that help students form a positive identity through positive thoughts about themselves (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Leary et al., 1995).

Many students felt “happy,” “excited,” and “proud” of their accomplishments. One student with IDD shared that they contributed to a fundraiser for the UCS program by helping ensure the event ran smoothly, and then they felt accomplished and happy that they could support it. Similar experiences were shared by students without IDD. One student noted:

I was a student aide in the Unified Soccer Club, and I feel like my biggest accomplishment with that was just being able to take photos for the Unified Soccer Club. I was able to take a lot of photos and compile them all together into a

slideshow to present it back to my principal. He was able to compile it and show it to a lot of the administrators.

When asked how this student felt, they said: “This accomplishment just made me feel very proud. I was very happy with what I did and I'm happy that it made a lot of people happy.”

Students talked about the positive relationships that occur between students with and without IDD as part of UCS. These relationships and support between students with and without IDD extend beyond UCS activities and go into general education spaces within a school's community. One student with IDD expanded on this point as part of a discussion about the distinction between athletes and partners in UCS at their school:

A partner is someone that you can kind of help them out if they need help with stuff. They're kind of there to support you and also there to help you with stuff. But then if you're an athlete, then it's like, “okay, you can do this.” But if you still need help with something the partner will step in and be like, “Hey, do you want help?” Or if you're feeling down or if you're frustrated about something, then the partner will step in and be like, “Hey, are you okay? What's wrong?” And it's a nice way to help you out and it's just easier... If the teachers are busy, then you can always ask your partner, like, “Hey, I need to talk to someone. I'm having an off day. Can we just go somewhere and talk?” Or have a walk around inside the school and ask, “Hey, I'm having an off day. I need someone to talk to just to get some stress off” or just stuff like that.

Additionally, students who participated in UCS activities developed many social skills and had many positive social interactions. For example, youth with IDD said that they learned how to be a part of a team and how to make friends in school. A student with IDD exemplified this point: “[UCS] changed me to a better person. I'm super smart and I'm nice to people and I'm happy and I have friends.” A student leader with IDD expanded on their skill development and social interactions as part of their leadership role within Unified Sports:

I am a third captain, which means I am a younger captain on my Unified Soccer team. That means that if I worked hard enough, I would get promoted. And if I told my Unified teammates, I told them to, “Next year, run faster. Learn your passing game. Maybe learn your dribbling and shooting.” I'm really hoping to see that some of my other Unified athletes get promoted to the captain position... I know if they work—if they work hard enough and show Coach [name] that they are reliable in the pocket and in the game, I know in no time that even after my time, that the captains are going to be four Unified athletes.

Students without IDD also discussed the skills that they learned and the confidence they obtained through UCS activities. They mentioned that they learned how to be more sociable, to communicate better, to be more confident, and to develop friendships with people they did not necessarily think they could be friends with. Students further explained



that part of their skill development and increased confidence stems from the leadership opportunities offered to them through the UCS activities in their school. For youth both with and without IDD, leadership in UCS often included opportunities for one student to help or support another student. In the words of a student with IDD: “Being a leader makes me feel helpful because I feel like I’m able to help guide those around me and also offer the kind of support that I know I would want if I felt like I needed it.”

Taken together, meaningful UCS participation facilitates identity development for students of all abilities. Students with IDD talked about how they learned to be a good sport and how they enjoy being a part of their school. One student with IDD mentioned: “I’m a fun kid, I’m nice, and I’m respectful.” Another student with IDD shared: “I am caring, kind, and I’m also friendly to everyone... I have learned about myself to be more open and to help one another.” Similarly, students without IDD reflected on what they learned about themselves through their participation in UCS activities. One student explained: “I find that I can be a more confident person, and I can be in an open space with a lot of people and still hold a room or maintain a conversation.” Another student mentioned: “I’ve learned that I’m more social than I thought I was originally, and that communicating just takes effort.” A third student expanded on this topic:

I’ve learned that I don’t need someone else to validate my actions and my opinions. This was something I really struggled with going into high school. I was very insecure going into high school. And so, I often looked towards my friends to kind of back me up. But over the past few years [through my participation in UCS], I’ve kind of learned that I don’t need that and that I am able to move past that.

Positive experiences—and the feeling of pride and self-discovery that comes from participating in UCS within their school—have influenced the future directions of students both with and without IDD. One student with IDD similarly stated: “[Unified] helps me be a better person in life.” Another student without IDD reflected:

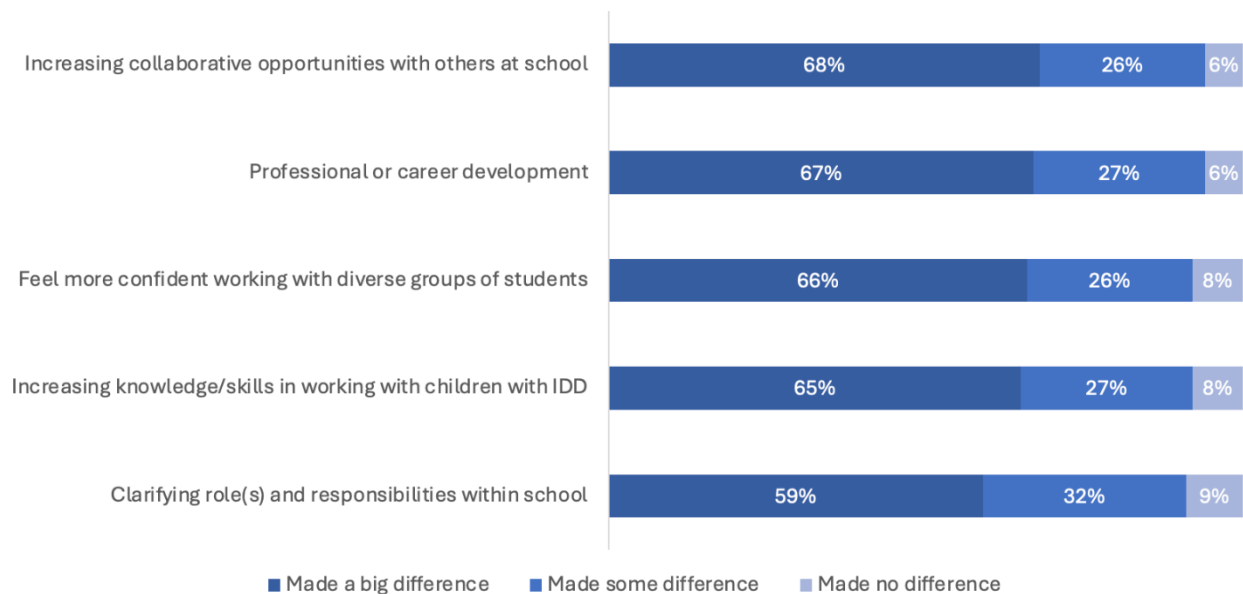
I mean, UCS really shaped who I am. My purpose in life is to be the best that I can be for those around me. I spend a lot of my time with those that might not always have the friendliest greeting from everybody that they’ve met. My goal is to be someone that people can come to if they need help or if they just want somebody to talk to, and to be that open and inviting individual that Unified has helped me become.

To summarize, students reported that UCS activities were a socially safe and inclusive space. The increased social inclusion for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS activities had three important benefits. Students reported a higher sense of belonging with their school overall. Students also reported that they had a space where they could belong within their school—spaces provided by UCS activities. This increased sense of belonging within their school helped students grow, discover who they are, and navigate their social environments within their high school. Combined, this helps students with and without IDD develop a positive sense of self.

### Benefits for UCS Liaisons

In addition to the benefits for students with and without IDD, UCS implementation led to many benefits for UCS liaisons and the school community. UCS liaisons noted that UCS helped increase collaborative opportunities with others within their school, advanced their professional or career growth, helped increase their confidence in working with diverse groups of students in their school, increased the knowledge of skills in working with students with IDD, and clarified their roles and responsibilities within their school (see Figure IS2).

**Figure IS2.** Perceived impact of UCS for school liaisons.



UCS liaisons and school staff also reported the benefits of UCS liaisons for the entire community. One school administrator noted: “[UCS] has just made inclusion what we do. You know, I remember when we started ten years ago, it was like one of those things where we had to organize things... Now, things just happen.” Another UCS liaison noted:

We have our red shirts, and we wear them for our events. And we have students who aren't involved in the program yet will say, “hey, I heard about UCS through my friend. How do I get involved in that next year?” Our shirts are red for a reason. We're bright and loud and proud.

## Overall Findings and Recommendations for 2024-2025

### Overall Findings

Overall, the Center for Social Development and Education’s 2023-2024 Annual Unified Champion Schools’ (UCS) Evaluation found that Special Olympics UCS continues to have a meaningful impact for students with IDD, students without IDD, and for the entire

school community. CSDE was able to identify findings and provide insights into the four questions that guided the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation.

**First, what did UCS implementation look like in the 2023-2024 school year?** UCS implementation was as good as or better than previous years. There continues to be an increase in the number of three-component schools since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., 2020-2021 school year), and most new schools that start UCS are starting as three-component schools. The increase in the number of UCS schools (now over 10,000 schools) means that more schools are implementing UCS activities than ever before.

**Second, what do indicators of quality programming look like in UCS schools in 2023-2024?** The quality indicators for Special Olympics UCS look healthy. Both Special Olympics North America (SONA) and state Special Olympics Programs continue to help support UCS schools through resources and professional development opportunities. State Special Olympics Programs further support the implementation of UCS within schools through technical assistance, logistical support, and funding. Lastly, many schools continue to be supported by multiple stakeholders within their school (e.g., general education teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and community members) in their implementation of UCS activities.

Expanding from the 2022-2023 Annual UCS Evaluation, CSDE also found three key indicators of program quality: having a leadership team, the integration of UCS within a school's overall community, and the awareness of UCS implementation within their school. Consistent with previous years, 32% of liaisons reported that their UCS school had a leadership team (32%). However, schools that had a leadership team had higher quality UCS implementation and outcomes of their implementation. Concurrently, program awareness and integration were higher in three-component schools (compared to two- and one-component schools) and schools that had a leadership team. These indicators also were higher in schools that increased the number of components that they offered in the last year compared to those who decreased the number of offered components, and they are related to whether a school is likely to continue UCS in the 2024-2025 school year.

**Third, what are the continued reach and benefits for students with and without IDD who participate in UCS?** The reach of UCS at the student level is similar to or higher than in past years. Based on student survey data, more students within high-quality UCS programs are attending whole school events and participating in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities than in 2018-2019—or the last time that participation percentages were assessed. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of students who participate in Unified Sports or inclusive youth leadership activities within their school are highly engaged in their participation.

Additionally, CSDE found many positive outcomes for students and schools that participate in UCS. As in previous evaluations, UCS participation led to more favorable attitudes towards students with IDD, the perception that their school is more inclusive for students with IDD, and a more positive conceptualization for what it means to have a

disability. UCS liaisons also noted that UCS participation led to many continued benefits for their overall school community and educators within their school. When benefits did not occur, it was either due to a lack of UCS awareness or integration within their school.

**Fourth, how does a student’s participation in UCS activities within their school impact their sense of belonging with their school and their positive identity development?** A student’s sense of belonging improves in two ways based on their participation in UCS. Students who participate report that they have a higher sense of belonging—either directly through their school or within UCS activities offered within their school. Students also report increased social interactions and relationships and an immense sense of pride from their accomplishments within UCS. Combined, the increased sense of belonging and experiences within UCS helps students with and without IDD develop a positive identity.

### Recommendations for 2024-2025

Based on the findings from the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation, CSDE offers the following four recommendations for SONA as UCS moves into its 17<sup>th</sup> year of implementation in its 10,000 schools across the United States.

**First, SONA should help state Special Olympics Programs promote and support the implementation of inclusive youth leadership activities within new and existing schools.** UCS schools that offer all three core experiences continue to have the most benefits for students with and without IDD. However, inclusive youth leadership is less frequently implemented in two- and one-component schools. Identifying ways to help promote the need for inclusive youth leadership activities within UCS schools and promote its implementation will help students have the most benefits from UCS implementation in their school.

**Second, SONA should help schools organize UCS leadership teams that include important stakeholders of a school community.** The benefits of a UCS leadership team are well known based on this year’s and prior years’ Annual UCS Evaluations. However, the majority of UCS schools do not have a leadership team and the ones that do may not include all members of the school community. Finding ways to promote leadership teams within a UCS school that includes all members of the school community can provide the best outcomes for everyone involved in UCS within a school community.

**Third, SONA should help state Special Olympics Programs increase support for one and two component schools.** While the trends of new and total three-component schools are very promising, increasing support for one- and two-component schools can help improve the quality of these UCS schools and the benefits for students with and without IDD. Increasing support can also help improve the number of schools that continue to implement UCS for many years.

**Fourth, clarify the processes involved in sharing resources, trainings, and professional development opportunities with state Special Olympics Programs and UCS liaisons.** Given the benefits of high-quality UCS programs for students and schools, finding ways to continue to support both UCS schools and state Special Olympics Programs can help provide the most benefits for the greatest number of schools. Resources, trainings, and professional development opportunities created by SONA may offer the widest possibility for promoting UCS within schools. This may also support schools' ability to form and maintain leadership teams and increase UCS awareness and integration into schools.

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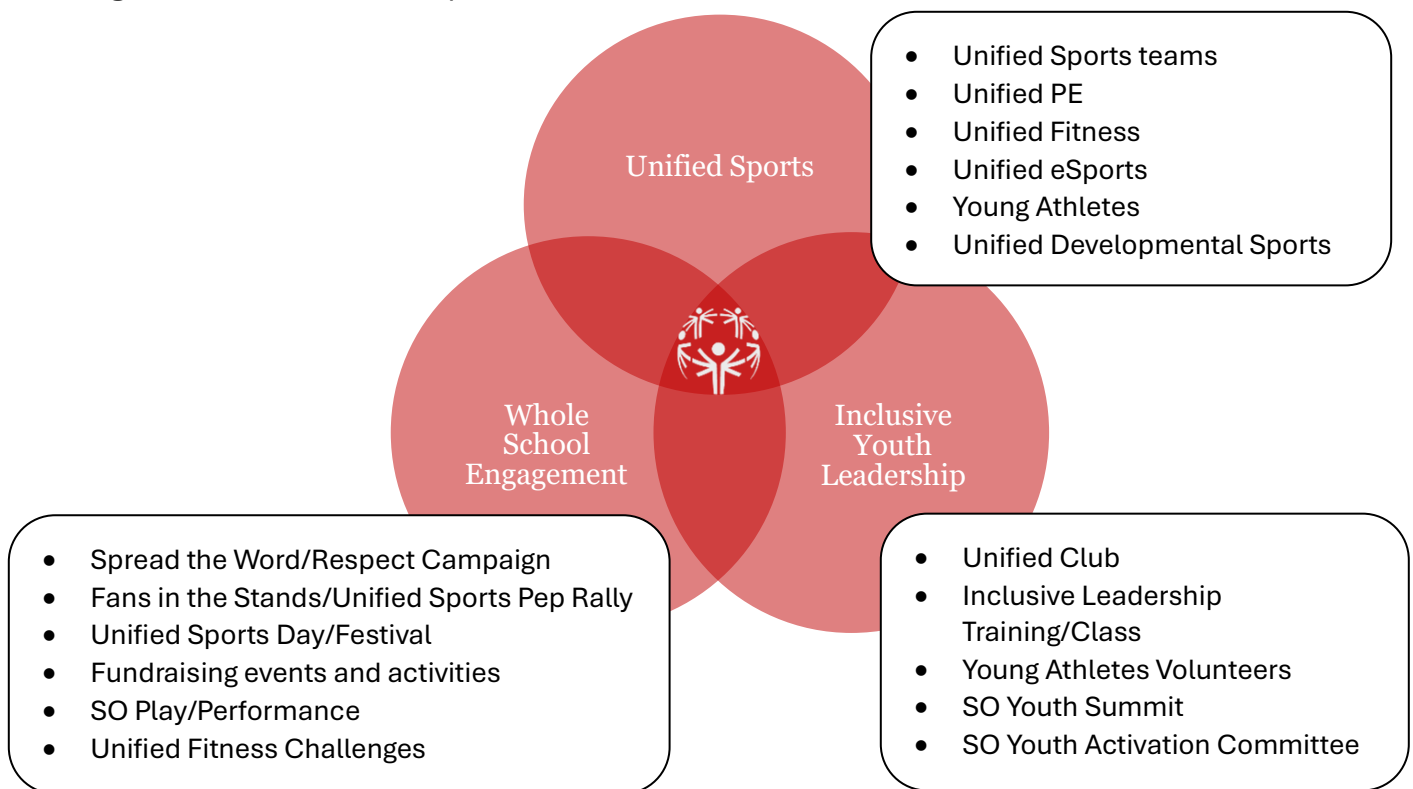
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## Appendix: Special Olympics UCS Guidelines

### 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.

**Figure SOG1.** UCS core experiences and activities evaluated in 2023-2024.



### Unified Champion Schools Core Experiences

#### ***Unified Sports***<sup>®</sup>

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.

### **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 Rules](#) 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.

## Appendix: Additional 2023-2024 Liaison Survey Tables

**Table UCSA1.** UCS Liaison Survey Response Rate, By State Program.

<b>State Program</b>	<b>Surveys Completed</b>	<b>Surveys Distributed</b>	<b>Completion Rate</b>
Alabama	1	1	100%
Alaska	27	48	56%
Arizona	100	143	70%
Arkansas	60	70	86%
Colorado	119	468	25%
Connecticut	85	110	77%
Delaware	46	67	69%
District of Columbia	16	35	46%
Florida	372	447	83%
Hawaii	40	65	62%
Idaho	26	26	100%
Illinois	168	251	67%
Indiana	32	208	15%
Iowa	83	105	79%
Kansas	102	125	82%
Kentucky	52	59	88%
Louisiana	70	356	20%
Maine	47	129	36%
Maryland	110	158	70%
Massachusetts	237	300	79%
Michigan	414	470	88%
Minnesota	209	280	75%
Mississippi	51	69	74%
Missouri	51	65	78%
Montana	97	107	91%
Nebraska	129	150	86%
Nevada	56	72	78%
New Hampshire	45	80	56%
New Jersey	219	231	95%
New Mexico	35	38	92%
New York	128	298	43%
North Carolina	304	430	71%
North Dakota	7	21	33%
Northern California	142	275	52%
Ohio	67	117	57%
Oklahoma	106	122	87%
Oregon	86	108	80%

Pennsylvania	361	378	96%
Puerto Rico	13	13	100%
Rhode Island	50	81	62%
South Carolina	290	352	82%
South Dakota	37	71	52%
Southern California	115	116	99%
Tennessee	100	133	75%
Texas	424	454	93%
Utah	37	66	56%
Vermont	24	53	45%
Virginia	62	110	56%
Washington	100	117	85%
West Virginia	12	13	92%
Wisconsin	94	102	92%
Wyoming	38	57	67%
Total	5,696	8,220	69%

<sup>1</sup> Surveys completed considers liaisons who either satisfactorily or partially completed the survey.

**Table UCSA2.** UCS Liaison Survey Response Rate by School Level and State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys <sup>1</sup>	Elementary	Middle	High	Other
Alabama	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
Alaska	27	9 (33%)	3 (11%)	14 (52%)	4 (4%)
Arizona	100	28 (29%)	9 (9%)	57 (60%)	1 (1%)
Arkansas	60	11 (19%)	14 (24%)	33 (56%)	1 (2%)
Colorado	119	25 (23%)	30 (27%)	53 (48%)	2 (2%)
Connecticut	85	13 (15%)	33 (39%)	39 (46%)	0 (0%)
Delaware	46	21 (46%)	12 (26%)	9 (20%)	4 (9%)
District of Columbia	16	9 (69%)	0 (0%)	4 (31%)	0 (0%)
Florida	372	165 (46%)	71 (20%)	103 (29%)	13 (4%)
Hawaii	40	17 (46%)	9 (24%)	11 (30%)	0 (0%)
Idaho	26	0 (0%)	3 (12%)	22 (88%)	0 (0%)
Illinois	168	12 (23%)	10 (19%)	30 (58%)	0 (0%)
Indiana	32	6 (19%)	3 (10%)	22 (71%)	0 (0%)
Iowa	83	24 (29%)	21 (25%)	37 (45%)	1 (1%)
Kansas	102	41 (42%)	15 (15%)	42 (43%)	0 (0%)
Kentucky	52	15 (29%)	8 (15%)	29 (56%)	0 (0%)
Louisiana	70	35 (54%)	8 (12%)	20 (31%)	2 (3%)
Maine	47	5 (11%)	6 (13%)	33 (73%)	1 (2%)
Maryland	110	35 (32%)	13 (12%)	60 (55%)	1 (1%)
Massachusetts	237	70 (31%)	44 (19%)	111 (49%)	3 (1%)
Michigan	414	176 (44%)	65 (16%)	136 (34%)	22 (6%)
Minnesota	209	58 (28%)	46 (22%)	100 (49%)	1 (0%)
Mississippi	51	11 (26%)	11 (26%)	17 (40%)	4 (10%)
Missouri	51	4 (8%)	10 (20%)	36 (71%)	1 (2%)
Montana	97	42 (44%)	18 (19%)	35 (37%)	0 (0%)
Nebraska	129	52 (42%)	24 (20%)	47 (38%)	0 (0%)
Nevada	56	21 (38%)	15 (27%)	18 (32%)	2 (4%)
New Hampshire	45	2 (5%)	10 (24%)	29 (71%)	0 (0%)
New Jersey	219	73 (24%)	50 (23%)	91 (42%)	3 (1%)
New Mexico	35	17 (49%)	7 (20%)	9 (26%)	2 (6%)
New York	128	7 (6%)	1 (1%)	111 (87%)	8 (7%)
North Carolina	304	90 (30%)	65 (22%)	136 (45%)	8 (3%)
North Dakota	7	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	6 (86%)	0 (0%)
Northern California	142	56 (40%)	24 (17%)	57 (41%)	2 (2%)
Ohio	67	7 (10%)	15 (22%)	42 (63%)	3 (4%)
Oklahoma	106	26 (26%)	27 (27%)	48 (48%)	0 (0%)

Oregon	86	10 (12%)	17 (21%)	53 (66%)	0 (0%)
Pennsylvania	361	25 (7%)	33 (9%)	292 (83%)	1 (0%)
Puerto Rico	13	6 (60%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
Rhode Island	50	22 (46%)	14 (29%)	12 (25%)	0 (0%)
South Carolina	290	125 (45%)	73 (26%)	77 (28%)	5 (1%)
South Dakota	37	9 (26%)	7 (20%)	19 (54%)	0 (0%)
Southern California	115	36 (32%)	16 (14%)	60 (53%)	2 (2%)
Tennessee	100	17 (19%)	21 (23%)	49 (54%)	4 (4%)
Texas	424	153 (38%)	94 (23%)	153 (38%)	2 (0%)
Utah	37	3 (8%)	6 (17%)	27 (75%)	0 (0%)
Vermont	24	2 (11%)	3 (17%)	13 (72%)	0 (0%)
Virginia	62	7 (11%)	21 (34%)	34 (55%)	0 (0%)
Washington	100	8 (9%)	14 (16%)	68 (76%)	0 (0%)
West Virginia	12	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12 (100%)	0 (0%)
Wisconsin	94	30 (32%)	18 (19%)	43 (46%)	2 (2%)
Wyoming	38	9 (24%)	13 (34%)	16 (42%)	0 (0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,696</b>	<b>1,645 (29%)</b>	<b>1,053 (18%)</b>	<b>2,578 (45%)</b>	<b>106 (2%)</b>

<sup>1</sup>The number of schools at each school level, when totaled, may not equal the number of completed surveys due to missing school level information from NCES.

**Table UCSA3.** Liaison demographics.

<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>	<b>Percent of Liaisons<sup>1</sup> (n = 5,696)</b>
Liaison for more than one school	16%
Gender	
Woman	78%
Man	22%
Position within school	
Special Education Teacher	49%
Administrator	7%
Athletic Director	4%
District Coordinator	2%
Physical Education Teacher	8%
General Education Teacher	5%
Adapted Physical Education Teacher	6%
Special Education Aide/paraprofessional	3%
Special Education Services Provider	2%
School Psychologist/Counselor/Social Worker	3%
Other position not specified	11%
Number of years as liaison	
1 year or less	32%
2-3 years	36%
4-6 years	20%
7-10 years	7%
10 or more years	6%

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

**Table UCSA4.** Demographics of schools as reported in this year, 2022-2023's, and 2021-2022's Annual UCS Evaluation.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>2023-2024 Percent of schools<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2022-2023 Percent of Schools</b>	<b>2021-2022 Percent of Schools</b>
<b>Locale</b>			
Urban	27%	27%	28%
Suburban	37%	38%	37%
Town	12%	12%	12%
Rural	24%	22%	23%
<b>New to UCS this year<sup>2</sup></b>	23%	29%	22%
<b>Title I</b>	64%	62%	63%
<b>Title I School Wide</b>	46%	45%	45%
<b>School Level</b>			
Elementary	31%	30%	32%
Middle	20%	19%	19%
High	48%	47%	46%
Other	2%	4%	3%
<b>Student Enrollment<sup>3</sup></b>			
Less than 500	30%	28%	30%
501-1,000	38%	37%	38%
1,001-1,500	16%	16%	15%
Greater than 1,500	16%	17%	17%
<b>Students with ID</b>			
0-10	27%	28%	30%
11-20	29%	31%	30%
21-30	16%	16%	16%
31-50	13%	14%	13%
More than 50	14%	12%	11%
<b>Students receiving free/reduced lunch</b>			
0%-25%	24%	25%	23%
26%-50%	35%	35%	34%
51%-75%	26%	23%	23%
76%-100%	16%	17%	20%
<b>Students of racial/ethnic minority</b>			
0%-25%	35%	35%	34%
26%-50%	28%	28%	28%
51%-75%	18%	18%	19%
76%-100%	19%	19%	19%

<sup>1</sup>Note: Percentages in table may not add to 100% due to "other" responses.



<sup>2</sup> 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 UCSA5.** Awareness and Use of Special Olympics Resources

<i>Name of Resource</i>	<b>2023-2024</b>		<b>2022-2023</b>		<b>2021-2022</b>	
	<i>Awareness</i>	<i>Use</i>	<i>Awareness</i>	<i>Use</i>	<i>Awareness</i>	<i>Use</i>
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	1,143 (71%)	806 (50%)	1,005 (67%)	463 (46%)	829 (65%)	374 (63%)
Middle School Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	642 (62%)	462 (44%)	606 (64%)	282 (47%)	943 (47%)	246 (37%)
High School Playbook	1,782 (71%)	1,363 (54%)	1,618 (68%)	683 (42%)	1,151 (51%)	461 (45%)
Unified Classroom lesson and activities	1,619 (78%)	1,055 (51%)	2,578 (52%)	668 (26%)	1,831 (45%)	524 (40%)
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	1,491 (73%)	1,003 (49%)	2,021 (42%)	511(25%)	1,292 (32%)	360 (37%)
Generation Unified website	2,916 (53%)	2,076 (37%)			1,566 (38%)	n/a
Special Olympics Fitness Guide	2,821 (51%)	1,273 (23%)	2,322 (47%)	304 (13%)	1,778 (44%)	269 (22%)
Inclusion Tiles game	999 (49%)	409 (20%)	1,709 (36%)	374 (22%)	1,143 (28%)	245 (28%)
Unified Physical Education Resource	2,694 (49%)	1,395 (25%)	2,305 (47%)	524 (23%)	1,784 (44%)	431 (34%)
eLearning courses on the Special Olympics Online Learning Portal	2,314 (42%)	1,185 (21%)				
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	2,241 (40%)	973 (17%)	1,923 (40%)	307 (16%)	1,247 (35%)	150 (15%)
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	2,238 (40%)	828 (15%)	1,845 (38%)	365 (20%)	1,680 (42%)	411 (36%)
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide	783 (38%)	332 (16%)	1,487 (31%)	181 (12%)		
Inclusion Tiles Student Guide	762 (37%)	273 (13%)	1,454 (31%)	152 (10%)		
High 5 For Fitness Guide	1,731 (31%)	556 (10%)	1,617 (33%)	263 (16%)		
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	1,631 (29%)	412 (7%)	1,401 (29%)	165 (12%)		
Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S**	1,236 (22%)	442 (36%)				
Generation Unified App**	275 (18%)	67 (24%)				

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.

\*\*The calculation of awareness includes the percentage of schools that actively use the resource, except for Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S and Generation Unified App.

**Table UCSA6.** Level of UCS implementation, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys <sup>1</sup>	Three-Component Schools	Two-Component Schools	One-Component Schools
Alabama	1	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Alaska	27	14 (52%)	7 (26%)	6 (22%)
Arizona	100	56 (56%)	29 (29%)	15 (15%)
Arkansas	60	55 (92%)	4 (7%)	1 (2%)
Colorado	119	64 (54%)	38 (32%)	17 (14%)
Connecticut	85	65 (76%)	16 (19%)	4 (5%)
Delaware	46	33 (72%)	12 (26%)	1 (2%)
District of Columbia	16	9 (56%)	5 (31%)	2 (12%)
Florida	372	268 (72%)	87 (23%)	17 (5%)
Hawaii	40	24 (60%)	13 (32%)	3 (8%)
Idaho	26	17 (65%)	7 (27%)	2 (8%)
Illinois	168	104 (62%)	44 (26%)	20 (12%)
Indiana	32	18 (56%)	9 (28%)	5 (16%)
Iowa	83	46 (55%)	25 (30%)	12 (14%)
Kansas	102	59 (58%)	36 (35%)	7 (7%)
Kentucky	52	39 (75%)	8 (15%)	5 (10%)
Louisiana	70	39 (56%)	17 (24%)	14 (20%)
Maine	47	27 (57%)	18 (38%)	2 (4%)
Maryland	110	54 (49%)	30 (27%)	26 (24%)
Massachusetts	237	167 (70%)	54 (23%)	16 (7%)
Michigan	414	273 (66%)	106 (26%)	35 (8%)
Minnesota	209	110 (53%)	65 (31%)	34 (16%)
Mississippi	51	39 (76%)	3 (6%)	9 (18%)
Missouri	51	38 (75%)	11 (22%)	2 (4%)
Montana	97	53 (55%)	26 (27%)	18 (19%)
Nebraska	129	66 (51%)	46 (36%)	17 (13%)
Nevada	56	35 (62%)	11 (20%)	10 (18%)
New Hampshire	45	24 (53%)	12 (27%)	9 (20%)
New Jersey	219	157 (72%)	49 (22%)	13 (6%)
New Mexico	35	32 (91%)	1 (3%)	2 (6%)
New York	128	84 (66%)	31 (24%)	13 (10%)
North Carolina	304	190 (62%)	69 (23%)	45 (15%)
North Dakota	7	5 (71%)	2 (29%)	0 (0%)
Northern California	142	84 (59%)	41 (29%)	17 (12%)
Ohio	67	39 (58%)	16 (24%)	12 (18%)
Oklahoma	106	88 (83%)	14 (13%)	4 (4%)

Oregon	86	45 (52%)	30 (35%)	11 (13%)
Pennsylvania	361	308 (85%)	37 (10%)	16 (4%)
Puerto Rico	13	12 (92%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)
Rhode Island	50	29 (58%)	16 (32%)	5 (10%)
South Carolina	290	184 (63%)	67 (23%)	39 (13%)
South Dakota	37	18 (49%)	18 (49%)	1 (3%)
Southern California	115	103 (90%)	9 (8%)	3 (3%)
Tennessee	100	77 (77%)	17 (17%)	6 (6%)
Texas	424	235 (55%)	127 (30%)	62 (15%)
Utah	37	25 (68%)	9 (24%)	3 (8%)
Vermont	24	12 (50%)	11 (46%)	1 (4%)
Virginia	62	38 (61%)	19 (31%)	5 (8%)
Washington	100	53 (53%)	32 (32%)	15 (15%)
West Virginia	12	10 (83%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)
Wisconsin	94	41 (44%)	42 (45%)	11 (12%)
Wyoming	38	13 (34%)	18 (47%)	7 (18%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,696</b>	<b>3,679 (65%)</b>	<b>1,417 (25%)</b>	<b>600 (11%)</b>

**Table UCSA7.** Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Unified Sports Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.<sup>1</sup>

<b>State Program</b>	<b>Schools Implementing Unified Sports program</b>	<b>Completed Surveys<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Unified Sports program</b>	<b>Unified Sports team</b>	<b>Unified PE</b>	<b>Unified Fitness</b>	<b>Unified Esports</b>	<b>Young Athletes<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Unified Developmental Sports<sup>3</sup></b>
Alabama	1	1	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Alaska	27	27	100%	70%	63%	30%	11%	11%	33%
Arizona	90	100	90%	88%	78%	20%	14%	54%	25%
Arkansas	58	60	97%	95%	71%	17%	12%	45%	36%
Colorado	110	119	92%	86%	58%	7%	8%	16%	19%
Connecticut	85	85	100%	98%	61%	22%	2%	31%	30%
Delaware	42	46	91%	88%	38%	14%	5%	76%	43%
Washington D. C.	15	16	94%	73%	73%	27%	0%	78%	44%
Florida	346	372	93%	62%	56%	21%	3%	84%	46%
Hawaii	39	40	98%	87%	26%	44%	5%	25%	64%
Idaho	24	26	92%	88%	79%	12%	8%	0%	0%
Illinois	143	168	85%	60%	67%	20%	15%	67%	32%
Indiana	27	32	84%	96%	41%	15%	11%	25%	29%
Iowa	69	83	83%	74%	71%	10%	3%	47%	30%
Kansas	95	102	93%	68%	58%	27%	7%	31%	39%
Kentucky	43	52	83%	79%	56%	19%	7%	22%	19%
Louisiana	65	70	93%	54%	83%	34%	3%	31%	40%
Maine	47	47	100%	94%	38%	17%	6%	20%	27%
Maryland	110	110	100%	71%	58%	19%	3%	89%	17%
Massachusetts	224	237	95%	76%	66%	25%	4%	37%	28%
Michigan	378	414	91%	70%	46%	20%	6%	40%	33%
Minnesota	170	209	81%	61%	71%	10%	1%	20%	25%
Mississippi	49	51	96%	76%	80%	39%	22%	40%	33%
Missouri	49	51	96%	80%	65%	27%	20%	0%	7%
Montana	85	97	88%	69%	53%	20%	9%	22%	27%
Nebraska	114	129	88%	68%	54%	25%	5%	20%	27%
Nevada	55	56	98%	69%	85%	45%	16%	14%	31%
New Hampshire	40	45	89%	100%	48%	20%	0%	0%	20%
New Jersey	183	219	84%	68%	56%	16%	8%	38%	27%
New Mexico	35	35	100%	94%	46%	17%	17%	41%	38%
New York	126	128	98%	96%	44%	13%	5%	83%	14%
North Carolina	254	304	84%	48%	73%	36%	4%	55%	29%

North Dakota	7	7	100%	86%	71%	14%	29%	0%	0%
Northern California	129	142	91%	67%	67%	23%	5%	46%	43%
Ohio	64	67	96%	84%	38%	19%	5%	67%	0%
Oklahoma	104	106	98%	92%	57%	41%	17%	46%	35%
Oregon	85	86	99%	89%	65%	12%	4%	11%	15%
Pennsylvania	354	361	98%	99%	38%	9%	5%	25%	11%
Puerto Rico	13	13	100%	100%	62%	38%	38%	83%	62%
Rhode Island	48	50	96%	77%	62%	17%	0%	50%	26%
South Carolina	238	290	82%	55%	71%	21%	4%	47%	40%
South Dakota	35	37	95%	77%	66%	31%	9%	22%	31%
Southern California	111	115	97%	65%	72%	23%	6%	53%	31%
Tennessee	95	100	95%	82%	71%	18%	6%	44%	25%
Texas	384	424	91%	60%	77%	28%	8%	46%	38%
Utah	37	37	100%	95%	41%	8%	14%	33%	22%
Vermont	24	24	100%	100%	46%	21%	4%	0%	0%
Virginia	59	62	95%	76%	58%	19%	8%	50%	24%
Washington	98	100	98%	92%	47%	14%	4%	50%	9%
West Virginia	12	12	100%	67%	75%	17%	0%	0%	0%
Wisconsin	77	94	82%	40%	53%	21%	4%	58%	33%
Wyoming	36	38	95%	83%	67%	19%	17%	11%	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,208</b>	<b>5,696</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>32%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Activity percentages are calculated out of all schools implementing Unified Sports.

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

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

**Table UCSA8.** Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.<sup>1</sup>

State Program	Schools Implementing Inclusive Youth Leadership	Completed Surveys <sup>1</sup>	Inclusive Youth Leadership	Unified Club	Inclusive Leadership Training/Class	Young Athletes Volunteers	Youth Summit	Youth Activation Committee
Alabama	1	1	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Alaska	16	27	59%	88%	50%	19%	12%	19%
Arizona	67	100	67%	73%	45%	24%	22%	15%
Arkansas	57	60	95%	79%	32%	42%	32%	23%
Colorado	75	119	63%	61%	35%	32%	45%	16%
Connecticut	70	85	82%	70%	36%	27%	44%	11%
Delaware	37	46	80%	62%	54%	70%	54%	14%
Washington D. C.	11	16	69%	55%	45%	64%	27%	0%
Florida	280	372	75%	60%	37%	58%	8%	6%
Hawaii	29	40	72%	52%	55%	17%	52%	55%
Idaho	18	26	69%	61%	56%	33%	0%	0%
Illinois	120	168	71%	71%	40%	37%	29%	19%
Indiana	23	32	72%	74%	43%	57%	13%	9%
Iowa	54	83	65%	83%	31%	24%	24%	4%
Kansas	65	102	64%	49%	38%	32%	26%	12%
Kentucky	44	52	85%	89%	45%	25%	23%	14%
Louisiana	42	70	60%	62%	36%	60%	5%	2%
Maine	30	47	64%	67%	23%	33%	67%	3%
Maryland	68	110	62%	71%	43%	37%	15%	7%
Massachusetts	183	237	77%	75%	34%	38%	17%	7%
Michigan	317	414	77%	65%	48%	33%	9%	21%
Minnesota	150	209	72%	80%	36%	24%	21%	13%
Mississippi	42	51	82%	74%	62%	57%	24%	7%
Missouri	40	51	78%	72%	50%	40%	18%	12%
Montana	62	97	64%	50%	50%	48%	6%	10%
Nebraska	75	129	58%	84%	39%	33%	15%	8%
Nevada	40	56	71%	72%	62%	38%	8%	0%
New Hampshire	29	45	64%	79%	28%	28%	38%	14%
New Jersey	188	219	86%	93%	30%	24%	15%	6%
New Mexico	32	35	91%	75%	56%	53%	9%	0%
New York	100	128	78%	66%	44%	36%	59%	43%

North Carolina	243	304	80%	76%	28%	37%	9%	7%
North Dakota	5	7	71%	80%	80%	20%	20%	20%
Northern California	101	142	71%	57%	50%	50%	4%	5%
Ohio	44	67	66%	75%	39%	34%	14%	0%
Oklahoma	90	106	85%	84%	51%	42%	40%	17%
Oregon	53	86	62%	75%	51%	25%	40%	15%
Pennsylvania	322	361	89%	87%	34%	22%	73%	5%
Puerto Rico	13	13	100%	85%	62%	54%	31%	23%
Rhode Island	32	50	64%	72%	47%	47%	12%	6%
South Carolina	236	290	81%	72%	39%	45%	21%	8%
South Dakota	20	37	54%	60%	40%	40%	5%	10%
Southern California	107	115	93%	82%	42%	23%	27%	6%
Tennessee	81	100	81%	80%	49%	31%	30%	12%
Texas	280	424	66%	72%	40%	42%	4%	5%
Utah	26	37	70%	85%	42%	27%	42%	42%
Vermont	13	24	54%	85%	23%	23%	23%	15%
Virginia	41	62	66%	80%	51%	41%	7%	5%
Washington	63	100	63%	78%	51%	13%	17%	2%
West Virginia	10	12	83%	80%	50%	50%	10%	10%
Wisconsin	66	94	70%	64%	18%	44%	5%	6%
Wyoming	19	38	50%	68%	42%	42%	21%	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,230</b>	<b>5,696</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>11%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Activity percentages are calculated out of all schools implementing Inclusive Youth Leadership.



**Table UCSA9.** Percentage Of Schools Implementing Each Whole School Engagement Activity as Part Of UCS, By State Program.<sup>1</sup>

State Program	Schools Implementing Whole School Engagement	Completed Surveys <sup>1</sup>	Whole School Engagement	Spread the Word Campaign	Fans in the Stands	Unified Sports Day/Festival	Fund-raising Events	SO Play/Performance	Unified Fitness Challenges
Alabama	1	1	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	0%
Alaska	19	27	70%	74%	37%	16%	53%	5%	5%
Arizona	84	100	84%	80%	48%	44%	39%	7%	20%
Arkansas	59	60	98%	86%	59%	24%	61%	17%	14%
Colorado	100	119	84%	93%	45%	20%	49%	4%	16%
Connecticut	76	85	89%	67%	63%	28%	45%	30%	14%
Delaware	45	46	98%	98%	24%	54%	56%	9%	2%
D. C.	13	16	81%	69%	38%	46%	31%	23%	8%
Florida	369	372	99%	97%	33%	15%	16%	15%	14%
Hawaii	33	40	82%	91%	27%	36%	24%	27%	9%
Idaho	25	26	96%	68%	48%	41%	52%	12%	8%
Illinois	157	168	93%	92%	45%	48%	42%	4%	8%
Indiana	27	32	84%	67%	44%	34%	85%	7%	0%
Iowa	77	83	93%	95%	34%	30%	31%	8%	8%
Kansas	96	102	94%	86%	24%	33%	20%	8%	4%
Kentucky	51	52	98%	98%	24%	45%	29%	10%	6%
Louisiana	58	70	83%	55%	41%	36%	16%	21%	16%
Maine	42	47	89%	64%	83%	39%	26%	10%	5%
Maryland	70	110	64%	70%	63%	43%	61%	20%	13%
Massachusetts	218	237	92%	67%	71%	35%	34%	12%	8%
Michigan	371	414	90%	85%	40%	24%	28%	12%	5%
Minnesota	174	209	83%	75%	30%	44%	60%	6%	6%
Mississippi	41	51	80%	88%	49%	41%	39%	37%	20%
Missouri	49	51	96%	71%	65%	23%	61%	8%	10%
Montana	82	97	85%	76%	68%	31%	62%	13%	7%
Nebraska	118	129	91%	85%	41%	52%	45%	15%	9%
Nevada	42	56	75%	81%	48%	28%	29%	31%	21%
New Hampshire	36	45	80%	50%	81%	28%	69%	8%	8%
New Jersey	211	219	96%	84%	43%	45%	61%	9%	7%
New Mexico	33	35	94%	76%	85%	32%	21%	9%	0%
New York	101	128	79%	56%	78%	40%	55%	13%	13%

North Carolina	256	304	84%	67%	47%	29%	36%	22%	20%
North Dakota	7	7	100%	86%	43%	42%	57%	14%	14%
Northern California	121	142	85%	71%	62%	30%	15%	12%	12%
Ohio	53	67	79%	45%	74%	29%	34%	6%	2%
Oklahoma	102	106	96%	78%	77%	25%	83%	38%	16%
Oregon	68	86	79%	53%	72%	27%	51%	4%	12%
Pennsylvania	338	361	94%	78%	76%	75%	73%	5%	8%
Puerto Rico	12	13	92%	92%	75%	45%	17%	33%	50%
Rhode Island	44	50	88%	70%	57%	42%	48%	16%	11%
South Carolina	251	290	87%	75%	50%	44%	49%	12%	12%
South Dakota	36	37	97%	100%	47%	59%	61%	19%	17%
Southern California	112	115	97%	89%	62%	28%	46%	10%	13%
Tennessee	95	100	95%	92%	44%	43%	56%	13%	18%
Texas	357	424	84%	57%	55%	42%	34%	19%	13%
Utah	33	37	89%	82%	79%	14%	45%	15%	12%
Vermont	22	24	92%	41%	68%	23%	45%	5%	0%
Virginia	57	62	92%	81%	58%	26%	32%	11%	7%
Washington	77	100	77%	47%	81%	42%	30%	10%	6%
West Virginia	12	12	100%	92%	58%	25%	17%	8%	0%
Wisconsin	75	94	80%	79%	31%	22%	40%	11%	5%
Wyoming	27	38	71%	59%	44%	46%	63%	15%	11%
Total	5,033	5,696	88%	77%	52%	36%	43%	13%	11%

<sup>1</sup> Activity percentages are calculated out of all schools implementing Whole School Engagement.

**Table UCSA10.** Use of SO Resources, by school level.

<b>Name of Resource</b>	<b>All Schools</b>	<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>High</b>
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	50%	50%	NA	NA
Middle School Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	44%	NA	44%	NA
High School Playbook	54%	NA	NA	54%
Special Olympics Fitness Guide	23%	20%	22%	25%
High 5 For Fitness Guide	10%	8%	10%	11%
Unified Physical Education Resource	25%	24%	22%	28%
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	15%	34%	7%	6%
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	7%	10%	6%	7%
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	17%	10%	15%	23%
Generation Unified website	37%	35%	39%	39%
Unified Classroom lesson and activities	51%	54%	55%	48%
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	49%	40%	53%	52%
Inclusion Tiles game	20%	13%	17%	24%
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide	16%	13%	15%	18%
Inclusion Tiles Student Guide	13%	10%	11%	16%
eLearning courses on the Special Olympics Online Learning Portal	21%	15%	17%	28%
Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S**	36%	40%	41%	31%
Generation Unified App**	24%	18%	14%	29%

Notes: 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.

\*\*For Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S and Generation Unified App, percentages of use are based on the total number of liaisons who were aware of each resource.

**Table UCSA11.** Awareness of SO Resources, by school level.

<b>Name of Resource</b>	<b>All Schools</b>	<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>High</b>
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	71%	71%	NA	NA
Middle School Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	62%	NA	62%	NA
High School Playbook	71%	NA	NA	71%
Special Olympics Fitness Guide	51%	47%	48%	55%
High 5 For Fitness Guide	31%	27%	31%	33%
Unified Physical Education Resource	49%	46%	45%	52%
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	40%	53%	34%	34%
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	29%	29%	27%	30%
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	40%	33%	39%	45%
Generation Unified website	53%	50%	54%	56%
Unified Classroom lesson and activities	78%	80%	81%	76%
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	73%	66%	75%	75%
Inclusion Tiles game	49%	40%	46%	51%
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide	38%	34%	37%	40%
Inclusion Tiles Student Guide	37%	32%	33%	40%
eLearning courses on the Special Olympics Online Learning Portal	42%	34%	37%	48%
Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S	22%	21%	22%	23%
Generation Unified App	18%	12%	17%	22%

Notes: 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.

The calculation of awareness includes the percentage of schools that actively use the resource, except for Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S and Generation Unified App.

**Table UCSA12.** Usefulness of SO Resources.

<b><i>Name of Resource</i></b>	<b><i>Very Useful</i></b>	<b><i>Somewhat Useful</i></b>	<b><i>Not Useful</i></b>
Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5	61%	36%	1%
Middle School Playbook: A Guide for Grades 5-8	58%	39%	3%
High School Playbook	58%	40%	1%
Special Olympics Fitness Guide	61%	37%	2%
High 5 For Fitness Guide	63%	34%	2%
Unified Physical Education Resource	64%	35%	1%
Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide	70%	29%	1%
Special Olympics Developmental Sports Implementation Guide	61%	36%	2%
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	63%	35%	2%
Generation Unified website	63%	37%	1%
Unified Classroom lesson and activities	70%	30%	1%
Generation Unified videos or Generation Unified YouTube channel	36%	58%	5%
Inclusion Tiles game	70%	28%	2%
Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide	31%	60%	9%
Inclusion Tiles Student Guide	34%	57%	10%
eLearning courses on the Special Olympics Online Learning Portal	66%	34%	1%
Inclusion Tiles F.E.E.L.S	30%	70%	0%
Generation Unified App	60%	34%	6%

**Table UCSA13.** Use and Awareness of Generation Unified App, by state Program.

<b><i>State Special Olympics Program</i></b>	<b><i>Awareness</i></b>	<b><i>Use</i></b>
Arizona	16%	50%
Arkansas	53%	34%
Florida	13%	32%
Maine	15%	14%
New Jersey	13%	15%
Oklahoma	16%	35%
Oregon	31%	7%
Rhode Island	6%	33%
Texas	18%	17%
Utah	38%	36%
Virginia	15%	22%
Wyoming	11%	0%

*Note:* Use of Generation Unified App is calculated based on liaisons who were aware of this resource

**Table UCSA14.** Need for resources and support, by component and activity.

<b><i>State Special Olympics Program</i></b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>%</i></b>
Unified Sports activities or events		
Unified Sports team	2,253	46%
Sport selection	1,329	59%
Coaching	1,590	60%
Unified Sports models/styles of play	1,756	78%
Unified PE	2,491	51%
Unified Fitness	2,628	55%
Unified Esports & Fitness	2,448	52%
Young Athletes	1,953	41%
Unified Developmental Sports	2,362	49%
Inclusive Youth Leadership activities or events		
Unified Club	1,912	48%
Inclusive Leadership Training or Class	2,407	61%
Young Athletes volunteers	1,620	42%
Youth Summit	1,679	43%
Youth Activation Committee	1,745	45%
Leadership activities for the younger grades	1,756	45%
Whole School Engagement activities or events		
Spread the Word	1,935	41%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	1,905	41%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	2,450	52%
Fundraising	2,362	50%
Unified Fitness Challenge	2,559	55%
Special Olympics play/performance	2,134	46%

*Note:* Percentages of needs for each activity are calculated based on the number of schools that implemented the component and provided responses.

**Table UCSA15.** Styles of Play, separated by the number of components.

	<b>One-Component (n = 212)</b>	<b>Two-Component (n = 753)</b>	<b>Three-Component (n = 2,849)</b>
Competitive	20%	14%	18%
Player	20%	18%	18%
Hybrid	20%	31%	36%
Recreation	34%	33%	26%

*Note:* Missing responses and liaisons who answered “Don’t know” for this question are not presented in the table but are included in the calculation of percentages.

**Table UCSA16.** Styles of Play, separated by whether the school was in their first year of implementation or a returning UCS school.

	<b>First-Year UCS (n = 800)</b>	<b>Returning UCS (n = 2,871)</b>
Competitive	14%	18%
Player	20%	18%
Hybrid	30%	36%
Recreation	33%	26%

*Note:* Missing responses and liaisons who answered “Don’t know” for this question are not presented in the table but are included in the calculation of percentages.



**Table UCSA17.** Taking styles of play into consideration when forming a Unified Sports team.

	<b>Yes (n = 2,529)</b>	<b>No (n =9 70)</b>
Overall	66%	25%
School level		
Elementary	62%	27%
Middle	63%	30%
High	69%	24%
Component		
One-Component	47%	35%
Two-Component	56%	32%
Three-Component	71%	23%
Year being as UCS		
New	62%	28%
Return	68%	25%

*Note:* Missing responses and liaisons who answered “Don’t know” for this question are not presented in the table but are included in the calculation of percentages.

## **Appendix:**

### **In-Depth Methodology for the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation**

Here is the in-depth methodology that was used across the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation. Methods will cover the 2024 Annual Liaison Survey, student qualitative data and student surveys as part of the work on the long-term benefits of UCS implementation for students who participate in UCS activities and events, and staff interviews as part of the work on factors related to long term sustainable UCS programs.

#### **Annual Liaison Survey**

##### ***Survey Development***

Survey development for the 2023-2024 Annual Liaison Survey occurred from January to March 2024. Throughout this process, researchers and senior staff from both SONA UCS and CSDE met and collaborated on survey development and updates to survey dissemination. This year's Annual Liaison Survey covered the following topic areas:

- Liaison and UCS school characteristics and demographics
- Core experience implementation for 2023-2024
  - Unified Sports®
  - Inclusive youth leadership
  - Whole school events
- Support from schools, support from state Special Olympics Programs, and Funding
  - Support from schools, including leadership teams and funding
  - Support from state Special Olympics Programs
- Training, resources, and professional development
- Sustainability and impact of UCS
  - Sustainability, integration, and awareness of UCS programming in schools
  - Impact for students with and without IDD
  - Impact on school communities overall
  - Impact on the UCS liaison

##### ***Data Collection***

Between February and March 2024, CSDE coordinated with both SONA UCS and state Special Olympics Programs that had at least one active Unified Champion School within their state. This process helped to set the norms and expectations between CSDE, SONA UCS, and state Special Olympics Programs for survey distribution and data collection.

In March 2024, SONA UCS provided CSDE with a list of 8,573 schools to contact regarding UCS implementation in the 2023-2024 school year. CSDE then contacted each school between April and June 2024 to complete the 2023-2024 Annual Liaison Survey. The

survey was initially distributed to school contacts from the SONA UCS grant portal. Throughout the collection period, CSDE maintained regular communication by sending reminders to schools and updating liaison contact information as needed. To support participation, CSDE provided weekly response rate updates to state programs, including detailed survey status reports and links that allowed programs to follow up with non-responding schools.

CSDE received a response from 5,695 schools that implemented UCS in the past year.<sup>37</sup> This is the same response rate (69%) that CSDE obtained in the 2022-2023 Annual Liaison Survey and represents an increase of 611 schools that completed the Liaison Survey this year. To accurately capture school participation in UCS activities, the response rate was determined by dividing the number of completed surveys by the total number of active schools in each state program. This contact list served as the baseline for response rate calculations. Schools were excluded from the response rate calculations under two conditions:

- When schools directly informed CSDE, during the nine-week survey period, that they were no longer participating in UCS activities, or
- When schools indicated through their survey responses that they had not implemented any UCS activities during the current academic year.

## Student Interviews

### *School and Student Recruitment*

CSDE approached school recruitment for the 2023-2024 school year by building upon its prior evaluation work in 2022-2023. The evaluation team attempted to reach the nine schools that CSDE collaborated with in 2022-2023 related to research on UCS and positive identity development. These schools were located within the following state Special Olympics Programs: Arizona, Northern California, Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oregon.

CSDE first reached out to state Special Olympics Programs to coordinate contacting these schools for the 2023-2024 Annual UCS Evaluation. Then, CSDE reached out to the school liaison to discuss the purpose of this aspect of the evaluation objective and how their school could participate. School liaisons obtained parental consent and student assent for their participation in this aspect of the Annual UCS Evaluation, and CSDE worked with UCS liaisons to coordinate data collection and ensure that study objectives were met. Seven of these schools agreed to collaborate on this aspect of the Annual UCS Evaluation, and five of these schools were able to provide complete data related to the work on UCS and identity development. See Table IDM1 for the demographic breakdown of student participants for this aspect of the Annual UCS Evaluation.

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<sup>37</sup> 272 listed contacts stated that no UCS activities occurred in their school in 2023-2024.

**Table IDM1.** Student demographics for students who participated in the work on UCS and positive identity development.

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Boy or Man	32	37.2%		
Girl or Woman	52	59.3%		
Self-described	2	2.3%		
Did not say	1	1.2%		
Age			16.8	1.1
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>				
Asian or Pacific Islander	4	4.7%		
Black or African American	7	8.1%		
Hispanic or Latino/a	19	22.1%		
Native American or Alaskan Native	2	2.3%		
White or Caucasian	49	57.0%		
Multiracial	3	3.5%		
Preferred to self-describe	2	2.3%		
<b>Participated in Unified Club in 2023-2024</b>				
Yes	84	97.7%		
No	2	2.3%		
<b>Participated in Unified Club in 2022-2023</b>				
Yes	77	89.5%		
No	9	10.5%		
<b>Participated in Unified Sports in 2023-2024</b>				
Yes	50	58.1%		
No	36	41.9%		
<b>Participated in Unified Sports in 2022-2023</b>				
Yes	44	51.2%		
No	42	48.8%		
<b>UCS Label</b>				
Athlete	29	33.7%		
Partner	57	66.3%		
<b>Has a self-described disability</b>				
Yes	32	38.6%		
No	47	56.6%		
Prefer not to say	4	4.8%		

### ***Procedure and Materials***

The procedure and materials for this aspect of the annual evaluation involved a year-long multi-aspect qualitative process involving three general steps. First, CSDE generated four audio diary scripts for students with and without IDD to complete.

Questions were generated through a collaborative method within research and evaluation team members at CSDE and Special Olympics North America. Questions were based both on prior published work (Rodriguez et al., 2023) and evaluations (Jacobs et al., 2020; Ramdass et al., 2023). Questions and directive text were displayed via Qualtrics (with an accompanying audio recording by one member of the research team reading all text in the survey), and Phonic.AI was used to record student responses via Qualtrics. Topics included:

- Audio diary 1
  - Individual demographic information about the student
  - An introduction to the student, their overall identity, and what is important to them
  - A description of their school's UCS activities and their experiences within it
  - Ideas about disability in general and what it is like to have a disability
- Audio diary 2
  - Family, friends, teachers, and community members that are important to the student, and how they would describe the student
  - A role model and why they are a role model for the student
- Audio diary 3
  - Accomplishments within and outside of school
  - Experiences being a leader within and outside of school
- Audio diary 4
  - Challenges in school
  - Challenges outside of school
  - Overcoming challenges

After the audio diaries were completed, students then participated in a focus group within their school. Focus groups ranged between three and five participants per focus group, and most focus groups consisted of students with and without IDD *in the same focus group*. A total of 18 focus groups were conducted across the five schools, and two members of the evaluation team led each focus group. Questions were based on the audio diaries from this year's evaluation as well as past evaluation projects (Jacobs et al., 2020; Ramdass et al., 2023). Topics included:

- Unified Activities within a school and the impact of these activities for students;
- Relationships, visibility, and leaders or role models;
- Challenges and support from others during challenges; and
- Accomplishments within UCS activities, within their school, and outside their school.

Lastly, 19 students completed a one-on-one interview. Interviews either occurred in person at their school<sup>38</sup> or through Zoom. Interviews were conducted by four members of the evaluation team, and interview topics expanded on topics discussed in the audio diaries and focus groups. Specific topics included:

- Identity and Unified Champion Schools;
- Challenges within and outside of school;
- Students' visibility within school and the role of UCS in their visibility;
- Social status and social hierarchies within schools;
- School inclusion; and
- Ideas about the future and purpose in life.

After all data was collected, qualitative data was transcribed using a third-party transcription service. Qualitative data was then initially coded by three members of the evaluation team into relevant codes, and coded data were then reviewed by seven team members. Findings for this year's report represent findings from the initial coding of the data.

## Student Surveys

### *School and Student Recruitment*

School recruitment occurred in two steps. CSDE first attempted to contact all schools that participated in the intervention study from 2014-2016 (Jacobs et al., 2017; McDowell et al., 2017). Contacts and initial meetings occurred during November and December 2023. The four schools that did not participate in the 2022-2023 evaluation (Ramdass et al., 2023) did not return contact efforts from both CSDE and their state Special Olympics Program. Out of the seven schools that did participate in last year's evaluation, two schools ignored contact efforts by both CSDE and their state Special Olympics Program, one school declined to participate in the student survey aspect of this year's evaluation, and two schools initially agreed to participate in this year's evaluation but then had to withdraw due to extenuating circumstances. The remaining three schools participated in the student survey portion of this year's evaluation.

As the original design of this evaluation included recruiting schools that did not participate in the intervention study from 2014-2016, CSDE then recruited additional schools in February and March 2024. Eight schools were contacted from the same state Special Olympics Programs as the schools that participated in the intervention study. Two schools declined to participate in this aspect of the annual evaluation, and one school was

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<sup>38</sup> One member of the evaluation team lived within driving distance of one of the schools and asked the liaison to conduct the interviews in-person instead of over Zoom. After gaining permission from the liaison and the school administration, the interviews for that school occurred in-person.

unable to provide enough data to be representative of their school. The five remaining schools participated in the student survey portion of this year's evaluation.

In total, 2,051 students completed at least 40% of the survey (i.e., data about their participation within UCS activities in their school), and 1,762 students completed the full survey. The demographic breakdown of students is provided in Table IDM2.

**Table IDM2.** Demographic Information for Student Surveys.

<b>Demographic</b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b>%</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Boy or Man	794	45.3%		
Girl or Woman	841	48.0%		
Self-described	60	3.3%		
Did not say	58	3.4%		
Age			15.8	1.2
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>				
Asian or Pacific Islander	85	4.8%		
Black or African American	266	15.2%		
Hispanic or Latino/a	200	11.4%		
Native American or Alaskan Native	13	0.9%		
White or Caucasian	995	56.7%		
Multiracial	88	5.0%		
Preferred to self-describe	104	5.6%		
<b>Self-reported grades</b>				
Mostly A's	461	26.3%		
Mostly A's and B's	662	37.7%		
Mostly B's	115	6.6%		
Mostly B's and C's	253	14.4%		
Mostly C's	52	3.0%		
Mostly C's and D's	92	5.2%		
Mostly D's or lower	25	1.5%		
Preferred not to say	94	5.4%		
<b>Number of extracurricular activities that the student participates in</b>				
0 activities	521	29.7%		
1 to 2 activities	869	49.5%		
3 to 6 activities	308	17.5%		
7 or more activities	59	3.4%		

*Note:* Demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey, and numbers may not add up to 1,762 due to incomplete survey responses.

### ***Procedures and Materials***

In winter and spring 2024, CSDE and Special Olympics collaborated to identify topics to ask within the student surveys. Both CSDE and Special Olympics settled on topics that were asked in prior student surveys between 2014-2016 (Jacobs et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019) and new questions that had become more relevant since 2016.

Between March and June 2024, CSDE programmed the survey in Qualtrics and distributed the survey link to each school's UCS liaison to administer to their students. CSDE worked with UCS liaisons, school staff, and school and district administrators to gain approval to administer the student surveys as well as to develop a plan for survey distribution.

Upon beginning the survey, students completed an adapted individual-level measure of prosocialness (Caprara et al., 2005) before answering questions about their participation in UCS activities within their school. CSDE asked UCS liaisons to list the activities that occurred within each component of the program and then provided the list of activities to students during the survey. Students were asked whether they participated in **any** Unified Sports® activities or inclusive youth leadership activities. They were also asked about **how many** whole school engagement activities they either attended or planned within their school. Students who participated in at least one activity within a component also reported how engaged they were by answering three questions on a four-point scale: "How involved were you when participating in these activities," "how much did you enjoy participating in these activities," and "how important was participating in these activities to you" (1: *Not at all*, 4: *Very much*). Participants who did not participate in activities within a component were asked if they were aware that activities within that component occurred in their school.

After stating their participation, engagement, or awareness of UCS activities within their school, students then answered questions related to four outcome measures. First, students completed 12 questions assessing their attitudes toward students with ID (Bossart & Petry, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 1986). Students then answered 11 questions related to the social inclusion and acceptance of students with ID in their school (Brand et al., 2003) before assessing their own interactions with students with ID within and after school (Siperstein et al., 2007). These three measures were used in CSDE's prior evaluative work between 2014-2016 (Jacobs et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019) and were adapted for students in 2024.

Students then completed a measure of a sense of belonging and social identification with their school by completing the psychological sense of school membership within their school (Wagle et al., 2018). This 9-item scale had questions that measured both student-level belonging in their school and different aspects of their social identification with their school. A tenth item was added to more directly ask students about their identification with their school (Postmes et al., 2013). This new measure was adapted by the CSDE evaluation team in consultation with Special Olympics before survey distribution.



Lastly, students provided demographic information about themselves: their gender, their age, their race, their self-reported grades, and the number of extracurricular activities that they were a part of at their school. Students were then thanked for their participation before finishing the survey.

### Staff Interviews

Sixteen staff interviews occurred in seven schools that were recruited for the student survey portion of the annual evaluation. Seven liaisons in total were interviewed—six from schools that were recruited specifically for the 2023-2024 evaluation and one new liaison from a school that originally participated in the evaluative work in 2014-2016. Eight additional interviews were conducted with general education teachers or administrators in the schools, and one interview occurred with the former UCS liaison from one of the schools.

Data collection occurred using a structured interview process and a narrative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). 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, support from school administrators, fellow teachers, and Special Olympics, and factors related to program sustainability and potential areas for improvement. See Table IDM3 for demographic information for school staff who participated in the interviews.

**Table IDM3.** Demographic Information for Staff Interviewees.

Demographic	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender			
Man	5		
Woman	11		
Age		41.94	9.84
Race			
White	15		
Mixed	1		
Liaison			
Yes	7		
No	9		
Years at their school			
0 to 4 years	3		
5 to 9 years	4		
10 to 14 years	2		
15 to 19 years	4		
20 or more years	3		

After all data was collected, qualitative data was transcribed using a third-party transcription service. Qualitative data was then initially coded by two members of the evaluation team into relevant codes, and coded data were then reviewed by four team members. Findings for this year's report represent findings from the initial coding of the data.