



Changing the Name of Unified Physical Education

Lauren J. Lieberman & Cathy Houston-Wilson

To cite this article: Lauren J. Lieberman & Cathy Houston-Wilson (2018) Changing the Name of Unified Physical Education, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 89:7, 7-8, DOI: [10.1080/07303084.2018.1491253](https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2018.1491253)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2018.1491253>



Published online: 31 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 33



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Changing the Name of Unified Physical Education

Lauren J. Lieberman

Cathy Houston-Wilson

Unified Physical Education is a program promoted through Special Olympics much like its Unified Sports program. The purpose of this viewpoint is to describe the program as it currently stands and to offer recommendations on a name change that would more appropriately describe its purpose. The current name, Unified Physical Education, has created some confusion among physical educators in terms of what the program is and how it should be offered. In order to set the framework for this article, it is necessary to provide a definition of physical education and adapted physical education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) has defined physical education as the development of:

- Physical and motor skills;
- Fundamental motor skills and patterns; and
- Skills in aquatics, dance, and individual and group games and sports (including intramural and lifetime sports).

Specially designed physical education, or adapted physical education, is provided to students with disabilities who have unique needs in physical education. Adapted physical education is physical education with appropriate modifications to meet the students' needs. With this definition in mind, a review of the Unified Physical Education program will now be presented.

Special Olympics has had a rich history of providing sport competition for over 4.9 million individuals with intellectual disabilities since 1968. Athletes can compete in both team and individual sports, as well as in developmental activities through their Motor Activity Training Program. In 1989 Special Olympics introduced its Unified Sports program. According to Special Olympics, Unified



Lauren J. Lieberman

Sports is an inclusive sports program that unites Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) as teammates for training and competition. According to Special Olympics leadership, “individuals without intellectual disabilities includes typically developing peers as well as others who may have a disability other than an intellectual disability” (e.g., cerebral palsy, autism, visual impairment; B. Quinn, personal communication, May 2018).

There are three levels of Unified Sport: (1) Unified Competitive, in which partners and Special Olympics athletes are highly skilled and compete in competitive games for winning; (2) Unified Developmental, in which partners and Special Olympics athletes are not at the same skill level and the partners are helping to develop the athletes' skills; and (3) Unified Recreational, in which partners and Special Olympics athletes play intramural sports or small-sided games together for fun and skill develop-



Cathy Houston-Wilson

ment but do not compete outside of their program (Special Olympics, n.d.).

In an effort to promote Unified Sport and to create Unified Champion Schools, Special Olympics created a resource known as Unified Physical Education to promote inclusion of all students within a school or district. Unified Champion Schools brings youth with and without intellectual disabilities in the United States (K–12) together through education and sports (Special Olympics, 2018).

The Unified Physical Education program consists of three strands to promote inclusion: (1) a physical education focus including outdoor pursuits, lifetime activities, individual performance, games and sports, aquatics, dance and rhythmic activities, and fitness activities; (2) a leadership theme including orientation, inclusive youth leadership, inclusion, co-leadership, teamwork and advocacy; and (3) wellness topics including personal fitness goals, exercise and injury prevention, physical and mental well-being, sports

nutrition and hydration, and healthy lifestyle choices.

Although these are worthwhile topics to promote in schools, Unified Physical Education does not reflect a comprehensive physical education program and should not be used in place of the subject matter of physical education. While the authors of this article wholeheartedly support any program that promotes inclusion, the name “Unified Physical Education” can inadvertently compromise the integrity of the discipline of physical education and can further reduce the ability of students with disabilities to receive an appropriate physical education curriculum that aligns with state and National Standards and with their individualized education plans (IEPs). The program promoted by Special Olympics known as Unified Physical Education does not reflect a physical education curriculum, leading to some confusion regarding the name of the program. A more suitable name for this program could be “Unified Sports Club” or some other name that should be further explored.

There is also some concern that Unified Physical Education may be used as a placement option for adapted physical education. There has been a great deal of research and education training to assist with the implementation of IDEA (2004), specifically in the area of placement (Columna, Davis, Lieberman, & Lytle, 2010; Lieberman, Cavanagh, Haegel, Aiello, & Wilson, 2017). As noted in the law, students with disabilities are to receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE allows for a continuum of options that best meet the needs of the student. This is to be implemented without focusing on one disability. To assist with this process, SHAPE America (2018) has a position statement on *Eligibility Criteria for Adapted Physical Education Services*. Resources such as this assist educators in determining the best placement option in which students should receive

their physical education class, adapted if necessary. Typical options include self-contained, modified, part-time self-contained/part-time inclusive, or inclusive with support.

Self-contained classes generally have students with more severe disabilities who need one-on-one instruction, which includes the support of paraeducators and, if possible, peers. Modified physical education is ideal for promoting the inclusion of students with and without disabilities in smaller yet inclusive classes that allow for the implementation of the same curriculum as the general physical education class but with more individualized instructional time. Part-time self-contained/part-time inclusive provides opportunities for students with unique needs additional time to master the skills that will be taught in the general or inclusive class. Finally, inclusive physical education includes children with disabilities in their general physical education class with or without support.

With this required continuum in mind, and noting the definition of physical education and adapted physical education, it is clear that the program sponsored by Special Olympics, Unified Physical Education, is not actually physical education, but rather a program to support the inclusion of students with and without disabilities within a school building. The authors of this Viewpoint offer the following recommendations to continue the dialogue with Special Olympics to promote inclusion and after-school sport participation:

1. Explore a name change that more accurately reflects the program promoted by Special Olympics to support the inclusion of students with and without disabilities, such as Unified Sports Club.
2. Promote the program as a venue for training for Unified Sport.
3. Do not allow the program to replace physical education or adapted physical education.
4. Promote the program as an elective class that students can participate in for credit.

The authors applaud everything that Special Olympics has done in the past and strives to accomplish at this time. Together we can work to ensure that students with disabilities are provided appropriate physical education or adapted physical education experiences to meet their needs as identified in the law, as well as promote opportunities for inclusion for all students in a variety of activities.

References

- Columna, L., Davis, T., Lieberman, L. J., & Lytle, R. (2010). Determining the most appropriate physical education placement for students with disabilities. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 81*(7), 30–37.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).
- Lieberman, L. J., Cavanagh, L., Haegel, J. A., Aiello, R., & Wilson, W. (2017). The modified physical education class; An option for the least restrictive environment. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 88*(7), 10–16.
- SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators. (2018). *Eligibility criteria for adapted physical education services* [Position Statement]. Retrieved from https://www.shapeamerica.org/uploads/pdfs/2018/position-statements/Eligibility-Criteria-for-Adapted-PE_rebranded_final.pdf
- Special Olympics. (2018). *All Unified Champion Schools resources*. Retrieved from https://resources.specialolympics.org/Taxonomy/Community_Building/Youth_and_School_Activation/Unified_Champion_Schools_Resources_All.aspx
- Special Olympics. (n.d.). *Unified Sports® models*. Retrieved from <https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/community-building/youth-and-school/PUToolkit/Unified-Sports-Models.pdf>

Lauren J. Lieberman (llieberman@brockport.edu) is a distinguished service professor, and Cathy Houston-Wilson is a professor, in the Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education at the College at Brockport, State University of New York, in Brockport, NY.