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NJ Department of Education Announces Launch of Rowan/Special Olympics Partnership to Promote Unified Programming and Inclusion through Sports

Trenton, N.J., June 16, 2020 – The New Jersey Department of Education today announced the launch of a five-year initiative in which Rowan University and Special Olympics New Jersey will expand a program where students with and without disabilities play sports together on a level playing field as peers, teammates and classmates.

The program will increase Unified Champion Schools, a Special Olympics program that promotes inclusiveness through unified sports and leadership programs. It is funded with a grant of \$7.5 million in federal *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act* funds.

Special Olympics New Jersey began the Unified Champion Schools Program in 2008. In New Jersey, 238 schools have implemented the Unified Champion Schools Program, about 9 percent of public schools. The goal of the partnership is to reach more than 80 percent of the state’s school districts in the next five years.

“I’m a strong supporter of introducing Unified Champion Schools to help build more inclusive communities in schools,” said Education Commissioner Lamont O. Repollet. “Whether together in school or through virtual leadership and sports activities, these interactions foster meaningful friendships and positive attitudes. Ultimately, it helps cultivate a school culture free from bullying, exclusion and negative perceptions.”

Through the program, students with and without disabilities in K-12 schools will practice and compete in sports such as basketball and soccer, often competing in games with Unified Sports teams from other school districts.

The program is prepared to respond to social distancing that may be required due to the threat of COVID-19. For instance, when schools begin programs next school year, students may participate in skills competitions where they track their progress, either individually or socially distanced on an athletic field.

Rowan University and Special Olympics New Jersey will partner to create a broader statewide network of inclusive school communities.

After the New Jersey Department of Education invites schools to sign up for the program, Special Olympics New Jersey will process the applications, and work with districts to implement the new programs in the schools.

Researchers from Rowan University's Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education will evaluate the program's impact on inclusive practices and school culture, as well as the growth, leadership skills, and social-emotional learning among all students.

"The Department of Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Education in the College of Education is a natural fit for involvement in the Unified Champion Schools," says Lisa Vernon-Dotson, Rowan University's lead researcher on the project. "Working with Special Olympics provides another avenue to explore and promote the true benefits of inclusive education at all levels and with all stakeholders."

"We are honored to partner with NJDOE and Rowan University. Through sports participation, SONJ has long been committed to equity, inclusion, and success for students with disabilities. The opportunity to provide a foundation for the development of youth enhances the quality of life for those with and without disabilities and creates authentic opportunities that nurture respect, acceptance, and inclusion," says Heather Andersen, President and CEO, Special Olympics New Jersey.

More information is available on the Special Olympics New Jersey [Unified Champion Schools](#) website.