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CIAC

Unified Sports®

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL UNIFIED

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF INCLUSION

"IT ALL STEMS FROM CONNECTION."

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October 29, 2026

Elementary school is where it all begins. Children build a foundation for their future education and undergo those important steps of socialization as they grow. Wouldn't it be great if those early lessons included the principles of inclusion and acceptance? Thanks to a growing number of Connecticut elementary schools supporting active Special Olympics Unified Sports® programs it's not a dream, it's a reality. In those schools, young students with disabilities understand that they belong in school just as their typical peers do.

The Unified revolution in Connecticut schools over the past decades has been thorough and remarkable. Most prominently is the near total saturation of Unified programs in high schools across the state, where almost 100 percent of public schools now feature a Unified team. The fun and inclusive success is not limited to high schools: Unified Sports is thriving and growing at the elementary level bringing acceptance and opportunity to Connecticut's youngest learners.

As of this writing, Unified Sports data has 63 Connecticut elementary schools with a Unified program and another 20 with young athlete programs. That's a vast number of young students whose early educational experience is being buoyed by exciting programming and fostering an inclusive environment.

"I think it has nothing to do with the sports and the practices, it has everything to do with reshaping how your school community sees and values those students with disabilities, or even students with behavioral challenges," stated Bear Path Elementary (Hamden) Unified Coach and physical therapist, Jacquelyn Sanca.



Along with the act of learning, elementary education is also about building important foundations for future learning. In that context it can be equally beneficial for young students to learn the foundations of inclusion and kindness in the setting of Unified Sports. Like a financial investment that earns compound interest over time, early investments in acceptance can pay off with a better school and district climate down the road.

Sue Freeman, Unified Coach and physical therapist at Center School and Memorial School (East Hampton), has seen firsthand how impactful having Unified programs at the youngest levels can be for a district. She shared a story about a student who participated as a Unified partner at the elementary level, and then was disappointed to learn the middle school in the district didn't yet have the program. His response was to organize and put on his own Unified event at the school, and invite the school administrators, who quickly recognized the value and began work to insure the program would become a part of the school in the near future.

"That's why elementary is so important," said Stephanie Dichele, school psychologist and Unified co-Coach at Highland Elementary (Cheshire). "If you wait to start it, it's almost too late. You have to start instilling those values when they are younger." (In the interest of full disclosure, the writer's son was a Unified Sports athlete in the Highland program).

Breaking down barriers at a younger age and reducing stigmas early can play a big part in keeping the momentum going throughout a district for students' entire journey through education.

"Being able to make connections that they wouldn't already have. For the kids, they truly do realize these kids are more like me than not," Freeman said. "They have more similarities than differences. When that's not really fostered that's an easy thing to fall apart."

The thriving elementary Unified programs across Connecticut get the benefits of inclusion and cohesion and have the ability to do it on their own terms. It's true of Unified Sports programs across the board, but it especially pertains to those programs thriving at the elementary level – there is no one-size fits all approach. The structure, the numbers, the activities - they all flow from the general Unified model of athlete and partner cooperation and collaboration and are flexible to match each school's situation.





Whatever it may look like, the coaches and administrators with elementary programs say the impacts are visible every day, and are unique in how it bolsters community and confidence with these young learners who are still so early in development.

"They [the Unified participants] all loved it, they were having fun every week and I got all positive feedback," said Lia Pankake, a physical therapist in the Prospect school district who helped launch and coach after-school Unified programs at two elementary schools in the district. "All the parents told me that, and from the smiles, you could tell [the kids] were proud to be on the team as a select group of kids and they felt special."

"It all stems from connection," said Dichele. "Our Unified program or any Unified program can build connections for students with disabilities in any capacity. At the end of the day that's what our kids feel. They feel connected to their school, they feel connected to their peers, and feel connected to other aspects of their life and that fosters happiness."

Big or small, as part of the school day or as an afterschool program, focusing in-school activities or aiming towards larger events with other schools in the district or across the state, elementary programs are thriving and growing however they are built. The main common denominator is each one launched with a small spark of inspiration or motivation from inside or outside the school and then made the program their own. And many made use of the available support from the CIAC or other districts with existing programs that were happy to support further growth.



The CIAC Unified Sports staff was the first call for several of the schools looking to launch, and they were rewarded with ample information, and in some cases financial support to help get a new program on its feet. In the same vein, it turns out that Unified coaches are thrilled to share their experiences and encourage growth at other schools, so reaching out to those with programs already in existence was another key early step.

"I talked to [Highland Unified co-coach] Ali (Ranciato) at Highland and she helped me a lot as we were getting started," Pankake explained.

"Once you contact [CIAC Unified] they give you so many resources and make it so seamless to start up the programs," Freeman said.

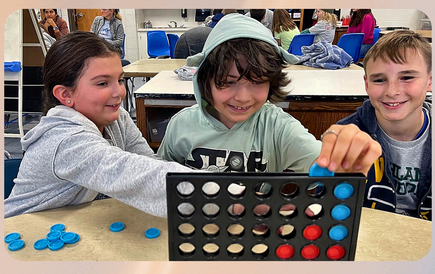
The support and spirit of collaboration within the Unified committee was evident when the CIAC Unified Sports staff hosted an Elementary Coaches Conference at its office last October. Representatives from schools around the state came to the CIAC offices and spent a day taking part in activities, hearing about additional resources, and sharing successes and struggles from their programs.

CIAC Unified will be holding a similar event on Thursday, December 3rd in Berlin and registration is now open for schools with programs or that might be considering creating one.

Whether it is events like the Coaching Conference in October, or a growing number of events bringing multiple schools together, the reach of Unified for elementary schools keeps growing. Last April and May athletes from numerous schools took part in Unified Elementary days at Conard (West Hartford) High School and Glastonbury High School. At Conard, all the West Hartford district elementary schools were joined by schools from Suffield, Canton, and Simsbury. All of Glastonbury's elementary programs welcomed participants from schools in East Hampton, Colchester, and Rocky Hill. High school athletes and Unified partners led the events, which offered current elementary athletes and partners to show off their skills and enjoy a great morning interacting with peers.

Barbara Horn, the Young Athletes/ Elementary Unified Sports Program Manager, noted that along with those events – some of which have been going on for many years – many other school districts run similar culminating events among the Unified programs in their districts.

Bit by bit, one Unified program at a time, the roots of inclusion, acceptance, and a culture of happiness are taking hold and changing experiences for young students. These elementary schools with thriving Unified programs are an incredible example of success and the value of Unified. They also represent enormous possibilities.



The greatest opportunity to see the Unified revolution keep rolling and expand is at the youngest levels. With more than 800 public elementary schools in Connecticut, there exists a massive opportunity for transformative early inclusion and kindness investment.

Those living the successes are more than happy to share the impact they have seen at their schools and what they are building.

"It's the best part of my job hands down, seeing our athletes shine and be so happy and the smiles and the friendships…those kids' faces make it worth it," Highland's Ranciato said.

"I just get goosebumps thinking about it," Freeman said. "Just having these kids included in things and not even necessarily sports all the time, it just sort of seeps out into their life."

The goosebumps and positive feelings are there for so many young learners across Connecticut thanks to Unified Sports at the elementary level. So many students already getting to live the reality of a school setting where kids learn to accept and embrace those with disabilities, with the potential for so many more to be a part of that reality. No dreaming necessary.