



Office of the President & CEO

NYC Council Committee on Education: Meeting the Needs of all Students with Disabilities Wednesday, September 21, 2022

**Testimony By
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Even champions need champions.

One in every 5 students enrolled in New York City Department of Education (DOE) schools has a disability. The same ratio is seen among New York State's general population.

It is on behalf of these students and citizens that I submit the following. Thank you for the opportunity.

New York is home to one of the largest Special Olympics chapters in the country. We currently serve more than 31,000 athletes – children, youth and adults with intellectual disabilities (ID) – statewide, providing year-round sports training, authentic competition, and health screenings. We also partner with schools throughout the state to offer Unified Sports, where students with and without disabilities compete as teammates. All Special Olympics New York programs are offered at no cost to athletes, their families or caregivers.

In short, we change lives. People with intellectual disabilities who never dreamed they could play a sport, be part of a team, or compete – *really compete* – are given the chance. With our help, they learn to discover and unleash the champion within themselves. And in the process, they show our communities what true inclusion looks like and why it's important.

To understand the impact of Special Olympics on someone's day-to-day life, let me tell you about a 17-year-old young man with Down syndrome who joined our program about two years ago. Before finding Special Olympics, Alex went to school every day, a public school in Upstate New York. He had some classes with neuro-typical students his age, but the vast majority of his time was spent in a self-contained environment with other students who have varying disabilities. He came home from school and spent the afternoon with his babysitter, his family and his computer. He was happy, but he was lonely. His friends didn't call him to hang out after school or on weekends.

When Alex first joined Special Olympics, it was at his parents urging. Sports had never been his thing; he didn't see himself as an athlete. So he took his time, tried a couple activities here and there. Surprising everyone who knows him, what he ended up enjoying most was powerlifting. Flash forward to today ... Alex meets his



Special Olympics teammates and coaches at the gym three days a week and trains as a *powerlifter*. He works out from 7 – 8 p.m. on weeknights and at 10 a.m. on Saturday mornings. He has become so confident in his athletic abilities that he's also joined the Special Olympics Unified Bowling team at his high school.

Alex has new friends and teammates. He has coaches and an entire community of people who believe in him and support him. He has championship lifts and matches on his calendar. He is proud to identify himself as an athlete and he is even learning to tell his story, to advocate. Alex is healthier, both physically and mentally. He isn't lonely anymore. He is too busy to be lonely.

Not long ago, Alex said to me: "Mom, Special Olympics changed my life."

I am the president and CEO of the organization that changed my son's life, and I can't separate the pride that gives me as both a parent and a leader. I only wish we had found Special Olympics sooner. Like so many people living with disabilities in New York City, we were not aware of the impact that Special Olympics could have on our family. I am determined to do everything I can to make sure that kids like Alex and parents like me know what we know now: that Special Olympics New York can improve their lives.

Increasing our footprint in New York City priority #1 because it's where our work is most urgently needed. Despite being the highest populated and most diverse area of the state, New York City is home to only 1,371 athletes who participated in traditional Special Olympics sports programs in their community in 2021. This, in a city that more than 18 million people call home.

Special Olympics is slightly more prevalent within the DOE, where approximately 22,000 students were exposed to some form of our programming in 2021. However, this – in the largest school district in the United States, where more than 1 million students are enrolled – is not enough.

It means 2% of the students this committee aims to serve had access to Special Olympics programming in school last year. Yet 20% of DOE students have a disability, and for the most part, the other 80% never even see a student with a disability in the hallway, let alone interact with them. It's not even close to being enough.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. Special Olympics New York offers programs for students of all ages. We offer training for educators and coaches. We provide equipment and uniforms. *All with zero start-up costs to impact school budgets.*

One of our most successful models is the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program, which my son and nearly 10,000 students currently participate in at more than 250 high schools statewide. In a Unified Champion School, students with and without ID compete as teammates against other schools in their section, just like any Varsity or Junior Varsity team. These students not only enjoy the physical, mental and social benefits of being on a school sports team; they lead inclusive activities that bring the entire student body together. The culture in a Special Olympics Unified Champion School is what all schools should strive for: one where every student is welcome, empowered and included.

While we are seeing the Unified movement grow quickly upstate, it has been a struggle to partner with schools in the city. In fact, of the more than 250 Unified Champion Schools we work with statewide, just 12 of them are within the NYC DOE.

Equally as important as comprehensive Unified Champion Schools programming, which is the most inclusive and engaging for students both with and without intellectual disabilities, Special Olympics New York offers training and coaching for school staff interested in providing Unified Physical Education classes, health and wellness programs, youth leadership and more. We have made some inroads at this less-immersive level over the years, with approximately 140 NYC DOE schools currently involved in some way. However, this is still a small fraction: slightly more than 7%.

I know this committee will agree that the country's largest and most diverse school system – and its surrounding communities – should be doing much, much better. With your help, it can.

There are tens of thousands of people with disabilities in New York City who need Special Olympics and don't know it yet. So many Alex's out there with a champion sleeping inside of them, waiting to be awakened.

Special Olympics can do that. I see it happen every day. But even champions need champions, and they need you.

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All Special Olympics New York programs are offered at no cost to athletes, their families or caregivers. The organization has earned the Platinum Seal of Transparency from GuideStar.com, making it one of the most trusted charities in the business, nationally. For additional information about Special Olympics New York, or to learn more about getting involved, visit www.specialolympicsNY.org.



