

Fostering Social Inclusion Through Unified PE

By Larissa Kulczyk



Students in Lisa Smith's Unified PE class at Proctor High School.

For decades, Special Olympics has provided children and adults with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to participate in year-round sports training and athletic competition. And, after 50 years, the organization has grown to include more than 5 million athletes in over 170 countries.

But Special Olympics is so much more than just an international athletic competition. Every day, in more than 6,500 Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® across the country, K-12 educators and students — of all abilities — demonstrate the very best of the human spirit and experience the benefits of inclusion.

Each Unified Champion School provides inclusive physical activity and leadership opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities, in addition to holding whole-school awareness activities. The result is a school community that promotes acceptance for all.

Health and physical educators generally play an integral role at Unified Champion Schools — often serving as coach for the Special Olympics Unified Sports team — and a growing number of HPE teachers are expanding their school's inclusive educational opportunities even further through a program called Unified Physical Education.

SHAPE America member Lisa Smith is one of those teachers.

UNIFIED PE IN MINNESOTA

Smith is a health and developmental adapted PE (DAPE) teacher and Special Olympics coach at Proctor High School, a Unified Champion School in Proctor, MN. A few years ago, she wanted to find a way to “do something more” with her DAPE classes and get more students involved — just like the school was doing with its Unified Sports team.

In 2016, during a meeting with her principal and a representative from Special Olympics Minnesota, Smith learned about Unified Physical Education and decided to pilot

the course. That first year, Smith's class had 21 students, a mix of those with and without disabilities. From the very start, the Unified PE course was popular — and it quickly became obvious that the class would have enormous benefits for the students enrolled, as well as the greater school community.

“The kids made friendships they never thought they would have,” says Smith. “They began eating together in the cafeteria and planning social events together outside of school.”

Smith began spreading the word about Unified PE by speaking at conferences throughout the state, as well as at SHAPE America district conferences and the 2017 SHAPE America National Convention & Expo. The program has spread throughout Minnesota, going from two pilot schools in 2016 to more than 86 schools offering the course during the 2018-19 school year.

Now, with several years of teaching Unified PE under her belt, Smith is beyond enthusiastic about all the positive changes for her students.

“The biggest impact has been the beginning of closing the gap between special education and general education,” says Smith. “Students are held to the same expectations in this class, not only by me as their teacher, but by each other.”

All of the students in the Unified PE class have opportunities to build leadership skills, and they have even become unofficial ambassadors of school- and community-wide inclusion.

“Our school culture is shifting,” says Smith. “My fellow teachers and administration have been working on how to bring the Unified movement into their classrooms, in the hallways, and the community.”

A HEALTHIER TRIBAL COMMUNITY

More than 1,100 miles away in Mississippi, SHAPE America member Amanda Reed is also finishing her third full year implementing Unified PE. An adapted physical education

teacher, Reed serves Choctaw Central High School and Choctaw Central Middle School, which are part of the Choctaw Tribal Schools district.

Reed teaches one Unified PE class in each school. Both classes meet five days a week for 50 minutes and have a one-to-one ratio of general education students and students with disabilities. She says this ratio allows the students to bond.

“The biggest impact I have seen is in the social skills that are achieved and the relationships that are formed,” says Reed. “Our students with disabilities are more willing to interact and branch out of their comfort zones.”

Because of the increase of diabetes and other critical health issues among Native Americans, Reed used two additional Special Olympics programs — “Unified Fitness Clubs” and “Fit 5” — to jumpstart her efforts to promote health and wellness in her class — which she hopes will help the tribal community become healthier as well.

Students with and without disabilities are learning about healthier food options such as fruits and vegetables. They are also learning to love exercise — and have begun seeing improvements in their overall health.



Amanda Reed's Unified PE students at Choctaw Central High School enjoy an outing to the local bowling alley.

“Some of our students with disabilities lead sedentary lifestyles after they graduate high school,” says Reed. “These programs help educate them and build a desire to sustain and maintain healthy lifestyles throughout their lives.”

SPREADING INCLUSION

At its 50th anniversary celebration in 2018, Special Olympics launched a new campaign — The Revolution is Inclusion — designed to end discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities and deliver a fully inclusive world. Health and physical educators can play their part in many different ways — from implementing Unified Physical Education, to starting a Unified Fitness program, to coaching their school's Unified Sports team.

“There is no one way to do Unified PE,” says Smith. “It can happen in any school, big or small. It can be a stand-alone class or be put right into an existing class. It can look any way that is right for each school and community.”

SHAPE America and Special Olympics: 50 Years and Counting

The American Association of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (AAHPER) — now SHAPE America — was deeply involved in the creation of Special Olympics, even before its founding in 1968.

April 1965 — Kennedy Foundation-AAHPER committees begin work on organizing year-round national fitness programs for people with intellectual disabilities. The programs task force includes chair Julian Stein, author of a groundbreaking article on adapted physical education for students with intellectual disabilities that had been published in AAHPER's *Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation* in 1962.

June 1965 — Eunice Kennedy Shriver announces a new nationwide program — a joint venture by the JPK Jr. Foundation, the President's Council on Physical Fitness, and AAHPER — saying, “We are witnessing here today the opening of an unprecedented new era for people with intellectual disabilities in schools, summer camps and year-round programs.”

June 1966 — Julian Stein becomes full-time director of the AAHPER program under the direction of the JPK Jr. Foundation.

July 1968 — The first International Special Olympics Games are held in Chicago at Soldier Field. The event is described as “daybreak” — the early stirring of a global movement for people with intellectual disabilities.

September 2008 — Special Olympics launches the Unified Champion Schools program with the goal of uniting students with and without intellectual disabilities through inclusive sports, leadership, and whole-school awareness activities.

July 2018 — Special Olympics kicks off its year-long 50th Anniversary Celebration in Chicago.

To learn more about Unified PE, check out the *Unified Physical Education Resource Guide*, co-authored by SHAPE America members Mike Messerole and Sue Tarr. You can find links to this and other resources at shapeamerica.org/unified.

