



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

Special Olympics New York Announces State Senate Support for Unified Champion Schools

ROBERT G. ORTT June 1, 2017

| ISSUE: **EDUCATION, MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**



Lancaster, NY – At a press conference held today at Lancaster High School, Special Olympics New York (SONY) announced a \$200,000 New York State budget appropriation in support of Unified Champion Schools. The funding was championed by the New York State Senate Majority, including Western New York Senator Robert Ortt (North Tonawanda), Senator Chris Jacobs (Buffalo), Senator Michael Ranzenhofer (Williamsville) and Senator Patrick Gallivan (Elma).

Through a partnership with Special Olympics New York and the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, Unified Champion Schools brings together students with and without intellectual disabilities through education, sports and youth leadership to provide them with the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to create and sustain school communities that promote acceptance, respect and human dignity.

Unified Champion Schools promotes social inclusion through shared sports training and competition experiences. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. Currently, 105 schools offer Unified Sports programming, with nearly 1,500 students participating on Unified teams and additionally over 1,200 trained youth leaders.

Senate Majority Leader John J. Flanagan said, “My colleagues and I in the Senate are thrilled to support the Unified Champion Schools program and its role in improving diversity and acceptance for students of all abilities.

I thank Senators Young, Ranzenhofer, Gallivan, Ortt and Jacobs for helping to secure new state funding that will help this outstanding program expand and promote the inclusion of more youth leaders in the region.”

Senator Catharine Young said, “Sports create a great bond, uniting people of all ages and ability levels in the comradery of athletic competition. The Senate Majority championed funding for the Special Olympics’ Unified Champion Schools because the program inspires student-athletes to do their best and achieve greatness, without regard to limitations. We are proud to assist in expanding the program’s outreach to new schools and look forward to seeing the positive outcomes that result from more people to having an opportunity to live their lives to the greatest potential.”

"The Unified Champion Schools program promotes inclusiveness and respect by bringing together students with and without intellectual disabilities to compete in sports, and it is making a difference in our schools. The interscholastic program is credited with reducing bullying. I am proud to support Special Olympics New York and secure state funding for this important program," **said Senator Michael H. Ranzenhofer.**

“I am proud to support Unified Champion Schools, which help break down barriers by making it possible for all students to participate in programs and activities as athletes. As part of a team, individuals are able to overcome their challenges, build their self-confidence and promote a more inclusive culture in our schools and communities,” **said Senator Patrick M. Gallivan.**

Senator Rob Ortt, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities said, “Unified Sports programming allows those who are differently abled to overcome certain challenges through sports in an environment that promotes social

acceptance and inclusiveness of students of all abilities. I'm proud Senate Republicans were able to secure this critical funding for Unified Champion Schools. Its valuable opportunities help student athletes gain confidence, a sense of camaraderie and most of all, they realize they too can defy all odds and achieve great things."

"Unified Champion Schools break down barriers between students with and without intellectual disabilities resulting in reduced bullying and increasing student's self-esteem," **said Senator Chris Jacobs.** "I congratulate Special Olympics New York and the New York State Public High School Athletic Association for making a positive difference in the lives of students across our state. This funding will help expand this worthwhile effort to more schools in our community."

The funding will help expand the Unified Champion Schools program into more districts and engage more students in more communities across New York State. Funding is needed to provide initial support to schools for transportation, coaches and advisor stipends, and to purchase uniforms and equipment. Additionally, funding is needed to support training and education of youth leaders, secure facilities for summits and competitions, purchase awards and school recognition materials, and staffing.

"Special Olympics New York, through our revolutionary Unified Champion Schools initiative, is leading the way in breaking down barriers and promoting inclusion for students across the state who are differently abled. Through interscholastic sports teams, students with and without disabilities, come together, supported by their whole school communities, changing

minds, hearts and attitudes about each other's abilities and the potential that is inherent in all of us. We are so grateful to the New York State Senate for securing important funding in the state budget to allow SONY to pursue its objective of bringing Unified Champion Schools to every school district in the state," **said Neal Johnson, President and CEO, Special Olympics New York.**

Robert Zayas, Executive Director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association said, "The membership of NYSPHSAA is truly excited to be a part of the Unified Sports program. We appreciate the financial support of the New York State Senate of this valuable program that has positively impacted school culture throughout the state. The Unified Sports program only continues to grow and gain momentum."

Today at Lancaster High School 16 schools will be taking part in the Section VI culminating event of the unified basketball season.

"The Unified Basketball program has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on both the students and the staff involved with the team. It truly exemplifies the best that scholastic athletics has to offer us. Daily we see young people showing respect, teamwork, dedication and perseverance on the court. However, I think what is most inspiring to me is the profound effect Unified Basketball has had on the Lancaster High School community. The crowds made up of families, staff, neighbors and other athletic teams have been large and enthusiastic. Watching these young ladies and gentlemen enjoy themselves while competing has brought smiles to many and reminded all of us what is important in our lives. It has been

amazing experience for all of us,” said **Lancaster High School Principal, Mr. Cesar Marchioli.**

Special Olympics New York provides year-round sports training and competition in 22 Olympic-style sports to children and adults with intellectual disabilities at no cost to the athletes, their families or caregivers. There are 68,547 athletes that train and compete with Special Olympics New York, the largest Special Olympics program in North America.