



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

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

KELLEY LIGOZIO May 18, 2017

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Gates, NY – At a press conference held today at Gates Chili High School Field House, 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 Senators Rich Funke (Fairport), Senator Joseph Robach (Greece), Senator Robert Ortt (North Tonawanda) and Senator Pamela Helming (Canandaigua).

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, “The Senate is proud to support programs like the Unified Champion Schools because they are instrumental in promoting inclusion and diversity as part of a child’s development. I applaud Senators Funke, Robach, Ortt, and Helming for supporting new funding in the state budget to help expand this exceptional program and enable more youth of all abilities to lead and succeed.”

“I’ve seen first-hand how playing together as part of a team can inspire young people to do more, to be more, and to achieve more in all aspects of life. Schools across our region are adopting unified sports programs, which offer students of all abilities the opportunity to gain life-long lessons, memories, and friends. I am proud we recently secured \$200,000 to continue to expand the Unified Champion School program and I thank Special Olympics, NYSPHSAA, and all of the participating districts for their great work on behalf of our kids,” said **Senator Rich Funke**.

Senator Rob Ortt, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities said, “Unified Schools’ inclusive programs levels the playing field for individuals

with developmental and intellectual disabilities, because they're not defined by any limitations. They're seen simply as student athletes on and off the field, overcoming all challenges and defying odds. I'm proud to continue to lead the charge in the state Senate for those who may be differently abled, but have just as much strength, drive and most of all heart as anyone else."

"I was proud to work in cooperation with my colleagues in the State Senate to help secure funding in the New York State Budget in support of Unified Champion Schools. By ensuring that students with and without intellectual disabilities have the ability and opportunity to participate in sports and competition experiences, these young people will have another path to friendship, understanding and respect. I could not be more excited to support a worthy cause such as Unified Sports and Special Olympics New York," said **Senator Joe Robach**.

"As someone who has worked directly with disabled individuals and volunteered with the Special Olympics, I've seen firsthand how programs like the Unified Champions School program help encourage these young athletes to build new friendships, compete with their peers and sharpen their social skills. I am proud that my colleagues and I were able to secure this critical funding to help support the expansion of this important program. I look forward to continuing our partnership with Special Olympics New York and NYSPHSAA," said **Senator Pamela Helming**.

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 Gates Chili High School 24 schools will be taking part in the Section V culminating event of the unified basketball season.

"I could not be more proud of our Section V Athletic council. Their commitment to the Unified Sports Basketball program has helped to change the lives of students throughout Monroe County and beyond. If you are looking for an opportunity to smile big, make your heart sing and see the promise of the future, see one of our Unified Sports Basketball games. I am thrilled to be part of this program and partnering with Special Olympics," **Kimberle Ward, Superintendent Gates Chili School District.**

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.