



**Special
Olympics**

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: 2021-22 Evaluation Report

Center for Social Development and Education



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Executive Summary

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is just one of the many ways that Special Olympics (SO) is leading the inclusion revolution across the United States and world. Focused on K-12 schools and activating students of all ages as agents of change, UCS is an evidence-based strategy for schools to prioritize social inclusion and equity for students with intellectual disability (ID) and an overall school culture of acceptance of difference, such as disability. With sports as the foundation, UCS offers myriad opportunities for students with and without ID to learn and work together within three core experiences—Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement. The annual evaluation findings have helped establish three implementation models, provided evidence of effective success and sustainability strategies, and documented a clear pathway of the mechanisms behind attitudinal change about inclusion and ID (e.g., Siperstein et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). After more than a decade of research and evaluation, it is clear that UCS is successful in providing inclusive schoolwide programming capable of effecting change within K-12 schools.

Given the wealth of information already amassed, the evaluation team at the Center for Social Development and Education approached the 2021-22 evaluation seeking to continue to add depth and context to what is already known by aligning newer data with older data and continuing the historical examination of qualitative data through the new archive of transcripts. Thus, the overarching focus of the evaluation this year was to look at 2021-22 in the context of recent years and current events as well as over a longer period of time to better understand program implementation trends and the various factors that are and have influenced UCS implementation.

The main findings from each section of the report follows.

Program Implementation

- In terms of implementation model, half of responding schools (51%) represented the Full-implementation Unified Schools model. This reflects an encouraging return to pre-pandemic levels.
- Among the three core experiences, the Unified Sports experience continued to have the highest rate of implementation (84%), followed by Whole School Engagement (82%), and Inclusive Youth Leadership (62%). Encouragingly, rates of implementation increased for all three core experiences compared to at the height of the pandemic.
- Among individual activities, Spread the Word/Respect Campaign was the most common activity (64% of responding schools), which represents a departure from during the pandemic where Unified PE was the most implemented activity.
- Within the Unified Sports experience, Unified Sports team implementation saw a substantial increase compared to the previous year (60% vs. 39%). Implementation of this activity is still not back to pre-pandemic levels (e.g., 76% in 2018-19), but implementation of the other Unified Sports activities is, and Unified Fitness implementation has doubled from 12% in 2018-19 to 24% in 2021-22.

- Within the Whole School Engagement experience, the average number of activities implemented increased from one activity during the pandemic to two activities in 2021-22. Notable increases were documented for fundraising, Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, and Unified Sports Day/Festival.
 - Social Media use as a Whole School Engagement technique was explored for the first time in 2021-22 and revealed that half of schools (48%) use social media to spread awareness about inclusion or promote UCS at the school. Use of social media was highest among high schools (61%) and schools with older UCS programs (52%).
- Within the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience, activities were implemented at a similar rate compared to past years, except, notably, for Youth Athletes Volunteers, which saw an increase from 16% last year to 32% this year.
 - Participation in Inclusive Youth Leadership activities was also documented. Overall inclusive participation was high with 87%-97% of responding liaisons reporting both students with and without ID participated in each activity.

Rebounding from COVID-19

- One in five responding liaisons (20%) indicated their school was shut down at least once during the 2021-22 school year due to the pandemic. Of those, over half (55%) indicated UCS was negatively impacted because of this closure.
- Although all UCS activities continued to be prohibited to some degree due to the pandemic, no activity was impacted at the levels of the previous year. In fact, across all activities, the level of impact was two to three times lower in 2021-22 compared to 2020-21. This indicates a clear rebounding from the height of the pandemic.
- Responding liaisons reported that the majority of their typical UCS program offerings were possible this year. In terms of how much schools had been able to recover, liaisons reported that 70% of their Unified Sports program had recovered, 63% of their Inclusive Youth Leadership program, and 67% of their Whole School Engagement program was “back to normal.”
- Encouragingly, almost all responding liaisons envisioned their school returning to “normal” within the next two years (86%) and further confirmed this was a goal for their school (91%).

Sustainability and Implementation Support

- Regarding self-sustainability, two-thirds (62%) of liaisons reported that they considered UCS self-sustainable at their school. Perhaps even more encouraging, 66% of liaisons reported their school had a concrete plan in place to continue and sustain UCS into the coming school year (2022-23).
- Liaisons at one-quarter of all schools (28%) reported having formed a UCS Leadership Team. This is consistent with last year and represents stability after a period of some decline during the first two years of the pandemic. Consistent with previous years, UCS Leadership Teams were more common at Full-implementation schools and having a Leadership Team was associated with more positive perceptions of program sustainability.

- The overwhelming majority of liaisons indicated they were the person that started the Leadership Team at their school (85%), and this trend was consistent across school type, implementation level, and locale. The makeup of UCS Leadership Teams has stayed consistent over the years.
- Liaisons without UCS Leadership Team support indicated that to be able to form a team they needed more time available in the day to commit to UCS leadership (44%). Liaisons with UCS Leadership Team support reported similar challenges to maintaining the team once it was formed including having difficulty finding time for the Leadership Team to meet (43%) and limited time for liaisons and others to commit to UCS leadership and planning (39%).
- Liaisons reported relatively high levels of support from administrators and general education teachers. Two-thirds of responding liaisons (65%) reported these school staff members contributed to UCS implementation at their school. Satisfaction with the contributions of administrators and general education teachers was also quite high (80% and 74%, respectively). Levels of support from and satisfaction with these groups were highest among Full-implementation schools.
 - Reflecting on how many general education teachers contributed to the implementation of UCS, liaisons reported an average of 38% of the general education teachers at their school were involved in some way. There were notable differences among school level, with elementary school liaisons reporting more of the general education teachers contributed (47% of the general education teachers, on average) compared to middle (37%) and high schools (32%).
- Regarding using SO resources to aid in program implementation, 50% of responding liaisons indicated they had utilized print or online resources in 2021-22. This is consistent with past years where overall reports of resource use have fluctuated around 50%-60% of liaisons. Expected differences were seen among implementation levels, where twice as many liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported using resources compared to Emerging schools (60% vs. 34%).
 - Awareness of individual SO resources varied and was highest for the *Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5*, where 64% of elementary school liaisons reported they were aware of this resource.
 - When liaisons were aware of and used specific resources, “usefulness” ratings were very high for each resource. Between 58% and 87% of liaisons reported each resource they used was “very useful” (this was the most positive option offered on the *UCS Liaison Survey*).
- Regarding training and technical assistance from the State SO Program, 39% of liaisons indicated they participated in a training (e.g., webinar, workshop, conference) offered by their State SO Program and half (51%) reported communicating once a month or more with state-level staff. High school liaisons and liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported the most participation in trainings.
 - Liaisons were overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of support they received (91% of liaisons were satisfied, with 65% “very satisfied”), which is consistent with past years.

- Regarding funding to support program implementation, the most common source of financial support for UCS was from State SO Programs (64%). Liaisons who reported receiving funding from the state reported that, on average, this funding accounted for 66% of the UCS budget at their school. Notably, nearly one-third (30%) of liaisons reported that the state-level funding constituted their entire budget.

Liaison Perceptions of UCS Impact

- Liaisons had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of UCS impact on students with and without ID, as well as the school as a whole, with 96% or more reporting that UCS was valuable to each of these three groups.
- Liaisons overwhelmingly indicated that they felt UCS made a difference to their school and its students across an array of impact areas that included increasing the confidence of students with ID (96%), raising awareness about students with ID (93%), creating a more socially inclusive school environment (93%), increasing opportunities for students to work together (95%), and increasing the participation of students with ID in school activities (96%).

Analysis of Factors Predicting Having a UCS Leadership Team

- Longitudinal data from a sample of schools that answered the annual *UCS Liaison Survey* in their first three years was analyzed to explore the factors that predict schools having a Leadership Team. To identify these factors, hierarchical logistic regression was used to compare schools with and without the support of a team.
 - No state- or school-level variables were found to be important in determining whether a school had a Leadership Team when they began implementing UCS.
 - Among UCS-level factors, the odds of having a Leadership Team decreased as resource use increased. Specifically, there was a 57% reduction in the expected likelihood of having a Leadership Team if the school utilized at least one SO resource.
 - Another UCS-level factor that emerged as significant was liaison position. Schools where the liaison was a general education teacher were approximately twice as likely to have a Leadership Team in the first year compared to schools which had a special education teacher or an administrator as the liaison.

Qualitative Perspectives on UCS Implementation

- The 2021-22 evaluation represent the first year in which all transcripts from current and former interview, focus groups, and other qualitative methodologies were combined within qualitative analysis software. The “qualitative archive” contains 1,793 transcripts representing approximately 2,066 participants (e.g., liaisons, administrators, students) from 197 schools in 34 states over fourteen years of evaluation. Different types of content analysis were conducted with the archive, focusing on resource use, support and sustainability, partnerships with community programs and organizations, and UCS in urban locales.

- Participants discussed resources in terms of specific resources available to them, such as the *High School Playbook*, but also in terms of what was generally helpful to keep UCS operating at the school (e.g., people as a resource).
- The idea of support was discussed most consistently among State SO Program staff and school administrators but was discussed the most extensively in conversations with Unified Sports coaches, liaisons, and special education teachers.
- When reflecting on resources and support for implementation, participants often focused on access to monetary resources and funding. For State SO Program staff, these reflections were often concerns about further investing in a school that was not sustainable year over year.
- When participants identified funding as a concern (i.e., not having enough funding), it was mainly participants from Emerging Unified schools and newer schools (which may be one and the same) who discussed this.
- Regarding program sustainability, especially as it overlapped with funding, administrators concerned about ensuring UCS continued at their schools noted that the lack of a stipend for Unified Sports coaches or the liaison was something that made it difficult for whoever initially had the passion to develop the UCS program to maintain their intense participation each year.
- Connections to community SO programs were strengthened when there were Unified Sports coaches and liaisons involved in both school UCS program and community program because it meant that students were more easily connected to opportunities for inclusive sports.
- Connections to the community SO program also meant that Unified Sports coaches and liaisons could get access to new perspectives on implementation and access to new resources (like space or transportation).
- Urban/city UCS schools have faced the same implementation successes and challenges as schools in other locales. However, these can be amplified by the unique context of schools in city or metro areas.
 - Access to space was a concern for participants from UCS city schools as many reported no athletic facilities or safety concerns with the spaces available. Sharing space was also a common occurrence for UCS in urban schools and UCS activities were not usually given the priority in these cases.
 - When it was possible to mitigate space challenges in UCS city schools, liaisons tended to do so through personal relationships with other school staff who exercised oversight over certain school spaces and help from community members who opened up locations outside of school for UCS activities.
 - Family involvement can be more sporadic in urban schools, and participants discussed the cultural differences, extenuating personal circumstances, and socioeconomic factors that made participation in UCS difficult for students let alone their parents/guardians. However, for families who were able to be involved, participants noted seeing positive

impacts on families, acknowledging that often there are not as many social spaces for parents of students with ID to connect.

- Transportation was also more difficult in urban schools due to a confluence of factors such as parents without cars, no school buses after school hours, and limited funding for charter transportation. Liaisons mitigated this by arranging transportation through community partners or teachers who volunteered to drive students back home. In some cases, liaisons were able to secure additional funding for transportation from the State SO Program or school administrators were able to find money in the school budget.
- Though participants at UCS city schools did not speak much about relationships with community SO programs, though they aspired to have a relationship, they did have strong relationships with their surrounding community and local community organizations. Through burgeoning partnerships with community businesses and ongoing relationships with community partners, they were able to gain access to new resources and provide students with new opportunities.

In light of the findings of the 2021-22 evaluation, the following recommendations are offered as SO embarks on its 15th year of UCS programming:

- Strengthen training and technical assistance plans so that program health and sustainability factors, as informed by the annual evaluation, continue to drive how State SO Programs and schools are supported.
- Develop more relevant programming models and impact benchmarks for the oldest UCS schools so that the positive impacts of UCS over time are highlighted, understood, and celebrated more widely.
- Connect more school UCS programs with more community SO programs so students in UCS schools have expanded, long-term opportunities to participate in inclusive activities and liaisons and Unified Sports coaches have expanded, long-term support and resource networks.
- Support all UCS schools by identifying better practices for UCS implementation and training and technical assistance in UCS city schools, as what benefits UCS schools in urban locales benefits all UCS schools.

Introduction

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is just one of the many ways that Special Olympics (SO) is leading the inclusion revolution across the US and world. Focused on K-12 schools and activating students of all ages as agents of change, UCS is an evidence-based strategy for schools to prioritize social inclusion and equity for students with intellectual disability (ID) and an overall school culture of acceptance of difference, such as disability. As a largely youth-led strategy, UCS does not intend for students to be passive recipients of the programming but rather one of the driving forces behind a cultural shift where inclusion is valued, where it is the norm and expectation. UCS builds students' capacity to do this through students with and without ID learning and working side by side within three core experiences:

- **SO Unified Sports®:** opportunities that bring students with and without ID together to participate in competitive and recreational inclusive sports activities (such as Unified Sports teams, Unified PE, Unified Fitness, Unified eSports, Young Athletes, and Unified Developmental Sports);
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** opportunities for students with and without ID to take on leadership roles in promoting UCS program activities, or other socially inclusive events, in the school and community (such as Unified Club, Inclusive Leadership Training/Class, Young Athletes Volunteers, SO Youth Summit, and SO Youth Activation Committee);
- **Whole School Engagement:** opportunities for all students in the school to participate in the UCS program (such as Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, Unified Sports Day/Festival, a SO play/performance (e.g., "It's Our School, Too" play), Unified Fitness challenges, and fundraising events and activities).

To support an evidence-based approach to program implementation that maximizes impact for schools and students, SO has partnered with the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Now in its 14th year, CSDE conducts an extensive evaluation focused on understanding how UCS is implemented across schools and its impact on school community members. Through the evaluation, UCS has developed three well-established implementation models, there is evidence of effective success and sustainability strategies, and there is clear pathway of the mechanisms behind attitudinal change about inclusion and ID (e.g., Siperstein et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). After more than a decade of research and evaluation, it is clear that UCS is successful in providing inclusive schoolwide programming capable of effecting change within K-12 schools.

Given the wealth of information already amassed, CSDE approached the 2021-22 evaluation seeking to continue to add depth and context to what is already known by aligning newer data with older data and continuing the historical examination of qualitative data through the new archive of transcripts. Thus, the overarching focus of the evaluation this year was to look at 2021-22 in the context of recent years and current events as well as over a longer period of time

to better understand program implementation trends and the various factors that are and have influenced implementation.

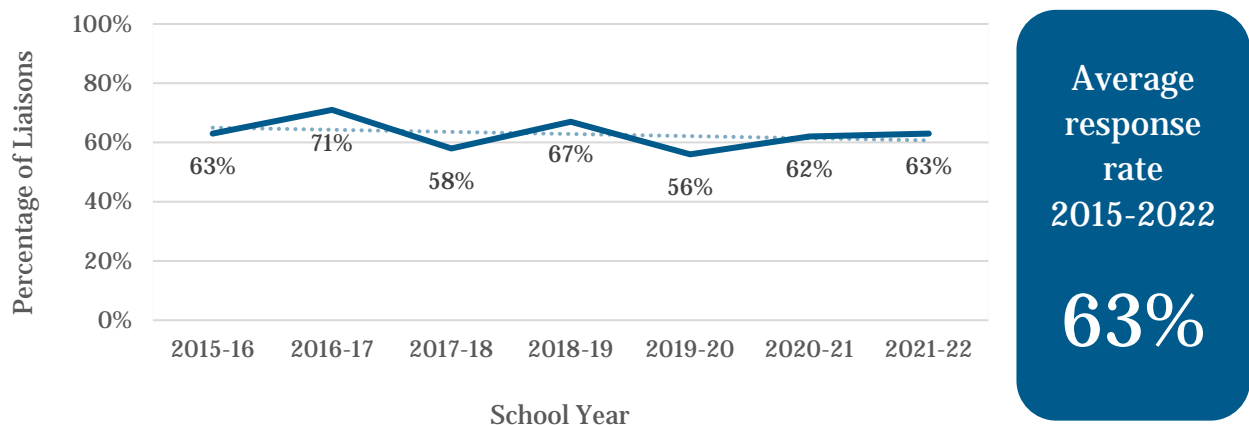
This year’s evaluation report examines program implementation from several angles. First, for the 2021-22 school year, examining implementation in the context of the continued rebound and healing from COVID-19, program sustainability in the short and long term, and program supports such as resource use and funding. Second, examining the factors that influence schools’ ability to start implementing UCS with a Leadership Team in the first year, as Leadership Teams have emerged as one of the most prominent support factors in previous evaluations. And finally, for a complementary perspective to the quantitative data, examining factors related to implementation in the new qualitative archive, which houses all transcripts collected over the fourteen years of the annual UCS evaluation.

The following sections present the findings on these topics in detail and concludes with recommendations that can guide programming into 2022-23 and beyond.

Implementation of Unified Champion Schools in 2021-22

Historically, liaisons have provided the most comprehensive picture of UCS implementation at the school and national level and, as a group, have become one of the most important sources of information for the annual UCS evaluation. Their collective responses to the UCS Liaison Survey each year and over time have been crucial to understanding the depth and breadth of UCS from 2009-2022. For the 2021-22 UCS Liaison Survey, the evaluation team reached out to 6,746 liaisons and received responses from 4,242. This represents a 63% response rate, which is consistent with last year and the average over time. See Figure 1 for the response rate over time.

Figure 1. Annual UCS Liaison Survey response rate between 2015-16 and 2021-22.

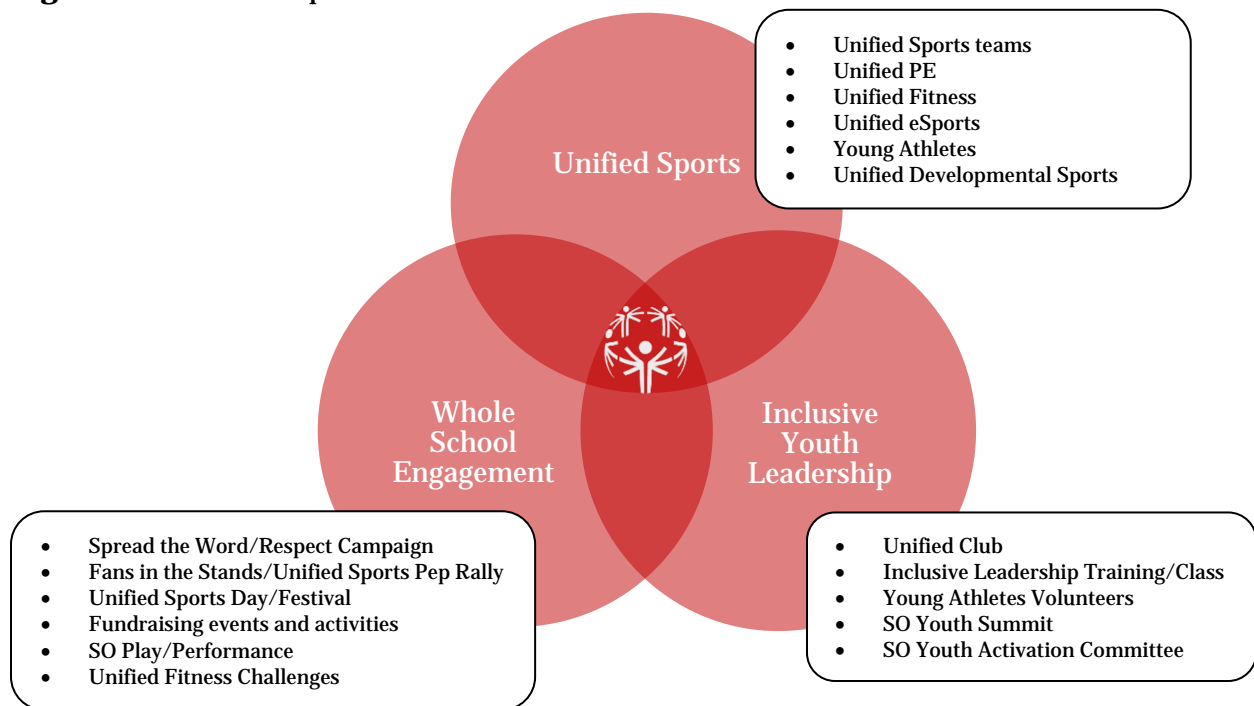


Collectively in 2021-22, there was a plurality of liaisons representing suburban high schools with fewer than 1,000 students enrolled, which mirrors national trends.¹ Similar to last year, UCS high schools were more common in rural, town and suburban locales while UCS elementary schools were more common in urban locales.² On average, school enrollment at UCS schools was 912 students, which is substantially larger than the national average of 529 students. This is likely because nearly half of all UCS schools are high schools (46%), while nationally, high schools make up 24% of all public schools. UCS schools were also comprised of more White students (56% of the student body, on average) compared to nationally. The largest racial/ethnic minority groups were Hispanic students (20%, on average) and Black students (15%, on average). See [Appendix A: Table 4](#) for more information on the schools that responding liaisons represented.

Implementation Across Schools

UCS activities are grouped into three core experiences: Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement (see [Appendix B](#)). School staff and youth leaders implementing UCS have the flexibility to choose which core experiences to implement and can therefore design a program that best fits their school’s unique context and needs. See Figure 2 for a diagram of the core experiences and their associated activities included in the 2021-22 evaluation.

Figure 2. UCS core experiences and activities evaluated in 2021-22.

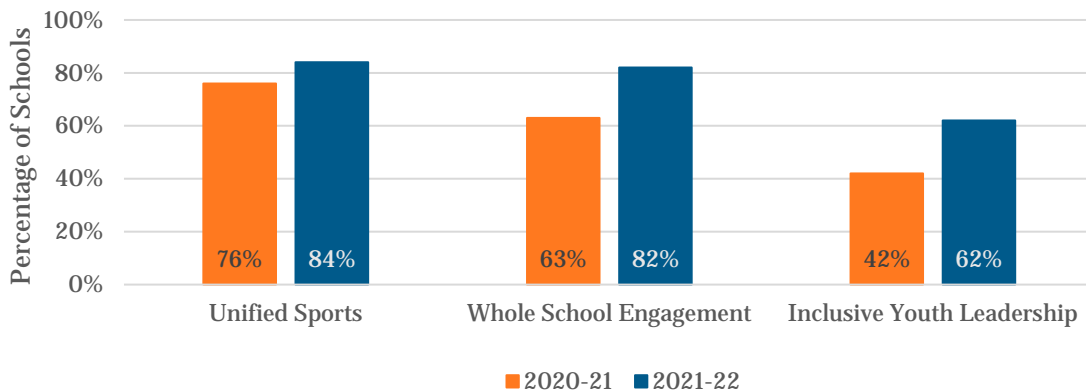


¹ National data in this paragraph taken from: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01>

² Locale categories designated by NCES. See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/handbook/data/pdf/appendix_d.pdf

As in previous years, Unified Sports had the highest rate of implementation at 84% of UCS schools. This is an increase from 2020-21 and resembles pre-pandemic levels of implementation. This was followed by Whole School Engagement implementation in 82% of schools and Inclusive Youth Leadership implementation in 62% of schools. These two core experiences saw a substantial increase from 2020-21 and resemble pre-pandemic levels as well. See Figure 3 for an implementation comparison over the last two years.

Figure 3. UCS core experience implementation levels 2020-21 and 2021-22.



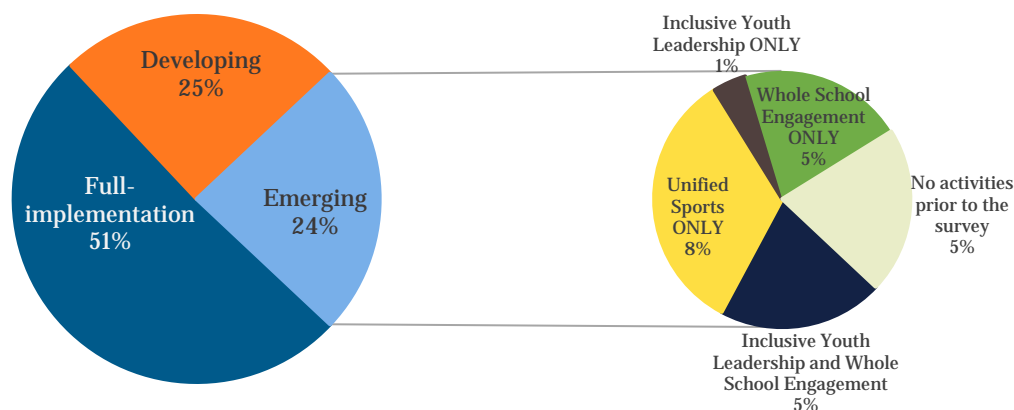
The adaptable nature of UCS allows school staff and youth leaders the freedom to choose which activities are best for their school and results in a variety of implementation levels among UCS schools. Beginning in 2014-15, SO defined the implementation levels as follows:

- ⊗ **Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools** are those that implement at least one activity from all three core experiences
- ⊗ **Developing Unified Schools** implement activities from Unified Sports and one other core experience
- ⊗ **Emerging Unified Schools** implement activities from some other combination of core experiences (i.e., Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement, or just one core experience)

While there are benefits for schools and students at all implementation levels, the most impactful model is Full-implementation. Research and evaluation of UCS indicates that UCS activities have the most impact when all three core experiences are implemented and work in tandem (Siperstein et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). While all schools are encouraged to reach Full-implementation, the option to implement UCS activities in myriad other combinations maximizes the potential for schools and students to participate in and benefit from UCS and helps ensure the program is implemented to the best of schools' abilities under any circumstances.

Within the sample of 4,242 responding liaisons in 2021-22, half were from Full-implementation schools and a quarter each from Developing and Emerging. As with implementation of the core components, these numbers also reflect an encouraging return to pre-pandemic levels. See Figure 4 for a breakdown of implementation level across the schools.

Figure 4. Proportion of each implementation level in 2021-22.



Continuing the historical association between implementation level and school level, more high schools continued to be categorized as Full-implementation in 2021-22, due to their higher rates of implementing the core experiences (see Table 1).

Table 1. Implementation level and core experience implementation across school levels in 2021-22.

	All Schools n = 4242	Elementary n = 1331	Middle n = 786	High n = 1866
Implementation Level				
Full-implementation	51%	39%	50%	61%
Developing	25%	30%	24%	21%
Emerging	24%	31%	26%	18%
Core Experience				
Unified Sports	84%	79%	82%	88%
Inclusive Youth Leadership	62%	49%	62%	71%
Whole School Engagement	82%	77%	80%	86%

Examining implementation level and core experience implementation by school locale and new/returning status, a higher proportion of suburban schools reached the Full-implementation level in 2021-22 compared to schools in other locales, with the difference most pronounced compared to urban UCS schools (59% vs. 44%, respectively). There did not appear to be meaningful differences in implementation of the Unified Sports experience or the Whole School Engagement experience among locales, however the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience was implemented in a higher proportion of suburban schools, and again most pronounced compared to urban schools (69% vs. 55%, respectively). This is perhaps an artifact of there being a larger proportion of elementary schools in urban locales coupled with the expectedly lower rate of Inclusive Youth Leadership activities among the lower grades.

Finally, liaisons at both returning UCS schools (schools that had implemented UCS prior to the 2021-22 school year) and new UCS schools (schools implementing UCS for the first time in 2021-22) reported similar rates of the Full-implementation model and similar rates of implementation across all three core experiences, which is consistent with last year.

Approximately 1 in 5 responding schools were new UCS schools in 2021-22, which also continues the historical trend in response rate from this group.

Unified Sports

Unified Sports is a key aspect of UCS implementation and impact. Unified Sports activities aim to build friendship and understanding by creating an opportunity for students with and without ID to train and compete together while representing their school. In 2021-22, liaisons at schools with the Unified Sports experience reported implementing 1.9 Unified Sports activities, on average. This is a small increase from 1.4 activities implemented on average last year. Table 2 reports the individual activities that schools implemented as part of their Unified Sports program. Most notably for 2021-22 was the substantial increase in the number of schools implementing Unified Sports teams compared to the previous year (60% vs. 39%), which was paired with a reduction in the number of schools offering Unified PE (62% vs. 79%). These changes likely reflect the continued rebound from COVID-19 as more schools were able to move back to in-person team sports. The number of schools implementing Unified Sports teams is still not back to pre-pandemic levels (e.g., 76% in 2018-19), but implementation of the other activities is similar, and Unified Fitness implementation has doubled from 12% in 2018-19 to 24% in 2021-22.

Table 2. Percentage of schools with Unified Sports implementing each Unified Sports activity.

Unified Sports Activity	All Schools n = 3559	Elementary n = 1054	Middle n = 647	High n = 1644
Unified PE	62%	63%	69%	63%
Unified Sports team	60%	25%	59%	80%
Unified Fitness	24%	27%	22%	23%
Unified eSports	7%	3%	7%	8%
Young Athletes	49%	49%	n/a	n/a
Unified Developmental Sports	27%	31%	20%	n/a

Note: Percentages reflect the number of schools implementing each activity out of the total number of schools implementing the Unified Sports core experience. Schools categorized as “other” or that are missing categorization information from NCES ($n = 214$) are not shown specifically in this table but are included in the sample of all schools. Percentages will not add up to 100% as many schools implemented multiple activities.

Note: Young Athletes was only implemented at the preschool, prekindergarten, and elementary level, through grade 2. The total n for this activity is comprised of just those schools with the Unified Sports experience ($n = 1054$).

Note: Unified Developmental Sports was only implemented at the elementary and middle levels, through grade 7. The total n for this activity is comprised of just those schools with the Unified Sports experience ($n = 1701$).

Examining these trends based on school locale revealed, similar to last year, that liaisons at urban schools reported lower rates of Unified Sports team implementation compared to liaisons in other locales, but slightly higher rates of Unified Fitness implementation. This variation reflects the historical challenges urban UCS schools have faced with Unified Sports teams (see [Access to Space](#)) but also reflects the goals of SO’ Unified Champion City Schools initiative. This initiative is bringing UCS to the most underserved schools, typically those in urban areas/cities, where SO can support overall health and wellness for students and communities.

Whole School Engagement

The Whole School Engagement experience gives all students in a school the opportunity to participate in UCS and support a socially inclusive school culture. As Whole School Engagement events and activities reach the greatest number of students within a school, they are integral to raising awareness about the capabilities and contributions of students with ID and signifying that inclusion is an expectation and a norm. In 2021-22, liaisons at schools with the Whole School Engagement experience reported implementing 2.1 Whole School Engagement activities, on average. This is an increase from just one activity implemented on average last year. Table 3 reports the individual activities that schools implemented as part of their Whole School Engagement program. Most notably for 2021-22 were the increases in implementation, compared to the previous year, for fundraising (38% vs. 30%), Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally (38% vs. 16%), and Unified Sports Day/Festival (34% vs. 20%). Unified Fitness Challenges, which saw an increase during the pandemic, saw a slight decrease in 2021-22 (down from 27% in 2020-21), although was implemented at a higher rate than before the pandemic. These changes likely reflect the continued rebound from COVID-19 as more schools were able to move back to in-person and larger group gatherings in support of UCS. The number of schools implementing Spread the Word/Respect Campaign has remained consistent over the last several years and through the pandemic.

Table 3. Percentage of schools with Whole School Engagement implementing each Whole School Engagement activity.

Whole School Engagement Activity	All Schools n = 3441	Elementary n = 1024	Middle n = 628	High n = 1599
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	79%	79%	82%	77%
Fundraising events and activities	38%	21%	38%	50%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	38%	23%	33%	50%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	34%	44%	30%	29%
Unified Fitness Challenges	19%	23%	17%	17%
SO Play/Performance	11%	10%	9%	11%

Note: Percentage reflects the number of schools implementing each activity out of the total schools implementing the Whole School Engagement core experience. Schools categorized as “other” or that are missing categorization information from NCES ($n = 190$) are not shown specifically in this table but are included in the sample of “all schools.” Percentages will not add up to 100% as many schools implemented multiple activities.

Examining these trends based on school locale revealed that liaisons at urban schools reported lower rates of Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally implementation. This is likely a result of lower rates of Unified Sports team implementation in these locales, as Fans in the Stands is a Whole School Engagement activity designed to promote/support the Unified Sports team. Liaisons at urban schools also reported lower rates of fundraising events and activities compared to liaisons in other locales, which is consistent with previous years. Over the years, liaisons have spoken about the socioeconomic challenges that schools in urban locales face, and especially families in these locales, which may contribute to lower rates of fundraising at these schools (for more information see [Family Involvement](#)).

Social Media

Social media platforms present an increasingly popular way for schools and school districts to connect with students, families, and the surrounding community, so it follows that UCS programs in those schools could have equal success utilizing social media to promote UCS activities and messages of social inclusion. The 2021-22 evaluation represents an initial documentation of schools' social media use for UCS.

Among all responding liaisons, half (48%) indicated that their school used social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to spread awareness about inclusion or promote UCS activities at the school. Perhaps as expected, use of social media for UCS was higher among high schools (61%) compared to middle or elementary schools (43% and 35%, respectively), and was also slightly higher among older UCS programs (52%) compared to new UCS programs (44%). Other notable differences emerged between schools in towns (56%) compared to other locales, with the biggest difference between schools in towns compared to urban locales (38%), and variation by State SO Program, from a high of 85% of responding liaisons in one State SO Program to a low of 17% in another.

Approximately one in five liaisons (19%) using social media for UCS reported that students participating in UCS had ownership or responsibility to maintain a social media account. These rates were expectedly higher among high schools and returning schools as well, with no notable differences among schools in different locales. Some common ways that liaisons reported their school used social media for UCS was to post pictures from events, recap Unified Sports results, and advertise for upcoming events in which the school community could get involved.

Inclusive Youth Leadership

Inclusive Youth Leadership activities provide students with the opportunity to find their voice and enact change within their school community. Leadership roles help students to develop and practice important social-emotional skills such as advocacy and decision-making, and the aim of the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience is to ensure that every student is given an opportunity to develop these skills and contribute their unique abilities and perspectives. In 2021-22, liaisons at schools with the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience reported implementing 1.7 Inclusive Youth Leadership activities, on average. This is a small increase from just one activity implemented on average last year. Table 4 reports the individual activities that schools implemented as part of their Inclusive Youth Leadership program.

Consistent with past years, the most frequently implemented activity within the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience was Unified Club, followed by Leadership Training/Class. Most Inclusive Youth Leadership activities were implemented at a similar rate in 2021-22 compared to past years except for Young Athletes Volunteers. Encouragingly, implementation of Young Athletes Volunteers doubled from 2020-21 to 2021-22 (16% to 32%), after seeing a decrease during the height of the pandemic. Overall implementation trends with this core experience remain as expected (e.g., low implementation of SO Youth Activation Committee among elementary schools as this is an activity geared toward the upper grades) and remains consistent with past years (even through the pandemic). This consistency is largely driven by the higher rates of implementation at the middle and high school levels, except for Young Athletes Volunteers,

which is consistently implemented at higher rates among elementary schools. Finally, examining these trends based on school locale revealed a slightly lower rate of Unified Club implementation among urban schools compared to schools in other locales. This is perhaps explained by the larger proportion of UCS elementary schools in urban locales, where elementary schools are expected to have lower rates of Unified Club implementation overall (as reflected in Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage of schools with Inclusive Youth Leadership implementing each Inclusive Youth Leadership activity.

Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity	All Schools n = 2617	Elementary n = 655	Middle n = 487	High n = 1329
Unified Club	70%	51%	75%	80%
Inclusive Leadership Training/ Class	42%	43%	42%	40%
Young Athletes Volunteers	32%	55%	23%	23%
SO Youth Summit	20%	5%	13%	30%
SO Youth Activation Committee	11%	4%	8%	14%

Note: Percentage reflects the number of schools implementing each activity out of the total schools implementing the Inclusive Youth Leadership core experience. Schools categorized as “other” or that are missing categorization information from NCES (*n* = 146) are not shown specifically in this table but are included in the sample of “all schools.” Percentages will not add up to 100% as many schools implemented multiple activities.

Another component of the Inclusive Youth Leadership aspect of the 2021-22 evaluation concerned student participation rates in the various activities and continuing to document this as the pandemic lessens its impact on how schools implement UCS. Inclusive Youth Leadership activities were the focus as liaisons have consistently reported over the years that they have the most difficulty with making leadership activities inclusive compared to other UCS activities. Notably, all Inclusive Youth Leadership activities saw more inclusive participation (i.e., the participation of both students with and without ID) than last year at the height of the pandemic. Overall inclusive participation was high, however there was no activity in which 100% of liaisons reported inclusive participation. Inclusive participation was highest for Unified Club, with 97% of liaisons at schools with that activity reporting both students with and without ID participated, and lowest for Youth Activation Committee (87% of liaisons with this activity reporting inclusive participation). When participation was not inclusive it was overwhelmingly only students without ID who participated. See Table 5 for more information about participation in each activity, including the main reason liaisons gave for non-inclusive participation.

Of note, while liaisons indicated that, overall, Young Athletes (as part of the Unified Sports experience) was inclusive due to the nature of younger students with ID being involved as the participants and older students without ID being paired with them as volunteers, liaisons did note that they were not aware of older students with ID in a leadership role being paired as volunteers with younger students with ID as participants. In addition, many liaisons noted that SO Youth Summit and SO Youth Activation Committee were new activities for their school this year and that they planned to make them inclusive in the future. Across all activities, scheduling conflicts (such as students with ID not having transportation home after school) and the

COVID-19 pandemic were cited as additional challenges to inclusive participation in Inclusive Youth Leadership activities this year.

Table 5. Participation structures for Inclusive Youth Leadership activities.

Inclusive Youth Leadership Activity	Participation structure			Main reason(s) for non-inclusive participation
	Inclusive	Only ID	Only no ID	
Unified Club (n = 1843)	97%	1%	2%	No students with ID at the school
Inclusive Leadership Training/Class (n = 1091)	92%	1%	7%	A training for students without ID to learn about students with ID and how to work together
Young Athletes Volunteers (n = 827)	89%	2%	9%	Older students without ID served as volunteers for younger participants with ID
SO Youth Summit (n = 516)	91%	2%	7%	Virtual event that was hard for students with ID to participate in / students with ID did not sign up to participate
SO Youth Activation Committee (n = 277)	87%	3%	10%	Virtual event that was hard for students with ID to participate in / students with ID did not sign up to participate

A final aspect of exploring leadership in UCS centered around the leadership roles that students with ID held. Past evaluations have explored this topic and found consistency in fewer liaisons reporting students with ID in leadership roles compared to students without ID. For example, liaisons have reported that in their Unified Club students without ID were more likely to hold a formal leadership role (such as an elected position or a position with a title) while students with ID were more likely to hold an informal role (such as leading a warmup activity or passing out/collecting materials). The 2021-22 evaluation expanded this exploration of leadership roles for students with ID by examining prevalence in Unified Sports and Whole School Engagement activities, where less is known compared to Inclusive Youth Leadership. Results indicate that students with ID held leadership roles the most in Unified Sports teams (79% of teams), followed by Spread the Word/Respect Campaign (60% of campaigns), and SO Play/Performance (65% of performances). These results were consistent at the middle and high school level. Results were somewhat different for elementary schools, where leadership roles for students with ID were reported most and at the same rate for Unified Sports teams and SO Play/Performance (57%), followed by Fundraising events and activities.

Summary

The landscape of UCS implementation in 2021-22 was much improved from the height of the pandemic; implementation of each core experience and implementation at each implementation level resembled pre-pandemic levels this year. Liaisons reported that UCS at their school was healing well from COVID-19 (see also the next section, [Unified Champion Schools Rebounding from COVID-19](#)), although in some cases still feeling lingering impacts, but they were able to implement more activities and involve more students than last year.

Unified Sports activities saw increases across the board, most notably for Unified Sports teams. Implementation of Unified Sports activities, except for Unified Sports teams, were back to or above pre-pandemic levels. Trends among urban schools revealed lower rates of Unified Sports teams and higher rates of Unified Fitness, which align with the foci of the Unified Champion City Schools initiative.

Several Whole School Engagement activities saw higher rates of implementation in 2021-22 compared to the previous year, which likely reflects the continued rebound from COVID-19 as more schools were able to move back to in-person and larger group gatherings in support of UCS. Trends among urban schools revealed lower rates of Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally, which aligns with the lower rates of Unified Sports teams in these schools. Social media was also explored for the first time as a way to engage the school community in UCS and revealed that half of schools (48%) used social media to promote UCS and, of those, one in five gave students some responsibility over what was posted. Expected differences in social media use emerged based on school level, school locale, age of UCS program, and State SO Program.

Most Inclusive Youth Leadership Activities were implemented at similar rates compared to past years, as they were less impacted by the pandemic than Unified Sports because they could more easily be moved to virtual formats. The exception was for Young Athletes Volunteers, which saw an increase this year after decreasing during the pandemic. Trends among urban schools revealed lower rates of Unified Club implementation, which aligns with the higher proportion of elementary schools in this locale. Inclusive participation in Inclusive Youth Leadership activities was also examined and revealed overall high levels of both students with and without ID participating in activities, although there were no activities in which all schools reported inclusive participation. When participation was not inclusive it mainly meant that students without ID were the only ones participating. Common reasons cited for non-inclusive participation were scheduling difficulties, implementing activities for the first time, lingering COVID-19 impacts, and disinterest from students with ID. Finally, leadership roles for students with ID in Unified Sports and Whole School Engagement were examined and revealed that they were involved in leadership the most in Unified Sports, followed by Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, and SO Play/Performance.

Unified Champion Schools Rebounding from COVID-19

Over the past two years the annual evaluation of UCS has attempted to capture the impact of the COVID-19 on UCS implementation and how schools have responded to the pandemic in an attempt to still deliver inclusive programming in some way. The first year of the pandemic (2019-20) was challenging for schools, with almost all (89%) reporting impacts to UCS due to school closures after March 2020. Virtual activities were fledgling at this time, with one in five schools able to hold a virtual activity before the end of the school year. The following year (2020-21), saw continued, and in some ways more negative, impacts of COVID-19. That year, most schools (85%) indicated COVID-19 outright prohibited at least one UCS activity from taking place when it otherwise would have been implemented, and, overall, there were sharp decreases in the implementation of many UCS activities. However, virtual implementation was utilized in twice as many schools as the year before, and with some perceived benefits, such as a

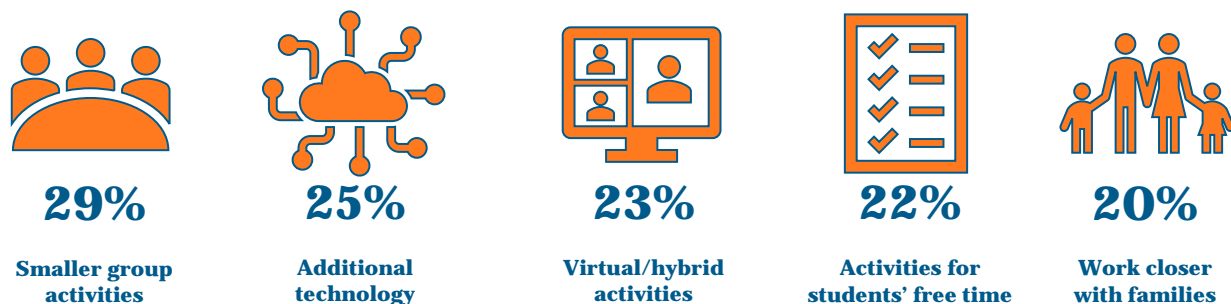
reduction in cost, transportation, and scheduling barriers that often accompany in-person events.

In 2021-22, as liaisons finished the third school year impacted by COVID-19, they reflected on the continued impacts of the pandemic and how their school was rebounding and healing. Among responding liaisons, 20% indicated their school was shut down at least once during the school year due to the pandemic. Moreover, of those schools with closures, over half (55%) of the liaisons there indicated UCS was impacted because of this. Consistent with last year, Unified Sports teams continued to be the most impacted activity wherein liaisons reported not implementing it due to the pandemic. However, the level of impact was much lower in 2021-22 (46% of schools with the Unified Sports experience in 2020-21 did not implement teams due to the pandemic vs. 26% in 2021-22). And although all activities continued to be prohibited among some schools due to the pandemic, no activity was impacted at the levels of the previous year. In fact, across all activities, the level of impact was two to three times lower in 2021-22 compared to 2020-21. This indicates a clear rebounding from the height of the pandemic.

Rebounding was also measured by asking liaisons to indicate how much of their UCS program had recovered compared to where it was before the pandemic. On average, liaisons indicated that 70% of their school's Unified Sports program had recovered, 63% of their Inclusive Youth Leadership program, and 67% of their Whole School Engagement program. One of the main reasons that liaisons cited was responsible for this recovery was simply being "back to normal" in all other aspects of school and largely this meant being back in person. In addition, liaisons also credited open, flexible, and consistent communication with school administrators/school staff, following any COVID-19 safety measures (e.g., masks, testing, sanitizing), and hard work and passion for "making it happen."

Encouragingly, almost all liaisons saw a "return to normal" as possible for their school within the next two years (86%) and further confirmed this was a goal for their school (91%). Adaptations to programming continued in 2021-22 and, although not a majority, some liaisons continued to indicate these adaptations were helpful and they planned on keeping them in place (see Figure 5). At least one in five liaisons indicated keeping one of the adaptations originally put in place because of the pandemic.

Figure 5. Percentage of liaisons who indicated planning to keep certain adaptations to UCS they initially put in place due to COVID-19.



Summary

School recovery efforts from COVID-19 remained strong three years into the pandemic and UCS implementation continued to rebound among schools nationally. In 2021-22 there were fewer activities explicitly impacted by COVID-19, although negative impacts remained for some schools. The most negative impact was that some schools were still unable to implement certain activities due to the pandemic; Unified Sports teams continued to be impacted the most in this way. However, the level of negative impact to activities was two to three times lower than last year, indicating a clear and strong rebounding from the height of the pandemic. Rebounding was also evident in that liaisons felt at least two-thirds of what they would have normally implemented was possible this year and for those who still were not “fully back,” the overwhelming majority said it was their goal to do this in the next two years (i.e., by the 2023-24 school year). Adapting activities helped with liaisons’ ability to offer more activities this year, and at least one in five liaisons indicated these adaptations were useful long-term and would continue. Liaisons also credited communication, practicing health and safety precautions for in-person events, and overall passion for UCS with their ability to “return to normal.”

Sustainability and Implementation Support

Many factors work together to influence the successful and sustainable implementation of UCS in schools. Past evaluations have linked sustainability to factors including implementation level, UCS Leadership Team support, general school community support, funding, and resources. Leadership Teams play a central role in the success of UCS, with Leadership Teams emerging as a significant predictor for schools to reach the Full-implementation level. Plus, when liaisons have a UCS Leadership Team at their school they report feeling more confident and secure in the sustainability of their UCS program, and the majority of liaisons at schools without a Leadership Team believe their UCS program can benefit from this organized and dedicated group. Moreover, the majority of liaisons have reported that Leadership Team support made a noticeable difference in UCS planning and implementation, creating a strategic plan for UCS, and getting more community members involved. At the same time, State Programs can impact UCS sustainability through several means including the provision of funding, dissemination of resources, and providing training to school staff. In particular, State Programs represent a primary funding source for schools, and are more likely to cover most or all of a school’s programming costs than other funding sources. Finally, support from the school community is critical to UCS, with past qualitative findings indicating lack of support from school administration, parents, and students are all perceived as challenges to UCS sustainability.

In 2021-22, big picture sustainability was assessed by asking liaisons to rate whether they considered UCS “self-sustainable” at their school. Holding consistent with during and prior to the pandemic, 62% of liaisons reported that they felt UCS was self-sustainable. Perhaps even more encouraging, 66% of liaisons reported their school had a concrete plan in place to continue and sustain UCS into the coming school year (2022-23). Notably, more liaisons from high schools reported there was a sustainability plan in place compared to liaisons from elementary schools (72% vs. 58%, respectively), and more liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported self-sustainability (71%) and having a concrete plan (79%) compared to Emerging and

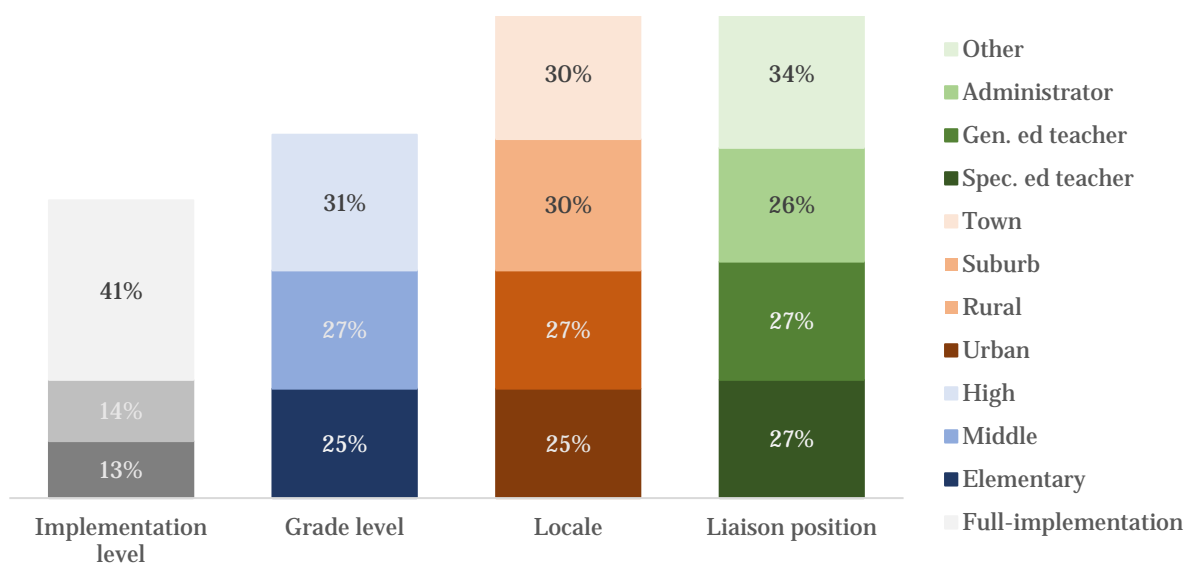
Developing schools (approximately 50%). There were no major differences among schools in different locales.

The following sections provide a more nuanced examination of sustainability factors in 2021-22 including: UCS Leadership Teams, school community support, resource awareness and use, receiving training, support from the State SO Program, and funding.

UCS Leadership Teams

First introduced by SO in 2014-15, the UCS Leadership Team is a group of school and community members who come together to promote and implement UCS activities. In the 2021-22 school year, liaisons at a quarter of all schools (28%) reported having a Leadership Team. This is consistent with last year and represents stability after a period of some decline during the first two years of the pandemic. See Figure 6 for the rate of Leadership Team implementation based on how the school is implementing UCS, what type of school it is, where it is located, and who the liaison is.

Figure 6. UCS Leadership Team implementation by school and UCS program characteristics.



Also consistent with previous evaluation findings, Leadership Team support is associated with perceptions of sustainability, where 77% of liaisons supported by a Leadership Team perceived UCS as self-sustainable compared to 56% of those without this support, and where 83% of liaisons supported by a Leadership Team report a concrete sustainability plan for next year compared to 60% of those without this support. Overall, though, it is encouraging that more than half of liaisons without Leadership Team support perceive the program as sustainable currently and in the future.

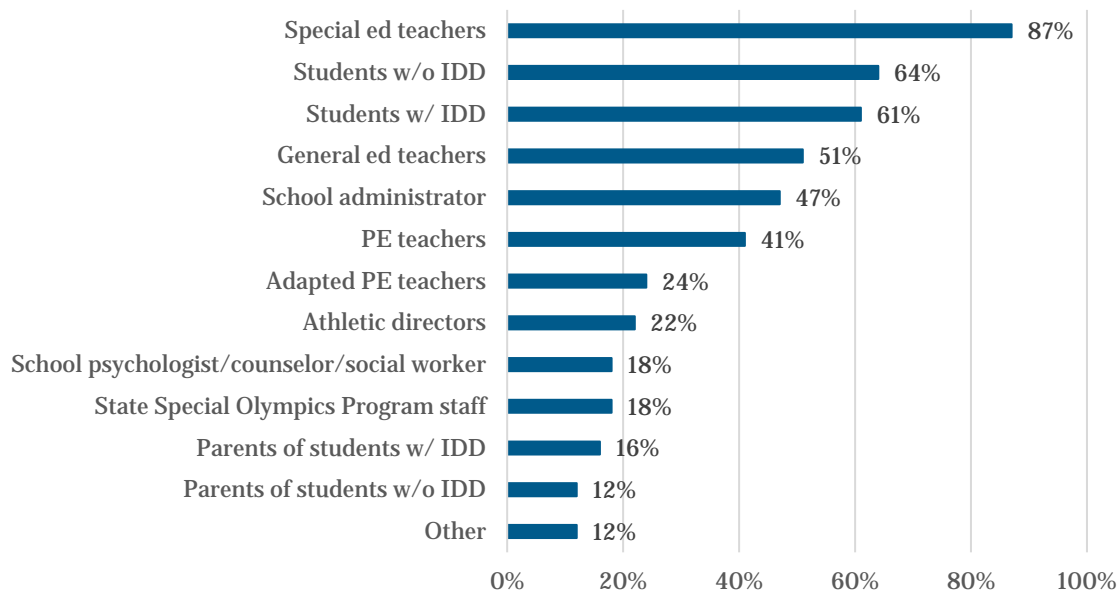
In light of the findings from the 2020-21 evaluation, where Leadership Teams emerged as a significant predictor of schools implementing UCS at the Full-implementation level, the 2021-22 evaluation sought to explore the characteristics of the teams in more depth, including who is on

the team, how those members were recruited, and challenges to forming and maintaining a team.

The majority of liaisons at schools with a UCS Leadership Team were on the team when it first started (78%). Notably, the rate at which liaisons indicated they were on the Leadership Team when it first started did not fluctuate much based on how old the team was. That is, 87% of liaisons at schools with Leadership Teams that were one, two, three, or four years old indicated they had been on the team since it first started. This is compared to 71% of liaisons at schools with Leadership Teams that were five or more years old reporting the same. The majority of liaisons (59%) reported their Leadership Team was between one and three years old, with a plurality of liaisons at schools with new Leadership Teams.

The overwhelming majority of liaisons indicated they were the person that started the Leadership Team at their school (85%), and this trend was consistent across school type, implementation level, and locale. The only notable difference between these groups was, as expected, a much higher rate of students starting the Leadership Team in high schools (21%) compared to middle (8%) and elementary schools (4%). Across schools, Leadership Teams recruited members overwhelmingly by asking people to volunteer or having people volunteer (72%), followed by some schools using an appointment or selection process (32%). These recruitment trends were consistent across school type, implementation level, and locale. See Figure 7 for Leadership Team membership.

Figure 7. Percentage of Leadership Teams with each membership group.

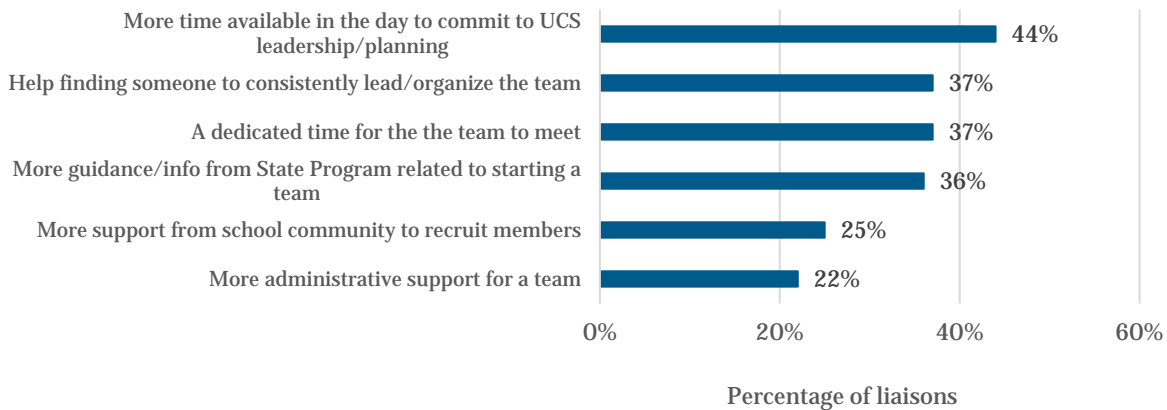


The makeup of UCS Leadership Teams has stayed consistent over the years. This stability is encouraging, but it means that Leadership Teams are made up primarily of special education teachers, with a noticeable gap in the percentage of teams with other school staff involved. In an effort to explore how more special education teachers might be able to recruit their general

education teacher peers to be involved, the 2021-22 evaluation asked liaisons to offer advice on how to do this. Some of the most common suggestions were to ask people to volunteer each time there is a UCS activity or event, start small with one or two passionate general education teachers and then grow from there, talk about it as often as possible and give presentations on UCS during professional development days, get buy-in from administrators and then other school staff will follow, and make sure everyone knows how much UCS benefits the entire school and not just students with ID. Other suggestions that were more specific included asking general education teachers to co-chair the Unified Club and involving general education teachers as content experts for certain activities (e.g., eSports).

The supports needed to form a Leadership Team and the challenges Leadership Teams encounter once formed is something that has also been documented in past annual evaluation reports. In 2020-21 liaisons provided write-in responses about the supports needed to establish a Leadership Team, which included additional support from the school community and resources/guides or a model for what the team could be and do. Liaisons also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it difficult to establish a team. The themes that emerged from liaisons' answers last year were used to create survey questions for 2021-22 in an effort to document a wider range of supports needs among schools without a UCS Leadership Team. Figure 8 depicts the percentages of liaisons at schools without a Leadership Team citing each support and/or resource as necessary for them to be able to form a team.

Figure 8. Resources and supports necessary for forming a UCS Leadership Team, at schools without a UCS Leadership Team.



Also in 2020-21, liaisons provided write-in responses about the challenges they faced establishing a Leadership Team, which included COVID-19 restrictions and time constraints. The themes that emerged from liaisons' answers last year were used to create survey questions for 2021-22 in an effort to document a wider range of challenges among all schools. The most common challenges for schools trying to maintain an existing Leadership Team in 2021-22 were not dissimilar from the support needs that schools without a team indicated above. Mainly, the challenges with maintaining the team related to time, including having difficulty finding time for the Leadership Team to meet (43% of teams) and limited time for liaisons and others to commit

to UCS leadership and planning (39% of teams). Notably, 23% of schools with a Leadership Team indicated they encountered no challenges with the team.

Support for UCS

As one measure of perceived sustainability, liaisons rated the likelihood that UCS would continue at their school without the involvement of key people. Liaisons reports have consistently demonstrated there is a relationship between their evaluation of UCS as self-sustainable and their belief that UCS will continue without their direct involvement or without the involvement of their State Program. This relationship was clear once again in the 2021-22 data, with over two-thirds (68%) of liaisons reporting that even without their direct involvement as the liaison, UCS would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to continue at their school. For liaisons who indicated they felt their UCS program was already self-sustainable, this number increased to 82%. Relatedly, half (53%) of liaisons felt that even without State Program involvement, UCS would be very or somewhat likely to continue, and this was even more pronounced for liaisons who felt UCS was self-sustainable (69%).

Administrators and general education teachers are another important source of support for UCS, and the annual evaluation has measured their involvement in various ways over the years. In 2021-22, liaisons reflected on the extent to which these groups were involved with UCS at their school and shared what that involvement looked like and how satisfied they were with these contributions. Across all liaisons, 65% indicated that administrators and general education teachers contributed to the implementation of UCS. There were notable differences across implementation levels (see Table 6).

Table 6. Percentage of schools with administrators and general education teachers contributing to UCS implementation, by implementation level.

Implementation Level	Administrators	General Education Teachers
Emerging (<i>n</i> = 1005)	46%	44%
Developing (<i>n</i> = 1041)	61%	61%
Full-implementation (<i>n</i> = 2159)	77%	76%

Some of the most common ways liaisons reported that administrators and general education teachers were involved included volunteering their time to help plan or implement activities, paying attention to UCS and helping to spread the word about it, and helping to secure resources like funding or space. For liaisons who were not fully satisfied with how their administrators or general education teacher peers had contributed to UCS implementation, they mainly just needed *more* of what they were already getting from them—more time, more attention, more resources.

On average, liaisons reported that over one-third (38%) of their school’s general education teachers contributed to the implementation of UCS. There were notable differences among school level, with a higher average among elementary schools (47% of general education teachers, on average) compared to middle (37%) and high schools (32%), thus indicating that

more of the general education teachers in elementary schools contributed to their school's UCS program than in the upper grades.

Satisfaction with the contributions of administrators and general education teachers was also quite high, with 80% of liaisons indicating satisfaction with administrator contributions (49% "very satisfied") and 74% of liaisons indicating satisfaction with general education teacher contributions (37% "very satisfied"). Satisfaction varied among implementation levels, with 15%-20% more liaisons from Full-implementation schools reporting they were "very satisfied" with the contributions of administrators and general education teachers than liaisons at Emerging or Developing schools.

Resource Awareness and Use

The SO resources for UCS implementation provide a broad and comprehensive array of information and guidance for schools and as past evaluation findings have indicated, using resources is a significant predictor of a school reaching the Full-implementation level. In 2021-22, 50% of liaisons indicated they had utilized print or online SO resources to help in their implementation of UCS. This is consistent with past years where overall reports of resource use have fluctuated around 50%-60% of liaisons. Expected differences were seen among implementation levels, where twice as many liaisons from Full-implementation schools reported using resources compared to Emerging schools (60% vs. 34%). No differences of note emerged based on school level or locale. Examining resource use based on liaison position in the school indicated that resources were used among more Adapted PE teacher liaisons (62%) than any other type of liaison and were reported the least among Athletic Director liaisons (30%).

Awareness and usefulness of specific resources was documented, with a high of 64% of elementary school liaisons aware of the *Elementary School Playbook: A Guide for Grades K-5*, to a low of 26% of liaisons aware of the *Planning and Hosting a Youth Leadership Experience: A Group Youth Engagement Activity Resource*. One of the new resources included in the 2021-22 evaluation was the Generation Unified website (www.generationunified.org) and 38% of liaisons reported awareness of this platform, with awareness of individual resources on the site ranging from 28%-45% of liaisons. Usefulness was assessed among those liaisons who reported using each resource, and overall usefulness ratings were very high (between 58% and 87% of liaisons reporting each resource they used was "very useful"). No liaisons (1% or fewer) reported the resources were not useful. See [Appendix A: Table 8](#) for the full listing of resources, reported awareness, and perceived usefulness.

There was a relationship between using resources and perceptions of sustainability, with more liaisons who used resources having a concrete sustainability plan in place compared to liaisons who did not use resources (75% vs. 56%).

Training and Technical Assistance

Another major form of support for UCS liaisons comes in the form of training and technical assistance from the State SO Program. The annual evaluation has tracked liaisons' perceptions of the support they get from their State SO Program over the years and has found that liaisons, as a whole, are satisfied with the support they receive and that this support mainly comes in the

form of supplies and resources, communication and training, and opportunities for activities. In 2021-22, 39% of liaisons indicated they participated in a training (e.g., webinar, workshop, conference) offered by their State SO Program and half (51%) reported communicating once a month or more with state-level staff. Participation in trainings was notably higher among Full-implementation schools (49% compared to 22% of Emerging schools), as was communicating at least once a month (62% vs. 36%). High school liaisons also reported higher rates of training participation (48%) than elementary or middle schools (32%). Participating in state-level trainings did not appear to have any bearing on whether a liaison felt their UCS program was self-sustainable (64% vs. 61% of liaisons who did not participate in trainings), but there was a higher percentage of liaisons who participated in state-level trainings reporting their school had a concrete sustainability plan in place for UCS for next year compared to liaisons who did not participate in trainings (74% vs. 61%). As in past years, liaisons were overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of support they received (91% of liaisons were satisfied, with 65% “very satisfied”). See Table 7 for a breakdown of the different ways that liaisons reported receiving support from their State SO Program.

Table 7. State SO Program supports liaisons reported receiving for UCS.

Type of Support	Percentage of liaisons n = 4052
Timely answers to questions	55%
Equipment	44%
Funding	41%
Training for coaches or teachers	31%
One or more in-person visits to the school	29%
Opportunity to participate in an in-person event	29%
Help generating ideas for inclusive activities	27%
Opportunity to network with other UCS schools	26%
Opportunity to participate in a virtual event	26%
Assistance holding an in-person school event	19%
Help getting families more involved with UCS activities	8%
Help recruiting/engaging students with ID virtually/remotely	5%
Help recruiting/engaging students without ID virtually/remotely	5%
Assistance holding a virtual school event	3%
Something else	8%
None of the above/I did not receive any support	10%

Funding

Financial health is another factor that past evaluations have documented as important for sustainability and the annual evaluation has examined different aspects of funding over the years, from the percentage of schools implementing fundraising activities to the amount of money received from State SO Programs and level of satisfaction with that financial support. The 2021-22 evaluation continued to document these aspects of funding for UCS.

The most common source of financial support for UCS was from State SO Programs (64%), followed by school budget (36%) and fundraising events (26%). Liaisons who reported receiving funding from the state reported that, on average, this funding accounted for 66% of the UCS

budget at their school. Notably, nearly one-third (30%) of liaisons reported that the state-level funding constituted their entire budget. Moreover, liaisons from Emerging schools indicated that more of their UCS budget, on average, was supplied by the State SO Program than Developing or Full-implementation schools (77%, 67%, 63%, respectively). Overall, liaisons were satisfied with the level of funding received from the State SO Program (89%, with 61% “very satisfied”). Liaisons who reported hosting or raising money through fundraising events reported that, on average, the money raised accounted for 41% of the UCS budget at their school. There were no differences among implementation levels.

Summary

In 2021-21, 62% of responding liaisons reported that they considered UCS self-sustainable at their school and 66% of liaisons reported their school had a concrete plan in place to continue and sustain UCS into the coming school year. As in past years, sustainability was related to implementation status, with 79% of liaisons at Full-implementation schools reporting a concrete sustainability plan as compared to 50% of liaisons at lower implementation levels. However, many factors work together to influence the successful and sustainable implementation of UCS in schools.

Liaisons at a quarter of all schools (28%) reported having UCS Leadership Team support this year, which is consistent with last year and represents stability after a period of some decline during the first two years of the pandemic. Leadership Teams were more common at Full-implementation schools compared to Emerging or Developing schools, and more schools with a Leadership Team had concrete sustainability plans (83%) compared to schools without a Leadership Team (60%). Liaisons without this support most frequently indicated that in order to be able to form a team, they needed to have more time available in the day to commit to UCS leadership and planning, a dedicated time for the team to meet, and help finding someone to consistently lead/organize the team. Liaisons with the support of a Leadership Team also encountered challenges related to time, mainly having difficulty finding time to meet and limited time for team members to commit to UCS. Notably, 23% of schools with a Leadership Team indicated they encountered no challenges with the team. The liaison was most often the person who started the Leadership Team in their school (85% of teams).

As one measure of perceived sustainability, liaisons rated the likelihood that UCS would continue at their school without the involvement of key people. The majority of liaisons felt that UCS would continue at their school without their direct involvement (68%) or State SO Program involvement (53%). These numbers were higher for liaisons who felt UCS was self-sustainable at their school. Other key players include administrators and general education teachers, and the majority of liaisons (65%) indicated these school staff contributed to UCS implementation. There were notable differences among implementation level. Satisfaction with the contributions of administrators and general education teachers was high (80% and 74%, respectively). Satisfaction also differed among implementation level.

Beyond people, resources and guides are also a necessary implementation factor. Consistent with past years, 50% of liaisons indicated they had utilized print or online SO resources to help in their implementation of UCS. Expected differences were seen among implementation levels.

Awareness and usefulness of resources was also documented with awareness ranging from 26%-64% of liaisons, depending on the resource, and perceived usefulness ranging from 58%-87% of liaisons, depending on the resource. There was a relationship between using resources and perceptions of sustainability, with more liaisons who used resources having a concrete sustainability plan in place compared to liaisons who did not use resources (75% vs. 56%).

Along with resources, training and technical assistance can also support liaisons to implement UCS. In 2021-22, 39% of liaisons indicated they participated in a training (e.g., webinar, workshop, conference) offered by their State SO Program and half (51%) reported communicating once a month or more with state-level staff. There were differences in participation and communication based on implementation level and school level. Participating in state-level trainings appeared to have some bearing on sustainability, with more liaisons who went to trainings reporting their school had a sustainability plan (74%) compared to those who did not complete any trainings (61%). As in past years, liaisons were overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of support they received from the State SO Program (91% of liaisons reported some level of satisfaction).

Finally, funding was also examined as a key implementation support. The most common source of financial support for UCS was from State SO Programs (64%) and when schools received money from the state it accounted for two-thirds of the UCS budget at their school. Notably, for one-third of liaisons, this funding constituted their entire budget. Financial support from the State SO Program was associated with implementation level, with Emerging schools receiving the most support. Overall, liaisons were satisfied with the level of funding received from the State SO Program (89% of liaisons reported some level of satisfaction).

Liaison Perceptions of Impact

UCS aims to facilitate school-wide cultural change through the implementation of inclusive activities in sports, youth leadership, and whole school engagement events. The annual Liaison Survey has assessed liaison perception of the extent to which UCS impacts the school as a whole and makes a difference in specific impact areas for over a decade. Respondents to the annual Liaison Survey have consistently reported high levels of program impact, and prior quantitative analyses have suggested that perceived impact is related to implementation level but not school level. The 2021-22 evaluation continued to document liaison perception of value and impact.

To evaluate program impact, all surveyed liaisons rated the value and influence they felt UCS had on their school and student body. Liaisons had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of UCS for students with and without ID, as well as the school as a whole (see Figure 9), and these reports are consistent with past reports from liaisons.

Liaisons likewise reported positive perceptions of UCS influence between specific impact areas such as increasing confidence of students with ID, increasing opportunities for students to work together, and creating a more socially inclusive school environment. Some of these areas have been measured consistently for the last six years. Figure 10 shows the percentage of liaisons

indicating UCS made a big difference in these areas over time. Figure 11 shows the additional impact areas assessed in 2021-22.

Figure 9. Value to the school as reported by liaisons.

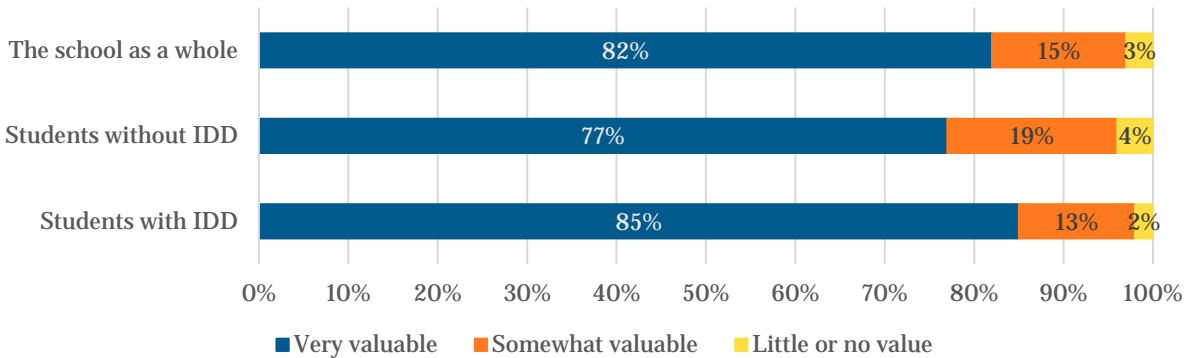


Figure 10. Impact areas that “made a big difference,” measured over time, as reported by school liaison.

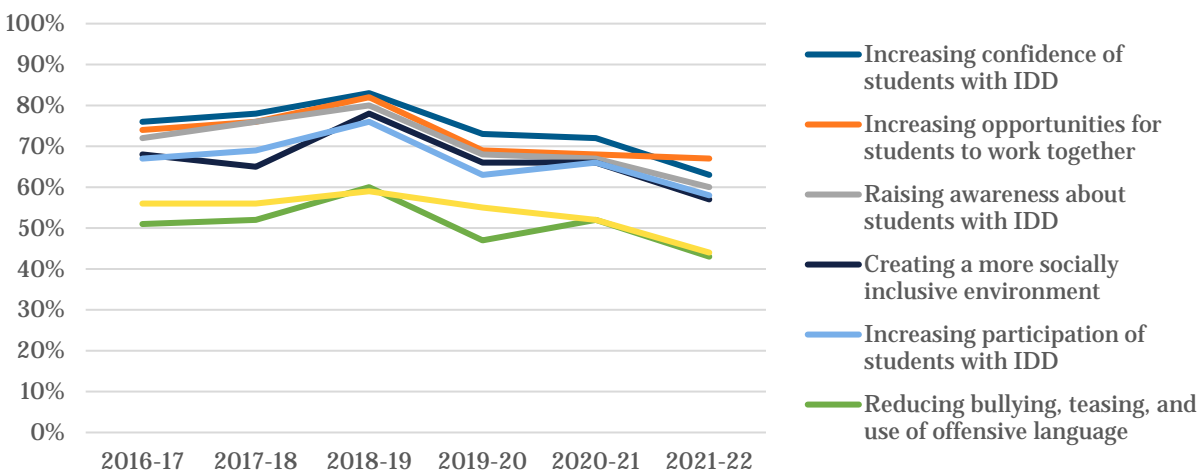
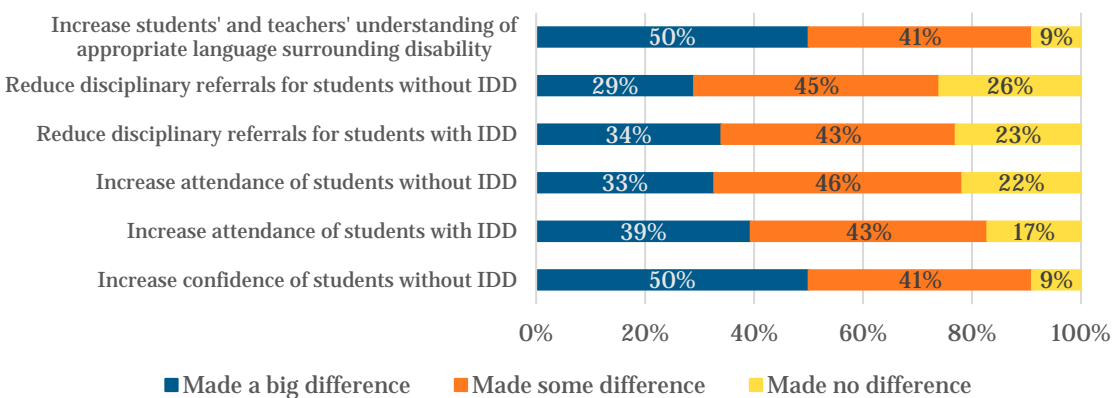


Figure 11. Impact on the school in 2021-22, as reported by school liaison.



In looking over time at the impact areas measures most consistently, it is clear that there has been some decline in the percentage of liaisons reporting the highest levels of impact. These declines are approximately 10%-15% from the spring of 2017 to the spring of 2022. One possible explanation for this is that approximately three-quarters of the responding liaisons are from returning UCS schools, with some who have had UCS at their school for three, five, or even ten years. With UCS being so ingrained in some of these schools over time, it is reasonable to assume that these impact areas have already reached their maximum (e.g., if a school has all students with ID participating fully in the school community, then it is difficult for UCS to continue to “make a big difference” in this area if this is the norm at the school, as intended). Thus, it is likely that this decline represents older UCS schools having reached or exceeded expectations across these various impact areas, rather than an actual decline in program impact.

Analysis of Factors that Predict Having a UCS Leadership Team

School liaisons have provided data through the *UCS Liaison Survey* every year since Year 2 (2009-10) of the annual UCS evaluation. While the survey changes each year to best suit changing evaluation objectives and priorities at SO, each survey has provided a detailed cross-sectional look at UCS implementation over time. A major objective of the evaluation in recent years has been to combine individual *UCS Liaison Survey* data sets into one data set and then connect this data to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). With this completed in Year 13 (2020-21), evaluation efforts can now focus on select longitudinal analyses by identifying schools that have provided multiple years of data and questions that have been repeated in multiple years. Examining the data over time in this way can provide more context for and a better understand of how UCS evolves in schools over time. The first longitudinal analyses of this kind were completed as part of the 2020-21 annual evaluation report and examined factors associated with reaching the Full-implementation model. One of the strongest predictors of a school either starting out at Full-implementation or reaching that level by the third year of programming was establishing a Leadership Team. As such, in 2021-22, there was interest in the factors that are associated with UCS schools having a Leadership Team.

In the previous sections, UCS implementation was described cross-sectionally, for 2021-22. In the current section, the focus is on the longitudinal data, specifically, those that responded to the liaison survey in the year the school started implementing UCS. Referred to as “Start Schools,” this longitudinal sample comprised a total of 682 schools that began UCS between 2014-15 and 2017-18. The sample includes only schools where the liaison submitted data through the annual survey in the school’s first year implementing UCS and for at least the next two sequential years. Additionally, only data from the 2014-15 school year to the 2019-20 school year were included in these analyses. This is because UCS has changed and evolved at the national level and, due to those changes, data prior to 2014-15 may not be relevant to current implementation and evaluation standards. Additionally, the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years represent a departure from normal school operations due to COVID-19 and thus were not included in the analyses as they are not representative of a typical year.

Methods

The following section investigates the factors that predict having a Leadership Team. The factors assessed fall into the three categories that were examined for the first time in 2020-21: state-level, school-level, and UCS-level. To examine the unique contributions of state-, school-, and UCS-level variables, hierarchical logistic regression models were fit using three steps: the first step utilized only the state-level factors, the second step incorporated state- and school-level factors, and the third the step incorporated state-, school-, and UCS-level factors.

State-level factors included the level of funding available to the State Program, whether the State Program provided funding to all schools, whether the State Program required schools to form a Leadership Team, total staff time dedicated to UCS within the State Program, and the frequency with which the State Program offered technical assistance to schools and communicated with liaisons (see Table 8). State Program funding was formatted to represent the total funding available at the state-level in each school’s first year implementing UCS (i.e., Year 1). All other state-level data came from the 2018-19 *State Staff Survey* and represented only that one year but were included in the models with the assumption that the policies and practices described were in place during the timespan of assessment. School-level factors included grade level, locale, student enrollment, the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch, the estimated number of students with ID in the school, and the percentage of students identifying as non-white (see Table 8). School-level data was sourced from the same NCES data used in the previous sections of the report and, like most state-level data, represented a single year. Finally, at the UCS-level, the primary factors of interest included the use of at least one print or online SO resource and the position of the UCS liaison (see Table 8).

Table 8. State-, School-, and UCS-level factors assessed in implementation models.

Factor	Values
State-level factors	
Funding available to the State Program	Range: 30,000 – 500,000
Provision of funding to all schools	Yes, no
Requirement of Leadership Teams	Yes, no
Total staff time dedicated to UCS	Range: 0.5 – 5.5
Amount of technical assistance offered to schools	Range: 3 – 19
Frequency of communication with liaisons	Range: 0 – 28
School-level factors	
Grade level	Elementary, middle, high, other
Locale	Rural, town, urban, suburban
Student enrollment	Range: 0 – 3818
Percent students eligible for free/reduced lunch	Range: 0 – 100
Percent students non-white	Range: 0 – 100
Estimated number of students with ID	0, 1-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-50, 51-100, 100+
UCS-level factors	
Use of at least one SO resource	Yes, no
Liaison position	Special-ed teacher, gen-ed teacher, administrator, other

Factors Associated with Having a Leadership Team in First Year of Implementation

The first objective was to investigate the factors associated with having a Leadership Team in a school's first year with UCS. Thus, the analysis compared two groups of schools: those that had a Leadership Team in the first year ($n = 282$), and those that did not ($n = 391$). To examine the contributions of state-, school-, and UCS-level variables, a hierarchical logistic regression model was fit using three cumulative steps, with the previously added factors retained in each step. Step 1 incorporated state-level funding as available in the school's first year of programming ("Year 1") and other state-level factors; Step 2 added school-level factors; and Step 3 added UCS-level factors as measured in Year 1. Table 9 presents the results of these models.

Table 9. Hierarchical Logistic Regression for Predicting Whether Schools will have a Leadership Team in their First Year Implementing UCS.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% <i>CI</i>		Nagelkerke's <i>R</i> ²
				<i>Lower</i>	<i>Higher</i>	
Step 1 – STATE-LEVEL						
Level of funding (year one)	0.00	0.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.03
Leadership teams required	- 0.14	0.28	0.87	0.57	1.34	
Frequency of technical assistance offered	-0.01	0.03	0.99	0.93	1.05	
Total staff time	0.18	0.11	1.19	0.97	1.46	
Provided funding to all schools	0.12	0.25	1.12	0.73	1.72	
Frequency of communication with liaisons	0.03	0.02	1.03	1.00	1.06	
Step 2 – SCHOOL-LEVEL						
Grade – Elementary ¹	0.31	0.70	1.37	0.36	5.24	.06
Grade – Middle ²	0.13	3.55	1.14	0.30	4.36	
Grade – High ³	-0.25	3.59	0.78	0.20	2.97	
Enrollment	0.00*	0.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
Locale – Rural ¹	0.45	0.34	1.56	0.84	2.91	
Locale – Town ²	0.12	0.41	1.13	0.56	2.28	
Locale – Suburb ³	-0.19	0.28	0.83	0.49	1.39	
Percent of student body that is non-white	-0.00	0.01	1.00	0.99	1.01	
Percent of student body eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	0.00	0.01	1.00	0.99	1.02	
Estimated number of students with ID	0.04	0.07	1.04	0.92	1.18	
Step 3 – UCS-LEVEL						
Resource use (Year 1)	-0.85**	0.21	0.43	0.29	0.65	.09
Liaison – Special education teacher ¹ (Year 1)	-0.20	0.45	0.82	0.38	1.79	
Liaison – General education teacher ² (Year 1)	0.75**	0.25	2.11	1.25	3.57	
Liaison - Administrator ³ (Year 1)	0.14	0.26	1.15	0.73	1.83	

Note: ¹Reference group: High school; ²Reference group: Suburb; ³Reference group: Special education teacher. ID = ID. *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$, + $p < .10$. Standard errors and p -values estimated using 2000 bootstrapped replicates.

No state- or school-level variables were found to be important in determining whether a school had a Leadership Team when they began implementing UCS. Moving to the UCS-level factors, the odds of having a Leadership Team decreased as resource use increased. Specifically, there

was a 57% reduction in the expected likelihood of having a Leadership Team if the school utilized at least one SO resource ($OR = 0.43 [0.29, 0.65]$). Note that from the analyses performed last year, it was found that both having a Leadership Team ($OR = 3.17 [2.00, 5.05]$) and using at least one SO resource ($OR = 1.74 [1.06, 2.87]$) in the first year resulted in expected increases in the likelihood of starting at Full-implementation. Therefore, our new findings suggest that not only are these two items important, but that there is a balancing act occurring regarding their relationship. The apparent implication is that if the school can only do one thing, establishing a Leadership Team will have the largest initial impact. However, if this is not possible, using resources will still make a difference, albeit at a slower pace. One partial reason for this may be that using resources offsets the need to have a dedicated Leadership Team, but more exploration of this finding will be worthwhile. Further, the best possible outcome is to have a Leadership Team and utilize the SO resources, if possible.

It was also found that schools where the liaison was a general education teacher were approximately twice as likely to have a Leadership Team in the first year ($OR = 2.11, p = .01$) compared to schools which had a special education teacher or an administrator as the liaison. This finding may be at least in part explained by the lack of familiarity general education teachers may have with special education students and they may feel they need more support to implement an inclusive program than a special education teacher would. Again, more exploration of this finding will be worthwhile.

Qualitative Perspectives on UCS Implementation

Over the past two years, the CSDE has worked to organize and compile data from the past fourteen years of the ongoing UCS evaluation into a singular space—a qualitative archive. Housed in Provalis Research’s QDA Miner and WordStat software, the archive enhances content analysis possibilities and allows for machine-assisted coding and pattern recognition. The software also compiles frequency data of key words and phrases and extracts data based on specified variables like school locale, participant role, implementation level, and presence of a UCS Leadership Team. Each year the archive can be updated with new qualitative data and new variables of interest (e.g., liaison tenure at a school).

The archive represents a new way to look at the vast amount of qualitative data collected as part of the annual evaluation and provides insight into the outcomes of past evaluation objectives, alignment of topics across objectives and evaluation years, and current or previous quantitative findings. Much like the Longitudinal Liaison Survey dataset for quantitative data, the accumulation of fourteen years of qualitative data in one place creates new possibilities for data analysis across evaluation years and participants. Moreover, using WordStat’s capabilities to only consider text from the interviewer, the archive also allows for analysis of the questions asked between 2009 and 2022 (for an overview of what has been asked over the years, see [Appendix D](#)). The archive can therefore also be used to investigate future evaluation opportunities and inform the development of survey questions or interview/focus group protocols based on what has already been asked. By comparing the occurrence of topics and key words in the questions asked and in participants answers across, time, participants, type of

school, and many more factors, the archive is another tool for more clearly and comprehensively illustrating the longitudinal story of UCS.

At the time of the 2021-22 evaluation report, the qualitative archive contained 1,793 transcripts from focus groups, interviews, and other data collection (e.g., podcasts) conducted between 2009 and 2022.³ Of the 1,793 transcripts, 1,737 were from schools where CSDE was able to verify the NCES ID number and link to the Longitudinal Liaison Survey data set (which included NCES data on each school). This connection links each transcript (aside from the 56 where a NCES ID could not be confirmed) to a variety of school-level variables, ranging from percent of students on free or reduced-price lunch to school locale to the implementation level each year UCS was implemented in the school, and more. Figure 12 illustrates key information about the content in the archive and more information can be found in [Appendix A: Table 9](#).

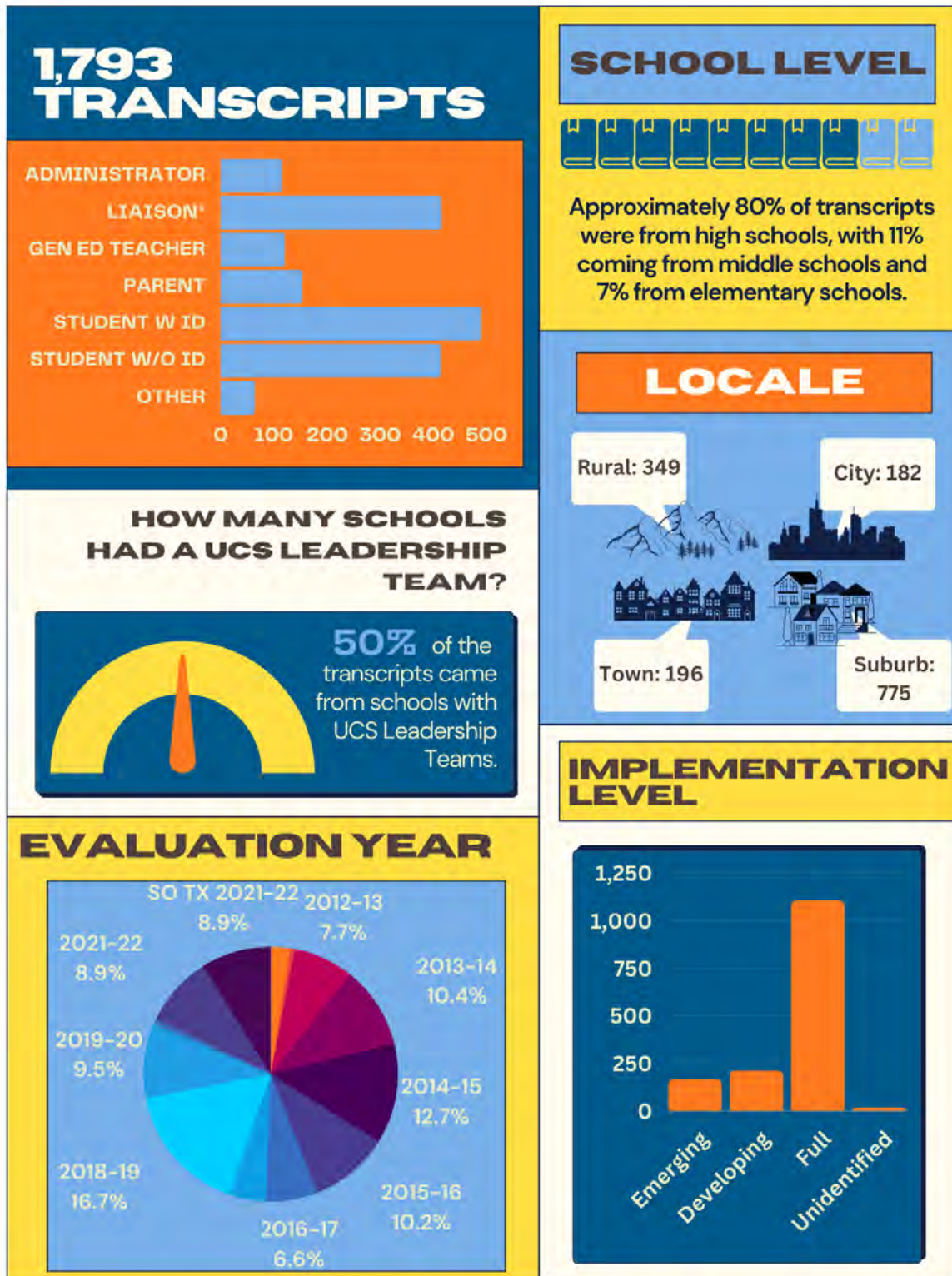
Combined, the transcripts contained almost four million words from approximately 2,066 participants across 34 states and 197 individual schools (this equates to an approximate average of 10 participants per school).⁴ Most of the transcripts came from interviews (n=1,481) but there were also a substantive number of focus groups, group interviews, or other data collection methods like “podcasts” (n=312).

Most transcripts came from UCS high schools (n=1,370). Of those high schools, most were in suburban areas (n=775). Most transcripts also came from schools operating at the highest implementation level, Full-implementation (n=1,103). The over-representation of transcripts from Full-implementation schools is a result of the evaluation team’s main site visit criteria for many years that schools participating in student-level data collection (such as surveys and interviews) be Full-implementation schools to maximize the ability to detect change and measure impact. When examining these transcripts now, as a collective, this over-representation may mean that the themes presented in this section of the report are truer of schools with more robust UCS implementation and may not necessarily represent the resources, support needs, and community connections of schools at lower implementation levels. However, the proportion of transcripts coming from participants at schools with and without UCS Leadership Teams were even, which highlights the voices of those at schools with varying levels of program support, despite almost all implementing UCS at the highest level. Finally, participants are fairly evenly represented across the transcripts. Students were by far the most interviewed group, with students with ID (n=490) and students without ID (n=414) each making up about half of the student transcripts.

³ 157 of these transcripts come from the 2021-22 SO Texas Unified Interscholastic Sports evaluation.

⁴ Note that the number of participants is larger than the number of transcripts, which is largely due to the Unified Champion Schools Intervention Study (2014-2016) in which participants were interviewed multiple times.

Figure 12. Number of transcripts in the archive across key variables of interest.



*Liaison is combined with Unified Sports coach and Special Education teacher due to the high rate of overlap among these roles

The word cloud below (Figure 13) represents the words that appeared most frequently in the archive. The size of the word corresponds with how often it occurred across all transcripts (larger words occurred more frequently). However, words were removed if their frequency across the archive was larger than 10,000 occurrences (often due to incidental or necessary use, such as “school” or “student”) as these words were biasing the frequency analysis. Even after removing those words, many of the key words that emerged were expected topically like “program,” “basketball,” and “unified.” However, the word cloud also illustrates important words of prominence, such as the widespread use of “teacher” (mainly among students and indicating the prominent role adults can play in UCS), “time” (indicating both time as a resource for implementation or students having a good time while participating), and “friends” (indicating the importance of the social relationships that are the hallmark of UCS). The word cloud also illustrates less common but more thematically related key words like “involved,” “community,” “meet,” “helped,” and “support.”

Figure 13. Word cloud representing most commonly used words among participants across fourteen years of the UCS annual evaluation.



The sections that follow provide a brief overview of the analytical methods applied to the archive for 2021-22 before presenting the findings of the specific analyses conducted, which focused on three major themes: resource use, support, and sustainability; relationships with community programs and partnership impacts; and urban UCS schools and their unique implementation needs.

Methods

The content analysis capabilities of WordStat allowed for both “big picture” analyses as well as more granular and nuanced analyses. WordStat is ideal for analyzing and extracting meaning from a large number of documents (in this case transcripts) due to features such as word/phrase frequency calculations across transcripts, topic modeling where words/phrases are clustered together into larger themes based on how and how often they are used together, link analyses that explore the similarity and relationships between words or themes, and co-occurrence analyses to further explore how words and phrases are used at increasingly granular levels (e.g.,

at the transcript vs. paragraph vs. sentence level). All these analyses were used in the 2021-22 evaluation and are described in more detail below.

To delve more deeply into a specific area of interest, rather than a broad analysis of all content in the archive, WordStat requires a categorization dictionary. A categorization dictionary is a curated list of keywords and phrases relevant to a theme or topic of interest that are added into the software. It then analyzes the archive using the specific words and phrases in the dictionary. The analyses conducted in 2021-22 used a categorization dictionary created by the evaluation team. Creating the categorization dictionary was a process similar to creating a coding guide for coding transcripts. An initial draft of the categorization dictionary was created based on the three main themes of interest in 2021-22 and preliminary exploratory analyses of the content related to those topics in the archive (e.g., exploring the prevalence of “resource(s)” in the archive and how participants discussed this). The dictionary was then expanded based on these exploratory analyses and discussion among the evaluation team. Additional exploratory analyses were conducted using the expanded version of the dictionary and based on those results some keywords and phrases were combined if they were deemed too nuanced. This process was repeated until no new words could be added to the dictionary or combined with one another. Five main categories of words were included in the final dictionary used in the 2021-22 analyses: resources, support, sustainability, challenges, and insufficiency (phrases that indicated a dearth of the aforementioned categories, e.g., “a lack of”). See [Appendix C](#) for the final version of the categorization dictionary.

Guided by the categorization dictionary, the various content analysis features of WordStat allowed for both exploratory analyses and more in-depth analyses of the major topics of interest in 2021-22: resource use, support, and sustainability; relationships with community programs and partnership impacts; and urban UCS schools and their unique implementation needs. The specific analyses conducted are detailed in Figure 14. As mentioned previously, it is important to note that some of these analyses were used as exploratory analyses to iteratively revise and further refine the categorization dictionary as they uncovered new connections between words and phrases, or new themes/topics not previously identified. This helped to ensure the results were less biased by evaluator preconceptions, while still retaining the insight the evaluation team has into UCS and how the topic areas of interest in 2021-22 related to program implementation.

The broader frequency and occurrence analyses were used to guide a modified qualitative coding of relevant data. The coding was driven by the themes extracted in the topic modeling (see below Table 10), co-occurrences of key words and phrases, the frequency data, and the categorization dictionary. Following this, the transcript segments associated with the most prominent themes, key words, and co-occurrence patterns were coded as related to resources, support, community, or sustainability. This process was then repeated with only transcripts from participants in urban locales. For each key word with a high frequency, all transcript segments were reviewed manually by the evaluation team and either determined to be related to the theme (e.g., “We work with the *community* to provide these services) or an incidental use of the word not related to UCS implementation (e.g., “I went to *community* college”). Of the transcript segments that were thematically related to UCS implementation as it pertained to resources, support,

sustainability, and community each incidence of the key word was grouped with other similar uses of the key word to establish broader themes and patterns, which are presented in the following sections. This analysis utilized a kind of machine-assisted qualitative coding process where the relationship and direction of the relationship was determined by the software and then, within those findings, evaluation staff read segments and refined the coding done by the software. This allowed evaluation staff to analyze the largest amount of qualitative data in the history of the UCS annual evaluation.

Figure 14. WordStat analyses conducted with the qualitative archive in 2021-22.

Frequency of words/phrases	Topic modeling	Co-occurrence analyses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This type of analysis, as the name implies, calculates the frequency of key words and phrases in the archive. That includes the total number of occurrences of a word/phrase, the rate of occurrence relative to all other words/phrases, and the number/percentage of transcripts in which this word or phrase appears, among other statistics. As the transcripts in the archive are connected to NCES data and data from the Longitudinal Liaison Survey dataset, it was possible to examine frequency analyses by participant role (e.g., liaisons, parent), UCS school locale (e.g., urban, rural), school type (e.g., high school, elementary school), implementation level (e.g., Full-implementation, Developing Unified), or whether the school had a UCS Leadership Team, among other factors. Bar graphs and word clouds are the main ways that frequency analyses are presented in this report and were often used as a first step to better understand data related to the three areas of interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This type of analysis is an extraction analysis in which words/phrases are clustered together and “extracted” into larger themes based on their association to one another (i.e., how and how often they are used together). Topic modeling uses natural language processing and factor analyses to uncover thematic meaning within a large amount of qualitative data. Topic modeling was conducted at the paragraph level. WordStat automatically provided a label for each extracted theme (although in some cases the evaluation team renamed these) and indicated the frequency of words/phrases associated with that theme and the number/percentage of transcripts in which those associated words or phrases appeared. See Table 10 for five themes generated by the topic modeling analysis that grounded further analyses within the three themes of interest for 2021-22. When appropriate, topic modeling was visualized through various forms of co-occurrence analyses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This group of analyses are mainly graphical displays of how words and phrases are related. Co-occurrence analyses use hierarchical clustering and multidimensional scaling, which are two ways to measure the physical distance between words/phrases in a transcript, paragraph, or sentence, to determine their association to one another (i.e., the closer to two words are to one another the more related they are). Dendrograms/tree graphs, concept maps, link analysis, and proximity plots are the main ways that co-occurrence analyses are presented in this report. Co-occurrence analyses were conducted at the paragraph level. Note that co-occurrence analyses can be conducted without first performing topic modeling.

Table 10. Top five themes extracted from participant responses in the qualitative archive.

Theme	Topics	Coherence (NPMI)	Freq.	Cases	% of Cases
Social and emotional learning	Social and emotional learning; management; relationship skills; social awareness; responsible; decision; character; handle your feelings; understanding; teach social; learned; situations	0.502	2760	717	39.99%
Family Involvement	Family involvement; parental support; mom; dad; grandma; grandpa; sister; brother	0.331	1360	580	32.35%
Social Relationships	Activity with friends; friends at school; friends after school; group of friends; hallway with friends; eating lunch together	0.263	1171	505	28.17%
UCS Network	School; district; program; involved; student; club; community; director; staff; state; administrator	0.299	15138	1368	76.30%
Student Leadership	Club; leadership; involved; student; youth; Unified; clubs; council; program; leaders; activity; student council; student leadership	0.323	10218	1185	66.09%

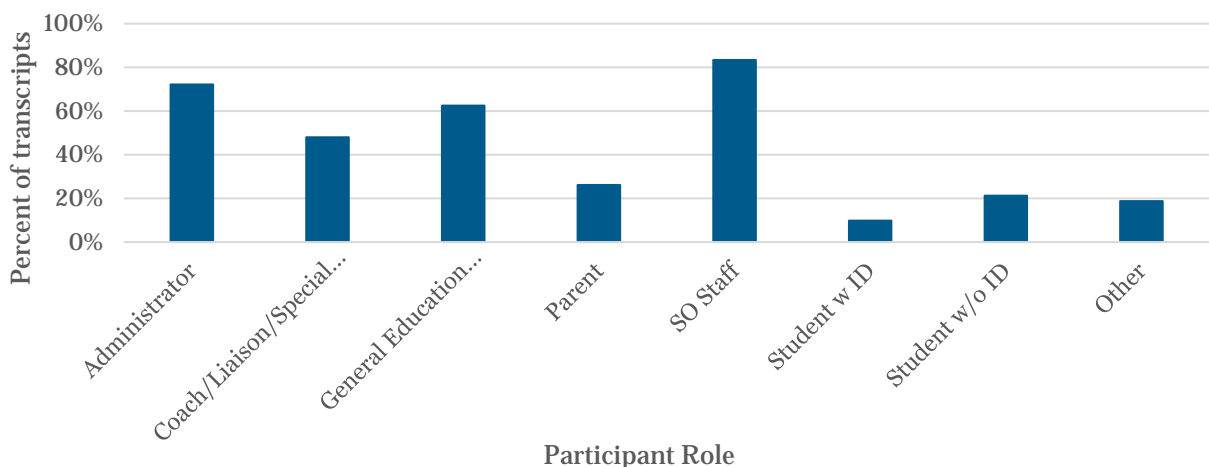
Resource Use, Support, and Sustainability

While there are many key words related to resources, support, and sustainability that come up frequently in the archive, participants did not often speak directly about this topic. The word “resource(s)” itself appears just 572 times in the archive, but participants were more likely to refer to resources by type (e.g., webinar) or name (e.g., High School Playbook). The combined occurrence of “resource(s)” with mentions of specific resources or types of resources was 2,487. However, participants have even more often discussed having resources more generally, such as having “help” (4,363 word occurrences). These words and ideas also came up together often. In one recent example, from 2021-22, a Unified Sports coach from a Full-implementation high school in a small suburb, without a Leadership Team, talked about how helpful a specific resource was:

The lightbulb section at the bottom [of the SEL Activity Cards] was awesome. It just is so helpful. In the fly, on the moment, just being able to read that section and understand how I need to instruct or introduce the card. (4)

When liaisons and coaches discussed support as it related to UCS implementation, they commonly spoke about support from administrators, other teachers at school, and from families of students in UCS. Despite making up a smaller portion of the archive, a larger proportion of State SO Program staff and school administrators discussed “support” during their interviews (see Figure 15). Coaches, liaisons, and special education teachers discussed (or were asked about) support more heavily in their interviews though, despite the topic occurring in fewer than half of all interviews with those participants. This indicates that when coaches, liaisons, and special education teachers mentioned support, they talked about it at length, using the word an average of 13 times per interview.

Figure 15. Percentages of transcripts with the word “support,” by participant role.



These initial findings indicate that engaging with participants about resources may benefit from using more specific lines of questioning related to specific resources or forms of support. For example, the word “resource(s)” comes up 216 times in questions to participants over the years, but specific types of resources are asked about much less frequently. In addition, it also indicates that framing questions in terms of how helpful a given resource or support is may feel more natural to participants and open more room for discussion on resources as a critical implementation factor.

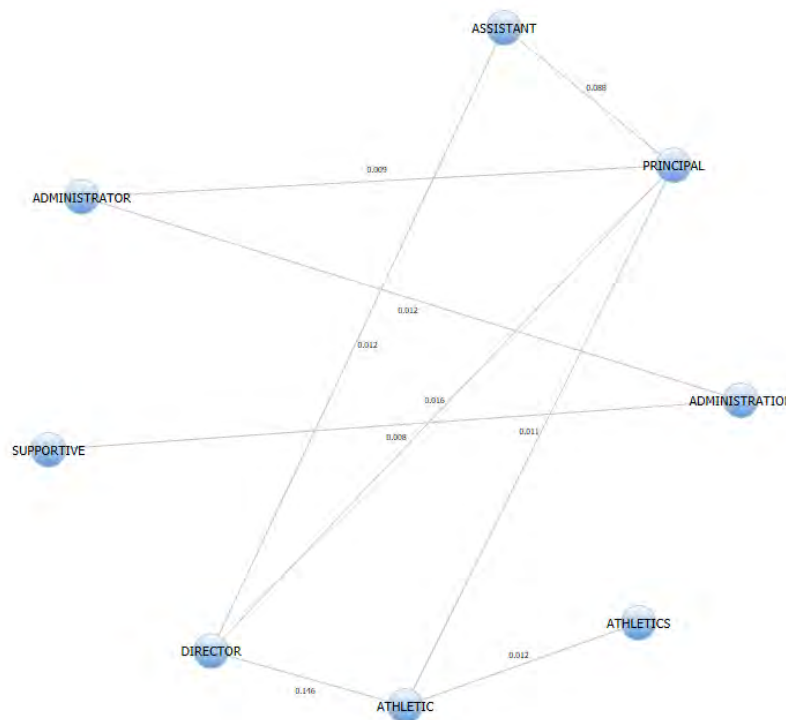
The ways participants discussed resources and support indicate that often they are thinking affirmatively about what is available to them and how they can best maximize their resources for implementation, likely because they do not always have the ability to rectify resource gaps or procure more support from other participant groups, like parents. When participants spoke about who was supportive during UCS implementation, they largely referenced administrators like principals and athletic directors, who often can broker access to resources for them (see Figure 16). The word “resource” co-occurred often with words related to spaces in school like “classroom,” “room,” and “gym.”⁵ This indicates that when participants were thinking about resources they had or needed access to, they were often thinking about the material concern of where students could participate in UCS activities. But, even after coaches have secured a place for Unified Sports practice, additional factors can make the space less accessible and make some aspects of implementation more challenging. In 2021-22, a coach from a Full-implementation high school in a small suburb, without a Leadership Team, reflected on the SEL Activity cards:

As far as being indoors, and when we were with another team on the other side, it was almost impossible to hear. So, some of the [SEL Activity Cards] where there was talking involved, it was difficult, and there was just no other spot that we can go to. (2123)

⁵ In examining this co-occurrence data, the common special education setting “resource room” was accounted for and excluded from consideration.

In this instance, despite having available space, the constraints of the space made it less suitable for a Unified Sports practice or a given activity during that practice (such as the SEL Activity Cards) than it might be for another type of practice. Importantly, the coach also noted that there was nowhere else for the practice to be held, indicating the degree to which coaches and liaisons must adapt implementation given the spaces available to them and that, despite having available resources like space, there are still accessibility concerns. Coaches and liaisons often reflected on the resources available in their classrooms that they also used for UCS activities, like whiteboards and projectors, and how coaching a Unified Sports team created different challenges than teaching in a classroom. Participants also frequently spoke of skills that they taught either in the classroom or on the Unified Sports team as future resources for students to draw on.

Figure 16. Force-based link analysis of the term “supportive.”



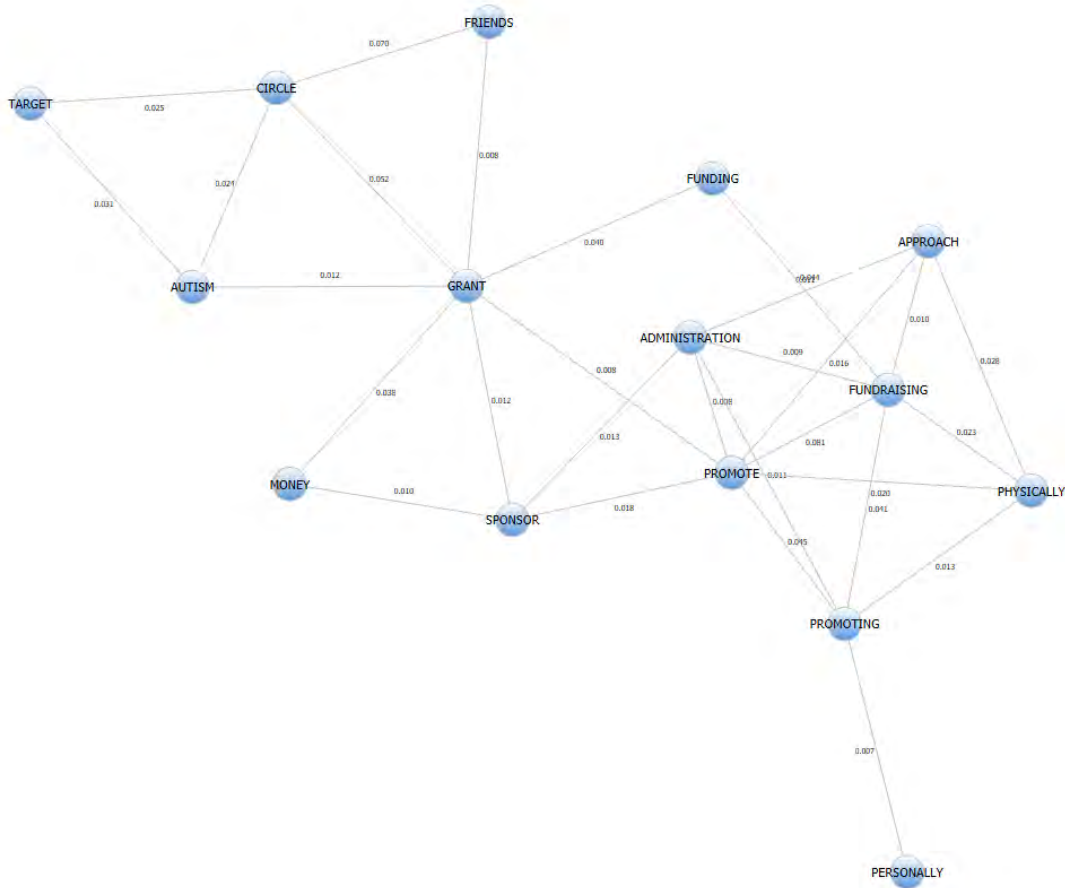
Monetary Resources and Funding

Participants also often reflected on the budget available to implement UCS, the challenges of securing and distributing funds, and how the funding was related to the sustainability of UCS (refer back to [Funding](#) for *UCS Liaison Survey* data on this topic) (see Figure 17). When State SO Program staff reflected on the budgets of their UCS schools, they were mainly discussing how schools need more money, but also how they had to consider the overall sustainability of UCS at a particular school and their concerns about investing in schools that would not continue beyond the first year. One state-level staff member reflected on the potential pitfalls of a top-down approach to implementation, back in 2018-19:

When we go to renew [the school] that second year, that teacher never wanted to participate in the first place. There was just a mandate on their end. So, they basically choose to not come back, and essentially, we've wasted funding dollars and resources on our end. (9420)

Administrators and coaches noted how budgetary concerns impacted UCS, but also how they mitigated this through fundraising opportunities, booster clubs, and by garnering more support at the administrative or district level.

Figure 17. Force-based link analysis of key words related to funding.

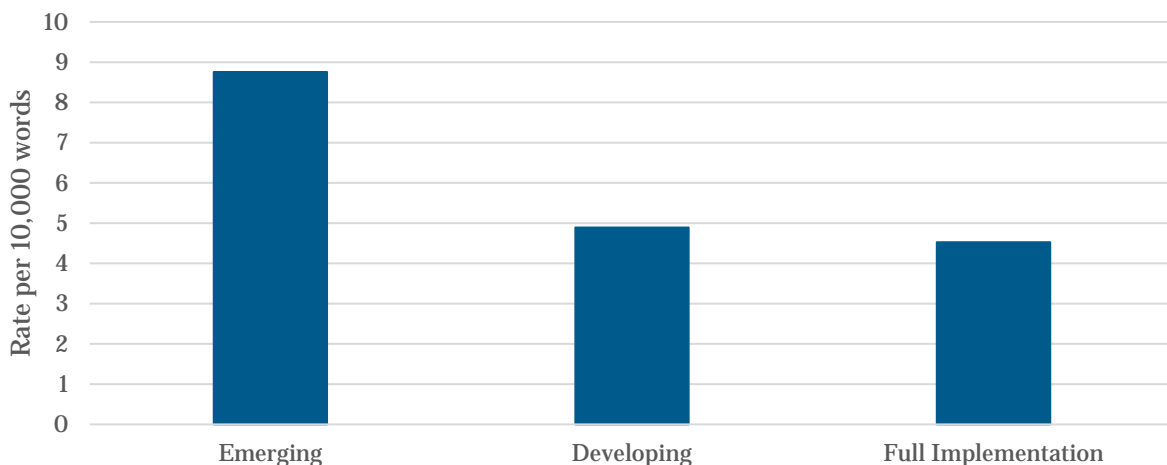


For many schools this was also related to the amount of community support they received or expected to receive in coming school years. As part of the SO Texas Unified Interscholastic Sports evaluation in 2021-22, an administrator from a Full-implementation high school in a midsize suburb, with a Leadership Team, reflected:

All the community members that I've talked to, they were very giving and very supportive of our program. We've talked about next year as far as budgeting-wise, what we can ask for in our budget, and then also having the athletic booster club for the Unified Track to raise that extra fund[ing] for them to make it all work. (9958)

Especially in schools implementing UCS at less robust levels (e.g., Emerging Unified schools), supplementing budgets with community donations and grant funding is one way to mitigate the financial concerns that were prominent in newer UCS schools and UCS programs with room to grow. Discussions about money and funding came up the most among participants in Emerging Unified schools and occurrences decreased as schools neared Full-implementation (Figure 18). This is notable given that most of the transcripts in the archive come from Full-implementation schools and there is no discernible difference in the type or number of questions asked about funding between participants at Emerging, Developing, or Full-implementation schools. Moreover, participants from Emerging or Developing Unified schools have been less consistently interviewed (mostly between 2009 and 2016 or in 2021-22). Meanwhile, participants from Full-implementation UCS schools were consistently interviewed over the course of the evaluation.

Figure 18. Frequency of money-related key words per 10,000 words, by implementation level.



Participants from Emerging Unified schools, especially in the very first year of implementation, were concerned about funding limiting their implementation capabilities and talked about working to ensure that their students would have the same opportunities as in other school programs. As part of the SO Texas Unified Interscholastic Sports evaluation in 2021-22, a coach operating a first-year program, without a Leadership Team, in an Emerging Unified rural high school explained:

“[The school has] a budget for this, they have a budget for that. But [UCS], there’s no budget for it. Anything that I do, I’m going out, and I’m raising the money, or we get parent support” (6375).

For schools without as much institutional support, the difference is made up through the acts of individual liaisons, coaches, and families. Some coaches and administrators have leveraged existing community partnerships around sports to create new funding opportunities for UCS. In 2019-20, a liaison from an Emerging Unified high school in a small city, with no Leadership Team, spoke about the impact of community partnerships, both for UCS and for students beyond UCS:

We're helping to provide services to all these individuals, just making them aware of the fact that the rec center is there for the kids...The fact is [community partner] takes out of his budget, it helps to provide for some of the food for the kids. That says a lot to how he feels about [UCS] but also, he feels about the kids. Because our rec center might be for the kids but when we have our prom, we have our Pajama Dance, he actually spends a good amount of money, I would say, on food, because we'll buy a lot of Spanish food for the kids. And that comes from his budget and not from [us]. (1395)

In this case, the community partnerships allowed for new social opportunities like dances, but also helped to supplement the UCS budget and allow the liaison to offer activities and events they likely would not have been able to otherwise. More information about community support for UCS appears in [Relationships with Community Programs and Partnership Impacts](#) and, for urban schools specifically, [Partnerships with Community Programs and Organizations](#).

For some families, money becomes a reason their student cannot participate in school extracurriculars. The hidden costs of being in a sports program, like equipment or getting a physical, can serve as substantive barriers to student participation in some schools. These barriers were no different for families with children in Unified Sports. These factors, while often mitigated by the structure of UCS or the support extended to families, may become more prominent as UCS activities moves into new spaces, like Unified Interscholastic Sports, which come with separate requirements for players. As part of the SO Texas Unified Interscholastic Sports evaluation in 2021-22, a coach from an Emerging Unified high school in a rural area, without a Leadership Team, noted:

When it comes to the sped area, a lot of the sped kiddos, they come from low-income families. So, a lot of them can't afford to go get those physicals done and get that paperwork in on time. That's where you see certain things in this department that's like, 'Man, I wish I could pay that \$75 or pay this or pay that to get that for them.' So, we're trying to find different ways, definitely for next year, how can we help these kids join [Unified Sports] and get them those physicals in a timely manner but where they can afford it. (9263)

As UCS (specifically Unified Sports) becomes more widely recognized by the community and broader educational organizations (like state athletic associations) as a legitimate school sport program, following the rules and regulations of those other entities may increasingly be required. This may place new or additional pressures on participants with ID and their families. The coach above recognized the potential for these barriers to arise, but also posited that the school was capable of supporting families through them. When UCS programs are able to support families financially, by being aware of the potential for barriers like these, they may be able to facilitate student participation, which in turn bolsters program sustainability. More information about families and UCS city schools appears [Family Involvement](#).

Program Sustainability

When participants spoke about sustainability, they often credited the liaisons and coaches who dedicated their time and energy to make UCS a success. Liaisons were worried about what happens to UCS in a school when the staff members driving implementation leave. In 2014-15, a liaison at a Unified community preschool reflected on what it takes for UCS to be sustainable in their school:

Over the long term what we need is administrative or principal support, and we need equipment. If our equipment were to wear out, we would need to be able to replace that. Then we would need ongoing training as new staff members would come in and if older staff members left that were not [able to share their knowledge] with the new [staff members], then the new ones wouldn't be familiar with the program. (2584)

Here, the liaison emphasized the importance of a strong support network of both administrators and staff members, as well as ongoing access to equipment and professional development, in particular, to address any gaps left when staff members moved to new schools. Similarly, and more recently in 2017-18, a general education teacher at a Full-implementation high school in a distant town locale, with a Leadership Team, reflected, “My concern is when people who are pushing forth programs that make amazing change and amazing difference, when those people who are the ramrods of those things, when those people leave, is sustainability” (4577). It is evident, then, that even when schools have a support structure in place beyond a singular liaison, such as a UCS Leadership Team, that does not always allay concerns about sustainability (although as past evaluation findings have demonstrated, it does help).

Implementing a robust UCS program may help people view UCS as sustainable, in that the wide variety of activities means there is a lot of involvement from the school community and thus, more buy-in and engagement. In 2012-13, an administrator from a Full-implementation high school in a large suburb, without a Leadership Team stated:

I think [UCS] would outlast and outlive the people who are currently involved with it... I think whoever came in afterward, it's not something that—it's built enough—there's so much momentum around it, whether it's from the students, the parents, the community, other people in the building. It's not something that could just go away, and nobody would notice, nobody would care. (223)

In this instance, the commitment of other UCS participants is one factor that the administrator saw as bolstering sustainability. Thus, when the entire school and surrounding community come to rely on and expect UCS as part of the school experience, if people closest to implementation do ever leave, UCS does not have to stop. In lieu of a formal Leadership Team, a groundswell of support from UCS participants can make a lasting impact.

In a similar vein, liaisons and administrators also discussed the role of students for sustainability because when students were motivated to continue participating in UCS, it helped ensure that there were more than just adults involved who were passionate. Student participation and interest can be a strong driver of sustainability as it often determined whether UCS activities were offered year over year. In 2015-16, an administrator from a Developing Unified high school in a rural area, with a Leadership Team, noted, “It's always about sustainability and being able to make sure you can keep the momentum going, which is always

hard...I think we try to switch it up, in hopes that we would draw different kids who would be interested” (687). Clearly, once school staff capture students’ attention for UCS, they must sustain it long-term by keeping them engaged with new activities and events. Participants also noted the importance of student leadership, beyond just involvement, for sustainability. Cultivating student leaders in UCS meant there were always new people to get involved as students moved from one school level to the next. In 2012-13, an administrator from a Full-implementation high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected:

A critical piece is the strategic opportunities for student leadership. So, it’s like very purposeful roles for students to play so that students can baton it. You know, they can learn from one another. So, there’s got to be a structure there, there’s got to be support there...and I think we’re forming that, I think, with a student leader. (720)

When liaisons were intentional about creating opportunities for student leadership that students looked forward to taking on, program sustainability can be bolstered by their involvement.

Finally, financial backing also informed program sustainability, especially from an operations standpoint. For some Unified Sports coaches, receiving a stipend is something they felt would drastically increase the sustainability of their role and, in turn, UCS at their school. As part of the SO Texas Unified Interscholastic Sports evaluation in 2021-22, a coach from a high school in a midsize city reflected:

They’re going to have to incentivize some kind of something for these [coaches] because we’re volunteer. And at some point, you’ve got coaches [who are] getting stipends...[Coaches are] not making a ton of money doing this, but they’re going to have to come up with something. Because you are putting in a lot of hours, a lot of time. And for me, that’s not the biggest deal right now, but I think that’s what it’s going to take to start growing this [program]. (1095)

Without stipends, the labor coaches took on, often in addition to their role as a full-time teacher, went unsupported and made it more difficult for coaches to keep up the effort required to implement UCS. Another coach implementing UCS at an Emerging high school in a rural area, without a Leadership Team in 2021-22, was similarly concerned about long-term sustainability, seemingly in the face of a lack of personal financial support if people were not fully invested in the idea of UCS:

We don’t get paid for this. We don’t get a stipend. We don’t get anything. We do this out of the kindness of our heart. And we want to see them do so much more. And we’re just trying to promote it that eventually, by the time that we leave, it’s soared into something completely different. That’s what we’re hoping for. I’ve seen it in the past where I’ve started something, and the second I leave because somebody else didn’t have that passion that I had, it went downhill. (8902)

Providing stipends to coaches may be one way to incentivize keeping experienced coaches in the role for longer, or bringing new people in, thereby helping to institutionalize UCS in a school with a larger support network of people who are also being supported in that role.

Administrators played a key role in brokering access to stipends as they control the school budget. In 2016-17, an administrator from a Full-implementation middle school in a large suburb, with a Leadership Team, reflected, “Because I saw the amount of work that [liaison name] was doing, and it’s really time-consuming, I got her a stipend...so I had to budget money

for it in my budget” (306). Similarly, in 2017-18, an administrator at a Full-implementation high school in a large suburb, without a Leadership Team, reflected:

When we brought [UCS] on in 2013, I paid out of my own [school's] budget the coaches' salaries. It wasn't covered by the district in activities and athletics...I think it was two years ago they implemented financial support of Unified Sports across the district, which was a really strong step in recognizing the need and the value. (2257)

Not only does providing a stipend for coaches make implementation more feasible, but it also connotes importance and authenticity by placing it alongside other athletic programs funded by school districts. By setting up financial support for coaches, schools can ensure that this labor is recognized and legitimized so that UCS can be supported long-term.

Summary

Although driven in part by the questions they were asked on these topics, the prevalence of discussion around resources, support, and sustainability in the archive nonetheless indicates that these are key implementation factors for UCS to be successful, even at Full-implementation schools. “Resources” appeared throughout the archive, often when participants were reflecting on the use of individual resources, like the High School Playbook or sports equipment, but also were related to when participants discussed what was helpful to keep UCS operating at the school. “Support” also appeared throughout the archive, emerging most consistently for State SO Program staff and administrators, but the most extensively in conversations with coaches, liaisons, or special education teachers. These discussions overall tended to focus on resources in the affirmative, emphasizing what school staff had available to work with, and reflecting on resource deficiencies when explaining why a particular aspect of implementation was not possible at that time.

Participants also often reflected on how access to monetary resources and funding affected implementation. For State SO Program staff, these reflections were often concerns about further investing in a school that was not sustainable year over year. School administrators tended to reflect on how they navigated budgetary challenges, especially through modes like fundraising, community support, or familial support. Concerns about funding were most likely to come up in Emerging Unified schools and newer schools (which may be one and the same). Reflections from the SO Texas Interscholastic Unified Sports evaluation were informative for revealing potential future financial barriers as UCS connects more and more with state-level agencies.

Regarding program sustainability, especially as it overlapped with funding, administrators concerned about ensuring UCS continued at their schools noted that the lack of a stipend for Unified Sports coaches or the liaison was something that made it difficult for whoever initially had the passion to develop the UCS program to maintain their intense participation each year. While many schools have made this a priority and found the money for stipends within their budgets, the lack of a stipend seemingly made it more difficult at some point, in some cases, for coaches and liaisons to stay in the role. Ensuring that schools committed to maintaining and

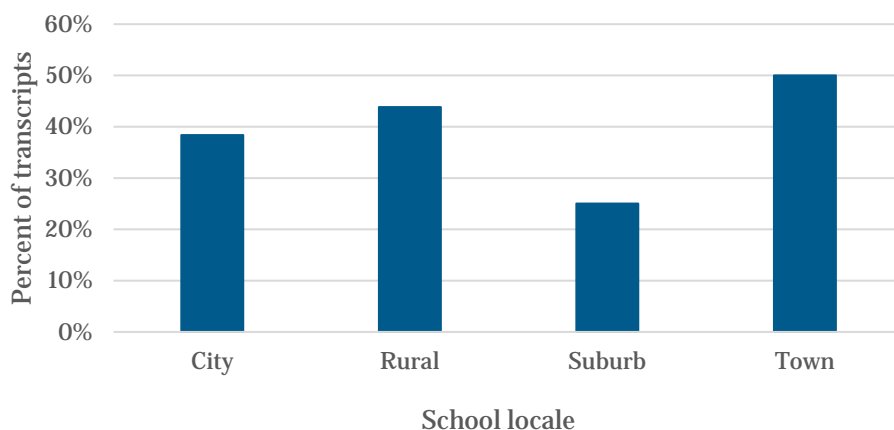
growing UCS first invest in financially supporting the individuals at the core of the program may help to boost sustainability. Liaisons also discussed the role of student participation in sustainability, noting how having students advocate for UCS to continue and demonstrate their interest made it more likely for the school to invest in the program and for the program to continue after the original liaison leaves.

Taken together, the discussion of resources, support, and sustainability over the years emphasizes the importance of support from various participants—a deep bench—in order for UCS to be successful. The logistical coordination of administrators and State SO Program staff, liaisons’ securing resources and facilitating daily implementation, student participation and engagement, and familial support all come together to make UCS possible. The perspectives in this section emphasized the importance of passionate individuals who were creative and dedicated in their pursuit of resources and support for implementation.

Relationships with Community Programs and Partnership Impacts

Most mentions of community in the archive referenced school communities or the sense of community found in UCS. There were differences across locale in terms of how often participants spoke about community, including the kinds of community partnerships that were most salient for UCS (see Figure 19). Most mentions of community from participants in town schools concerned local volunteering opportunities or described a welcoming school community. In contrast, participants from city schools who spoke about community tended to discuss the relationship between the surrounding community and the school, discussing community service opportunities through UCS, and the services schools provided to the surrounding community.

Figure 19. Percent of transcripts with the word “community,” by locale.



The analyses in this section dive deeper into these mentions of community in the archive to uncover the relationship between UCS and community SO programs (e.g., local or area programs connected to the larger State Program) to better understand the impacts of those partnerships. By examining how schools connect UCS to community SO programs, this analysis aims to illuminate the ways these partnerships have historically been structured, the local benefits to both schools and SO, and how participants envision future collaborations between

the two. Specific references to relationships with community SO programs did not occur frequently in the archive, largely because this is a topic that has not been expressly explored in the annual evaluation over the years.⁶ Nevertheless, it has come up organically in some interviews and is thus worth exploring in light of SO' new efforts to pilot collaborations between UCS programs and community SO programs in 2022-23. Moreover, most participants who mentioned this seemed interested in growing their relationship with community SO programs, which can provide important insights for expanding these relationships in the future.

In the archive, mentions of “community” were often connected to volunteering and ideas of service, such as volunteering at a community business, but also volunteering with the local SO program. In 2014-15, a liaison from a Developing Unified high school in a fringe town, without a Leadership Team, explained this overlap and the high level of volunteering among UCS participants. The liaison reflected, “We have a lot of volunteer students. We have a lot that volunteer at the Rec Center and help with their SO program” (583). The following year, in 2015-16, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a fringe rural area, with a Leadership Team, discussed her school’s relationship to the community SO program. The liaison reflected, “We were asked by [county] SO to help with their fall half marathon...I think that they know about [UCS here], so when they have something like that where they need some help, we’re a good group to get involved” (395). In some instances, the two programs’ first interaction was reaching out to each other for support with implementation. Thus, implementation support could be a way to introduce UCS programs to community SO programs and potentially build a bridge for further partnership.

Beyond volunteering, the overlap between athletes and partners in a school UCS program and a community SO program constituted the main way the two programs interacted. Thus, student participants may serve as a way to introduce and build partnerships between schools and community SO programs. Based on how participants described students who participated in both the school UCS program and the community SO program, it appears that students’ experiences of each program were separate (i.e., no connection). Back in 2013-14, a State SO Program staff member serving urban schools in a northeastern state reflected on this topic:

Our school program is primarily just school programs so there’s no bridge right now between, or successful bridge between, the school and community program. [...] The bridge we are looking at and looked at for some time quite frankly is that they get the flavor and excitement of SO with the selected sport that we offer and they’re so excited and engaged that they now become a community base athlete and from there they get the opportunities to advance via competition, but that bridge isn’t directly right now from our... or consistently from our school to regional or our school to state games. (772)

⁶ There have been certain years in which liaisons and other school staff involved in UCS were asked about their connections to/partnerships with community organizations (not SO). For more information on this, please see the [2019-2020 UCS Evaluation Report \(Year 12\)](#).

However, the fact that students in some UCS schools are participating in both programs means that their dual participation represents a potential avenue of communication and point of connection for program leaders. For example, in 2019-20, a State SO Program staff member from a state in the Northern Rockies region of the U.S. described the connection between UCS at the district level and community SO programs:

There's quite a bit of just overlap with our community programming as well, along with our schools, which that's kind of how we're structured right now in [state] anyways. We have school-age athletes and partners that might participate on a community team...It's the same district that we have our state competitions in because there's a lot more just opportunity for us to work with them for multiple years in their engagement with SO [state] as well, and then kind of getting our foot in with Unified Champion Schools programming. (3613)

Here, the staff member noted the overlap in participation where students participating on their community team were also likely to participate on their school's Unified Sports team. This made it possible to grow UCS in this state by approaching schools in districts where community participation was already strong (such as where they hold the state competition). The staff member also felt that because of the relationship between the community SO program and school-based UCS programs, students were engaging with SO for longer and had more opportunities to participate overall. For UCS schools without strong relationships to their community SO program, encouraging student participation in local-level SO activities could help establish a connection.

Another liaison from a Full-implementation elementary school in a large suburb, with a Leadership Team similarly saw UCS as feeding into the community SO program. In 2018-19, they noted:

“Sometimes if there's a student that we know isn't in the [community SO] program and I think they would benefit, we have had some come on over to the community program as well” (7285).

For students who already benefit from participation in UCS activities like Unified Sports or Young Athletes at school, branching out into community SO participation can be a natural extension and a way for students to benefit even more from all that SO has to offer. With younger students in particular, encouragement to join both UCS at school and community SO programs has the potential to set students up for a lifetime of participation. In 2018-19, a State SO Program staff member from a New England state reflected on their own experience moving through community and school program. They recalled:

I actually started with SO as a Unified Partner at a young age, and then through school, with the Unified Partner in the community program here in [Northeast State], and then volunteered. And when I started into college, I was asked to help out with [Unified Champion Schools] when it first started. (4026)

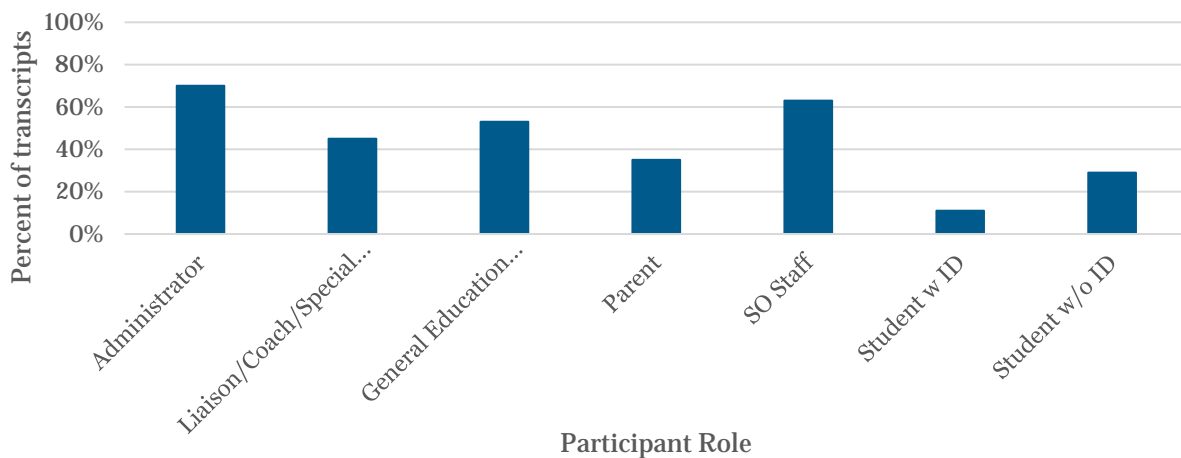
By establishing pathways for students to get involved at an early age and stay involved in a variety of ways through UCS and community SO programming as they grow up, the connections between school UCS programs and community SO programs might be strengthened naturally.

Aside from students, adults who worked with both UCS and the community SO program also built connections. In 2018-19 a liaison from an elementary school in a fringe town with a leadership team and Full Implementation noted, “A group of us are the coaches for the Young Athletes community team, the [County] Riptide community team here. Myself and a few other people from our school, and then from [nearby school]” (4493). In this instance, the community SO program served as a place for teachers at UCS schools to pool resources with one another to serve students and the community in a new context. In many cases, when programs shared leadership, there was more likely to be overlap in student participation and adults were able to bring implementation experience and resources from other roles. In 2018-19, when talking about the resources and support liaisons at an elementary school needed to start UCS, a State SO Program staff member from a Northeastern U.S. state reflected, “It was helpful because their liaison has been a coach in our community program” (4026). Similarly, in 2019-20, a Unified Sports coach from a Developing Unified high school in a remote town, without a Leadership Team, talked about how also serving as the local SO coach supported students to participate in both. The coach explained:

“Well, because some of my students come from other areas, I do have students or adults from other participating towns. But usually, [community SO participants] start with being students in my [UCS] program” (2095).

Because of the coach’s participation in Unified Sports in the school, they were able to refer students to the community SO program of which they were also part. When adults are positioned to serve as the bridges between community SO programs and school UCS programs, they can facilitate participation for students in both arenas. In 2021-22, as part of the SO Texas Interscholastic Unified Sports evaluation, a rural high school liaison remarked on this connection, “I think ever since I’ve been here, we’ve sent kids to compete in our local SO” (1120). Figure 20 below shows the percent of transcripts where community was discussed.

Figure 20. Percent of transcripts containing “community,” by participant role.



By far, liaisons, coaches, and special educators talked about community the most, followed by administrators and students without ID. This illustrates that often it is the adults closest to program implementation who discussed (or were asked about) how to build these bridges and working to integrate UCS with the larger community, whether that is the community SO program or other community-based entities.

Despite the possibility of increased engagement and participation in SO more broadly as a result of stronger partnerships between community SO programs and school-based UCS programs, increased student engagement does not always translate to increased adult engagement. The same high school liaison above from 2014-15 who spoke about their students' participation across community and school programs, did not see a similar overlap in adult participation. When asked if any teachers at the school were involved with SO in the community, they reflected, "We don't have any adults, which is shocking because it sounds like we have a pretty strong program at our Rec Center. But none of our adults are involved with that" (583). In 2015-16, a parent from a Developing Unified high school in a fringe town, with no Leadership Team, noted:

The local chapter of SO is—again, it's something that suffers from interest and support from the community. We had a lot of our kids that were doing that that translated into the Unified programs in their schools. The parents that were involved in really getting the SO activities going couldn't do Unified and SO. So those efforts just got put into the Unified program to see our kids succeed there. (7308)

When parents are balancing numerous commitments, sometimes on behalf of their children in addition to their own commitments, it can be difficult for them to support their child's participation in both the school and community SO activities. When looking to support UCS programs and community SO programs in building partnerships, it is clear that adults must be connected early on to facilitate implementation and student participation.

Summary

Based on these insights from across participants and over years of the annual evaluation, it is clear that coaches, teachers, and parents have been key players for building, establishing, and maintaining bridges between UCS at the school and SO in the community. When there were coaches and liaisons with connections to both school and community programs, students were more easily connected to opportunities for inclusive sports. Further, serving in these roles provides coaches with new perspectives on implementation and access to new resources. As the networks of nearby programs at the school and in the community became more interconnected, program leaders could lean on each other for support with participation and implementation. While coaches were interested in developing these partnerships, for many schools there was no such existing connection. Especially without the dedicated involvement of parents and students, it seemed difficult for programs to establish and maintain a partnership. Finding ways to build connections between participants and volunteers of school and community SO programs, whether student or adult, could be an effective way to foster partnerships between the two as it has worked for some UCS schools in the past.

Urban UCS Schools and their Unique Implementation Needs

To better understand the implementation challenges unique to UCS schools in cities, this section of the report presents analyses from a subset of the archive constituting 182 transcripts, selected due to their NCES designation as a school in a city. Launched in the fall of 2021, the Unified Champion City Schools (UCCS) initiative aims to engage more schools in underserved communities in order to better serve more diverse student populations in urban areas. The findings here highlight the challenges specific to UCS implementation in underserved communities in urban areas, and how participants have navigated them using the resources available. By focusing on how participants from city schools have described their experiences in UCS, the implementation of the program in their schools, and the barriers they faced, this analysis supports the UCCS initiative in developing more diverse implementation strategies to bolster the growth of programs in city schools and districts.

Overall, the city school subset of transcripts mirrors the larger archive in that the majority of transcripts are from Full-implementation high schools, schools with and without a UCS Leadership Team are evenly represented, and students with and without ID are evenly represented. See [Appendix A: Table 10](#) for more detailed information about the transcripts in this subset. The word cloud in Figure 21 illustrates the most common words participants in UCS city schools used during their interviews, and overall resembles the larger archive word cloud (refer back to [Figure 13](#)). To avoid the outsized prominence of words with robust incidental uses (e.g., school, students), any words that occurred over 1,000 times were removed from the word cloud. One difference includes more of an emphasis on time, involvement, and education in urban schools compared to all schools (as a factor of how often those words were used).

Figure 21. Word cloud representing the most commonly used words among UCS city school participants across fourteen years of the UCS annual evaluation.

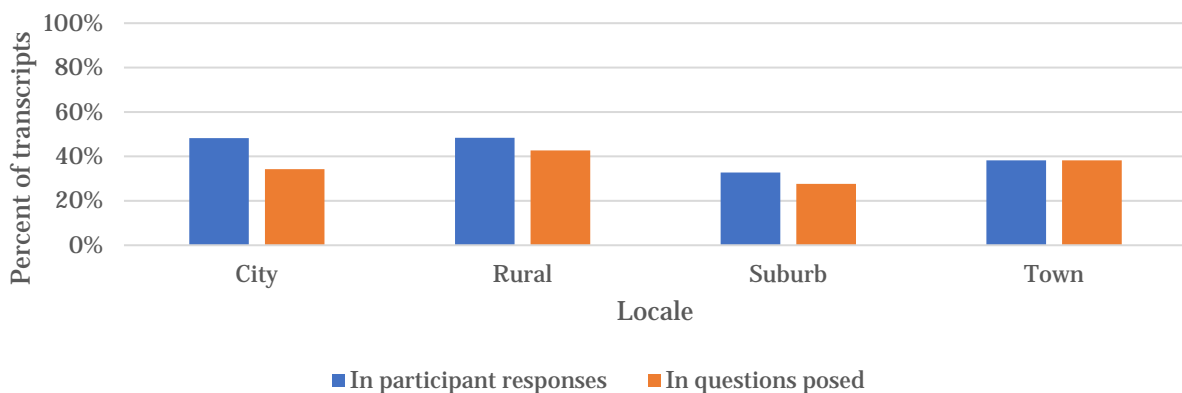


The implementation needs and concerns raised by participants at these city schools often mirrored the broader needs and challenges faced by all schools, namely transportation, family

involvement, space for activities, and community connections and support. However, the unique context of the city can create different mechanisms for those needs and may strain different participants. For example, UCS programs based in rural or suburban schools and programs based in city schools all struggle with transportation and space. This has been evident over the years in the annual *UCS Liaison Survey* and is a clear challenge throughout the archive as well. In rural areas, data from the archive indicates that this can look like not having enough buses and relying instead on parents to provide transportation. However, in a city, where public transportation is more widespread, many parents do not own a vehicle and therefore are unable to fill a transportation gap. In these UCS city schools, the relationship between programming and parents seemed more distant, where school staff interacted less often with parents directly, especially when students took public transportation or walked to get to and from school. Transportation is just one example of how challenges manifested differently based on the geographical location of the school and its implications are discussed in more detail later in [Transportation](#). While most schools struggled with transportation, the same solutions available to schools in suburban areas were not necessarily available to schools in urban areas. The analyses that follow provide a more in-depth understanding of how implementation challenges have differed for city schools and how that affected schools' UCS programming.

Participants from UCS city schools, overall, have discussed “support” more than participants from suburb and town schools, and the same as rural schools (see Figure 22). Moreover, participants at city schools were asked about support in fewer cases than they discussed it, suggesting that support may be an especially important aspect of implementation concerns and participant experiences in urban UCS schools compared to other UCS schools. For these participants in particular, there was an emphasis on the people involved in implementation. As they reflected on their experiences with UCS, what stood out was how they discussed working with others in their UCS network to make implementation happen. Liaisons and coaches at these schools reflected on the support they received from parents, administrators, and State SO Program staff as highly related to the quality of the implementation and how they were able to navigate challenges. Schools with strong relationships with SO community programs and local community partners felt they were able to mitigate implementation barriers better, largely through new access to resources like transportation or physical spaces.

Figure 22. Percent of transcripts with the word “support,” by locale.

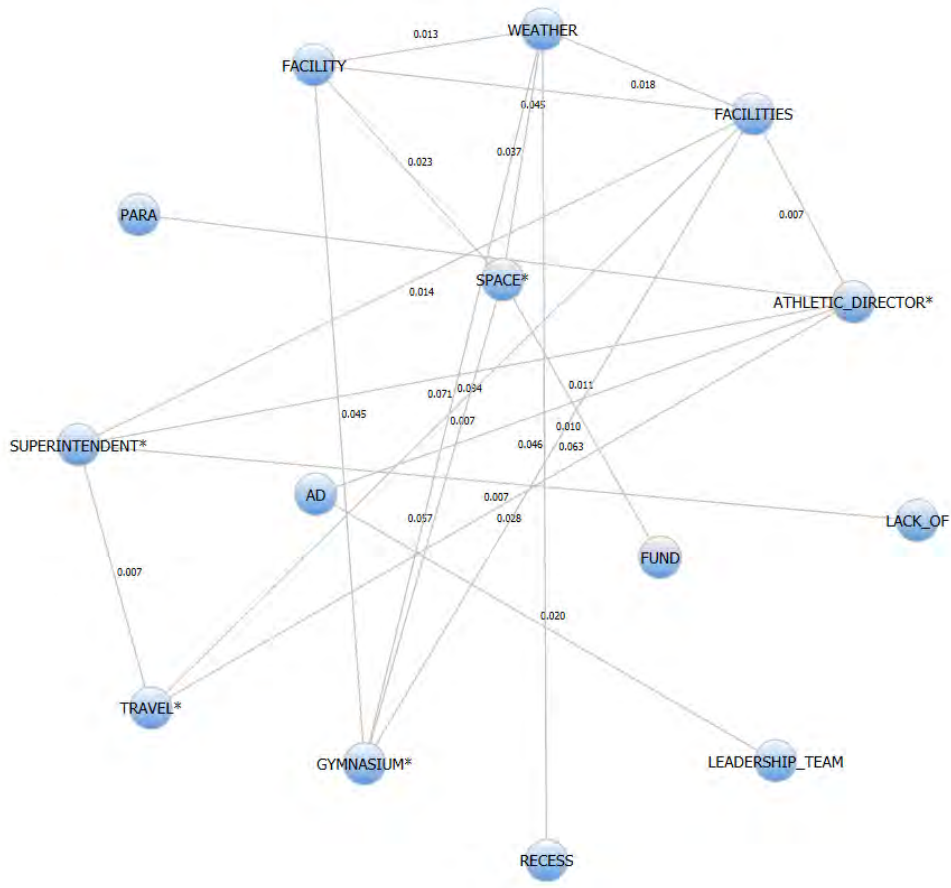


As these analyses begin to suggest strong implementation in a UCS city school requires a strong team of people involved at all levels, allowing the program flexibility and reach in overcoming challenges. The idea of a strong network of people is explored further in the sections that follow related to space for implementation, family support, transportation, and connections to the community.

Access to Space

For many urban UCS schools, as with most UCS schools, the challenge to find space appeared to disproportionately affect Unified Sports, especially if team activities took place during the school day. This aligns with the lower rate of Unified Sports team implementation liaisons have reported in the *UCS Liaison Survey* over the years. Figure 23 illustrates the words that occurred alongside “space” in participants’ responses. Notably, these included specific facilities (e.g., gymnasium), specific situations that impact the availability of space (e.g., recess, the weather), and specific people who were supportive in the quest for space (e.g., athletic director).

Figure 23. Link analysis of words co-occurring with “space” among UCS city schools.



Appropriate Facilities

One notable challenge for some liaisons in UCS city schools was that they were entirely without access to sporting facilities and equipment, which made certain aspects of implementation virtually impossible. In 2014-15, a liaison from a Developing Unified elementary school, with a Leadership Team, in a large city shared:

“I can’t throw sporting events because, first of all, we don’t have a track. We don’t have an outdoor basketball court. We don’t have nothing outside but a PlayScape” (745).

When schools were able to offer Unified Sports, access to space and facilities determined which sports schools could implement. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Developing Unified high school in a midsize city, with a Leadership Team, explained, “[State Special Olympic Program] specifically only talked about [implementing] track because that seems to be the only athletic program that works for our campus in terms of facility space” (8339). Clearly, the lack of physical space or facilities available for UCS in city schools has made it more difficult, and sometimes impossible, to implement Unified Sports. A related challenge was that when spaces were available, they were not necessarily adequate or even safe. A liaison from a Developing Unified elementary school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected in 2014-15:

Because a lot of our kids are runners, and so when we did Unified Track and Field (which we didn’t even get to do this year), there’s no fence at the place where they hold it now, there’s no fence. And there’s no trees. And it’s in spring. And the last year it was so hot, and the kids tantrumed, and with no parents able to come help us we just couldn’t even keep the kids safe. So, we’re trying to think of things that we can do that are more confined in the space so that the kids are safe and yet having fun. (881)

Similarly, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a large city, with a Leadership Team, echoed this concern in 2018-19, stating, “Our resources are really limited, and our track is really in bad shape, so I don’t think it would be safe to actually host a track meet” (7612).

Sharing Space

When UCS city schools did have access to space and it was safe to use, another common scenario was that UCS activities often took place alongside other school activities, at the same time and in the same spaces. On the idea of sharing space, in 2014-15 a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a large northeastern city, with a Leadership Team, reflected:

...the facility usage becomes an issue because we either have way too many kids in the gym or we have to have classes going on at the same time our program is running, so we’re sort of limited to space in the gymnasium. Weather permitting, then we’re able to go outside and there is plenty of space. But that is only a little bit of time here. (2400)

With lack of space impacting what or how much UCS city schools could implement to begin with, changes to the weather that made outdoor space unusable had compounding impacts.

Other liaisons, including participant 881 quoted earlier, have also struggled with the weather as it coincided with space issues. In 2014-15, a liaison from a Full-implementation elementary school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected that, “Since [Midwestern US state] Public Schools implemented mandatory recess, sometimes if it’s raining or inclement weather, like today, we have no space to practice” (794). In schools with insufficient indoor space, a problem especially prominent in city schools where spaces tend to be smaller and multipurpose (e.g., a cafetorium functions as both the school’s cafeteria and auditorium), having to first meet the needs of the broader school population meant that there was sometimes simply no space to host UCS activities. Though many UCS schools in suburbs and towns also lose space due to the weather, in urban schools this appeared to compound existing space challenges and seemingly made it more difficult for liaisons to consistently implement UCS activities like Unified Sports throughout the school year.

Expanding Needs

As programs expand, the resources and space that formerly supported the program may become insufficient and hinder its overall growth. The implementation possibilities available to liaisons are heavily determined by access to space and resources. In 2014-15, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a large city, with a Leadership Team, explained, “In the building and resources, we don’t have much. We don’t have extra funding...our program, our numbers have grown over the past three years so now we don’t have enough...” (2400). More recently, in 2019-20, a liaison from an Emerging Unified high school in a small city, without a Leadership Team, reflected on necessary changes to ensure there continues to be enough space for UCS implementation as the program grows. The liaison noted:

It's something that we are going to start to discuss because as we start to get larger or as we start to bring on other schools, we know that the rec center may not be able to always accommodate us along with every other place that wants to utilize their facility. So, we are going to have to start, as we expand even further, to see where else we can utilize space so that it's central to other kids as well and parts of the district. (1395)

This liaison addressed how program growth affects their use of space at the recreational center and emphasized the concerns participants have when considering available space, like geographical accessibility for participants. Clearly, schools not only need to navigate logistical challenges for UCS, like resources and space, early on in implementation but as UCS evolves so do its needs.

Support with Finding Space

When liaisons faced major challenges with accessing space, some were able to work with their administration to open access or partner with nearby schools to find locations for UCS activities. In 2014-25, a liaison from a Developing Unified elementary school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected:

We don’t have sports equipment [laughter]....and we don’t have a gym. So that, and finding space is a challenge, but the principal is supportive, the staff is supportive. It probably helps that the PE teacher and I are really good friends. (881)

As the ones who set school schedules and regulate access to the use of school spaces, administrators came up often when liaisons in UCS city schools reflected on their issues with finding space. In some schools, a supportive administration meant that liaisons did not encounter any difficulties with physical space for UCS activities. In 2014-15, a liaison from a Developing Unified high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected:

It hasn't been a challenge [to find space]. Luckily, I've had the times that I had the gym open fit in with [students'] schedule...Their schedules are pretty flexible, which is nice. And our principal is on board, so we've been able to have that time set aside to do [UCS]. (2670)

With solid administrative support, liaisons might be able to more easily navigate complicated schedules and logistics to create time and space for UCS during the school day. The relative power of an administrator to access space or make space available can also help a school district implement UCS. For example, in 2013-14, an administrator from a Developing Unified high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, described their approach to supporting UCS across the district by having other schools come to them:

[I] make sure [other schools] have a place to go, like they've used our building for the district all the time because we have a high school gym. They use a lot of the gym. I think they used the building two or three times last year and then we have a football field. They use a lot of the football field...So, I open the building whenever they ask for it. (763)

The idea that schools within a district can help one another alleviate space challenges was also echoed by Participant Y11_7612, quoted earlier regarding the safety of available facilities. The liaison stated:

Our resources are really limited, and our track is really in bad shape, so I don't think it would be safe to actually host a track meet. So, I'm working with another high school that has been doing SO for like the past ten years. (7612)

By partnering with a nearby high school with more resources, and an established relationship with the community SO program (for more information on this see [Partnerships with Community Programs and Organizations](#)), this liaison was able to facilitate students' participation in a Unified Track meet. Supporting liaisons to develop resource networks within their school, school district, and larger community may be one way to mitigate spatial challenges in UCS city schools.

Family Involvement

While liaisons across locales have emphasized the need for familial support and involvement, access to families as a resource for UCS varied greatly. For participants at urban schools, this variation also seemed to depend heavily on family circumstances, like socioeconomic and immigration status. However, it is difficult to understand the factors that affect family involvement from the parent perspective as they are underrepresented in this subset of

transcripts (see [Appendix A: Table 10](#)).⁷ Therefore, the perspectives on family involvement for UCS in urban schools come from the school liaisons.

Competing Demands

Many liaisons cited competing demands on parental time and resources as one reason why parents were not able to be more involved in UCS or their student's academics more broadly. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a small city, with a Leadership Team, noted that, "they're so concerned about just making ends meet that they're not—it's not a priority for them for their kids to come to school. Or we'll have kids that have to quit school in order to go to work" (263). These challenges were magnified when there was a divide between how students and their teachers move through the world. Language barriers between students and staff, different racial and ethnic backgrounds, or variation in socioeconomic status contributed to a disconnect in how students related to their teachers and how teachers best understood how to support students. Participant 263 further reflected on how these barriers impacted student participation and familial involvement:

We're just a white, English-speaking staff trying to help these students. I don't speak Spanish. We don't have a social worker that speaks Spanish...I think people don't really know what to do about it, because we're all white people trying to figure out what to do about this cultural divide...Again, it's the priority that falls to the bottom of the barrel versus teaching to the middle. (263)

Here the liaison acknowledges the importance of addressing the cultural divide between students and staff so that the school can be more supportive of the totality of what students are going through, but admits it becomes difficult to prioritize this work when schools are also responsible for education and extracurricular programming.

As families navigated meeting competing survival needs, they were often unable to prioritize their own involvement in their child's education and extracurricular activities. In 2015-16, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, noted:

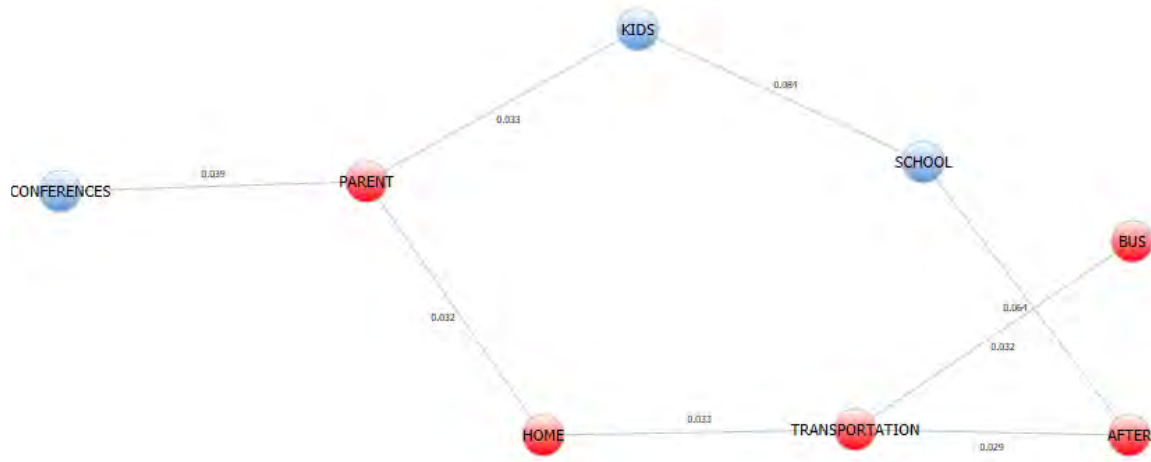
"All of our parents are working right now [during the school day]. The ones that aren't, probably are working third shift, which is why they can't do the transportation [for UCS]" (634).

Earlier on in the evaluation, back in 2013-14, a liaison from a Developing Unified high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, observed, "Our parents are supportive. Many of our parents still have that transportation concern so if it's something in the building, we have some participation" (1193). When UCS participation created new challenges for parents, it became more difficult to convince them to support their child in additional ways, such as volunteering or fundraising. Figure 24 illustrates the words used when parents and transportation were discussed together, which indicates they were especially connected to the idea of after school

⁷ Note that many of the barriers to family involvement described in this section are very likely the reasons why parents in UCS city schools could not be reached for an interview.

transportation (and with the red nodes indicating a specific cluster of words used often together). As Participant 634 noted, it was difficult, if not impossible, for parents at UCS city schools to provide this resource. The relationship between parents and transportation is discussed in more detail in the following section on [Transportation](#).

Figure 24. Link analysis showing the relationship between parents and transportation.



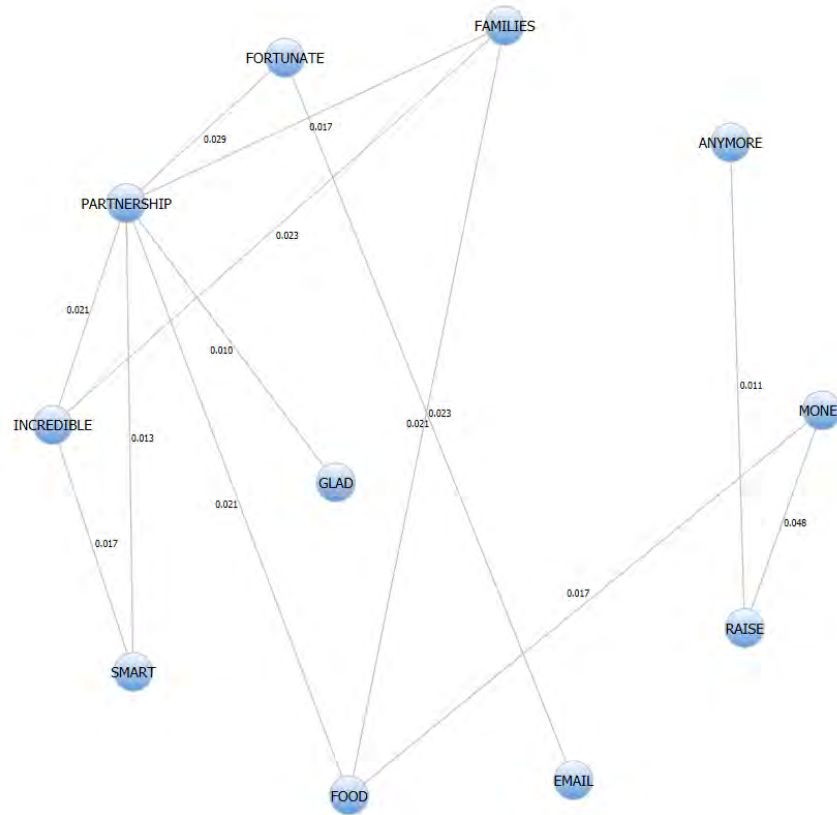
In 2014-15, a liaison from a Developing Unified elementary school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, provided more information about how difficult it was for parents to be involved, including and beyond transportation. The liaison reflected:

[Our parents] have multiple challenges. Usually, it's socioeconomic. And therefore, their ability to become involved is very difficult. We have a number of families that don't have a car, we have a number of families that have more than one child impaired, so that having opportunities to do other things is difficult. They don't have the money to do any extras or to help out in any way. They do what they can, but it's a big challenge...We do backpacks on Fridays to send food home, and we give winter coats, and we help with clothes and shoes, and we have breakfast and lunch at school.

(881)

For this school, as at many other UCS schools in urban areas, family support for UCS was limited for a variety of interconnected reasons, which the school was attempting to mitigate. In fact, “families” co-occurred often with the phrases “raise money” and “food” among the UCS city school participants, illustrating the emphasis schools in urban areas placed on holistically supporting students (see Figure 25).

Figure 25. Link analysis of “families” as it is related to “raise money” and “food.”



Benefits for Families

Although challenges for families at home and outside of school made it difficult to support their students in UCS and other activities, some schools did have access to familial support and involvement and were able to speak about this and its resulting benefits for the families. Some UCS liaisons spoke positively about the amount of familial support they had and how it impacted implementation. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a small city, with a Leadership Team explained, “And in our elementary schools, we see some parents even getting involved in the Leadership Team, so it brings the whole community together” (1418). By including parents as members of the UCS Leadership Team, this school was able to include parents in a way that many UCS schools do not (refer back to [UCS Leadership Teams](#), and in ways that may not require parents to offer resources they themselves do not have (e.g., transportation). Interestingly, at other schools with familial support, liaisons spoke about how that involvement brought with it new challenges and how they were conflicted about the role parents should play given the intention for UCS to serve as an independent social space for students with ID. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Developing Unified school in a midsize city, with a Leadership Team, reflected:

“Since we’re at that high school level, we felt that the [Unified] Club should have been for kids who want that social interaction without their parents around” (8339).

Whether or not UCS city schools had families actively supporting the program participants often noted the benefits of UCS for urban families, which is why it is so important that they can be involved. Liaisons saw further development of social relationships for both students and families, and perceived UCS as a way for parents to connect and support each other. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a small city, with a Leadership Team, reflected:

“[When students participate in UCS] the child doesn’t need to be fully dependent on the parent. And it gives the parents a little bit of a break as well” (1418).

For students with more demanding needs, UCS activities can give families an opportunity to take some time for themselves. Increasing familial involvement and attendance at UCS events also led to unexpected impacts, like the organization of a carpool system to ease the burden of transportation for all families. In 2018-19, another liaison from a Full-implementation high school in a small city, with a Leadership Team, reflected:

I think a lot of time our parents miss out on [social interactions with other parents]; there aren't as many opportunities. And so now you see the parents kind of making friendships... And I think it's a good support group for the parents. Especially this year, I've really noticed the parents just sitting together talking the entire time and smiling and laughing. And I think it's a great kind of pseudo support group. We didn't intend for that, but I look at it and think, "This is really good for them." And then some of them are giving other students a ride. They didn't know them before this, really. I don't know, I just think a lot of good comes out of it. (213)

For families in urban settings, developing a support network with other UCS families may help to mitigate some of the existing barriers to familial involvement and student participation. Creating opportunities for families to connect and develop relationships may broaden the possibilities for familial support, while also furthering the impact of UCS in and out of school.

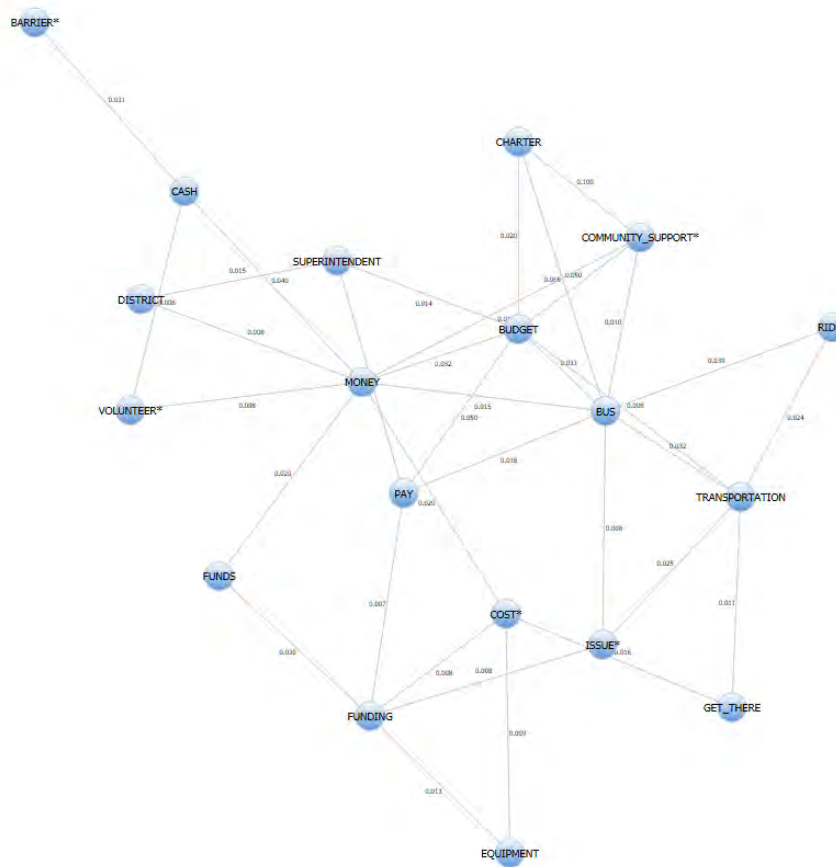
Overall, participants from urban areas noted the importance of familial involvement for UCS implementation and how the lack of family support is created by a confluence of factors (e.g., socioeconomic status and working multiple jobs) rather than a singular issue. When families are already struggling to make ends meet at home, they do not have additional time, resources of their own, or energy to contribute to UCS. This indicates the need for UCS resources to better address the circumstances that surround familial involvement and provide schools, especially urban schools, with alternative modes of securing support. The perspectives provided here also underscore the need for UCS schools to support all families, especially when families are already facing systemic challenges that impact student participation and long-term, sustained familial involvement. As the Unified Champion City Schools Initiatives looks to

further UCS programming in underserved communities and building relationships with parents and communities, these findings serve as a reminder that program growth in these areas might be more inherently tied to familial involvement than in other locales. This also has the potential to inform the development of a family engagement toolkit that can support families in advocating for inclusion. By better understanding the factors that influence families' capacity for involvement and how parents have historically benefitted from their child's participation in UCS, this analysis informs our grasp of the resources and support families will need. In order to grow the number of high-need schools with UCS programs, participation will have to be accessible to both students and families.

Transportation

Transportation has emerged as a critical implementation resource and a challenge consistently over the years of the annual UCS evaluation, both through the *UCS Liaison Survey* and from interviews across a variety of UCS schools. In the archive, mentions of transportation from urban UCS school participants co-occurred often with mentions of community support, administrators, volunteers, school district, and funding (see Figure 26). This indicates that as liaisons and Unified Sports coaches tried to secure transportation for UCS, they relied on a broader support network that encompassed both school officials and the community, often relying on volunteers from both groups to meet transportation needs.

Figure 26. Force-based link analyses related to “transportation,” among urban UCS schools.



For some schools, transportation was largely connected to funding concerns and for others it was more reflective of how scheduled UCS activities aligned with the school's transportation policies. While some schools could turn to families to mitigate transportation troubles, the perspectives below illustrate that for urban schools this was not often the case. In 2019-20, a liaison from a Full-implementation elementary school in a small city, with a Leadership Team, explained how the confluence of the school's transportation arrangements and family access to transportation made it difficult for students with ID to participate not just in UCS, but all after-school extracurriculars. The liaison noted:

A lot of my families don't have transportation. And so, it's really difficult for [students] to get picked up. They are allowed to stay after school, if you will, but they don't get transportation home. And so, when we do even like school dances, the self-contained [special education] kids weren't coming partly because they didn't have transportation... (2967)

Often for urban schools, transportation emerged as a concern that affected the entire school and social experience for students with ID. In 2019-20 a liaison from a Developing Unified high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, explained:

A lot of our students don't live extremely close to the school, or their parents may not have transportation to come and pick them up. So, all of our students take the bus. There are very few students who walk to school and walk home from school. So, if their primary means of getting to school is on the bus, then they most likely aren't going to be that involved in any after-school programs. (5698)

While some UCS schools or school districts might be able to absorb the cost of transportation home for students, for many UCS schools in urban locales this simply meant some activities could not be implemented or some students were unfortunately not able to participate. In 2015-16 a liaison from a Full-implementation Unified high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, reflected:

Our problem at the school is transportation. There are a certain type of kids that do and do not have parents that can come pick them up, and if you have meetings after school or a club after school, it almost discriminates against the kids that have the luxury of being here during the day. So that's why we use that group of kids, kids that were here at school and in class. (634)

This liaison addressed the challenges transportation poses for student participation by keeping activities during the school day. When facing budgetary concerns, liaisons and coaches had to dedicate increased time to securing additional funds for transportation or adjust how they implemented UCS.

While transportation remains a challenge that appears heightened in urban UCS schools, there are ways that liaisons and coaches can work around transportation barriers to UCS implementation. Some schools were able to mitigate transportation challenges through support from administrators, State SO Program staff, community partners, or volunteers from the school community. A liaison from a Developing Unified elementary school in a large city, with a

Leadership Team, mentioned in 2014-15 that, “You have to have [teachers] to volunteer to come back to the school to help get the kids back home because the parents don’t have cars” (745). Other schools secured transportation with resources provided by the State SO Program. In 2018-19, a liaison from a Developing high school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, stated, “Our SO budget is used for those transportation purposes” (1378). For other schools, support from administrators and existing school commitments to providing after-school transportation facilitated the logistical aspects of implementation. For example, a liaison from a Developing Unified middle school in a large city, without a Leadership Team, explained back in 2014-15, “That’s [our] policy, that’s the after-school program at [school name], so we provide the transportation, and our motto is get every student a safe ride home” (1708). In another case in 2019-20, a liaison at an Emerging Unified high school in a small city, without a Leadership Team, spoke about how their relationship with their local recreational center Director facilitated a new program initiative and assisted with transportation because of the rec center’s access to city resources. The liaison reflected:

[The rec center Director] was like “Don’t worry about the transportation. They have their vans from the city.” And he was able to provide for transportation. So, he will pick the kids up for rec night at [school name] and then he will go door to door with every one of the kids and make sure that they get dropped off at their house at the end of the day. (1395)

Through a partnership with a community organization, this liaison was able to resolve existing transportation concerns and provide new extracurricular opportunities for their students by joining forces with the local recreational center. Though UCS city schools face unique barriers to transportation, liaisons and Unified Sports coaches were successful at securing transportation for their programs when they had help from the State SO Program, administrators, volunteers, and community partners.

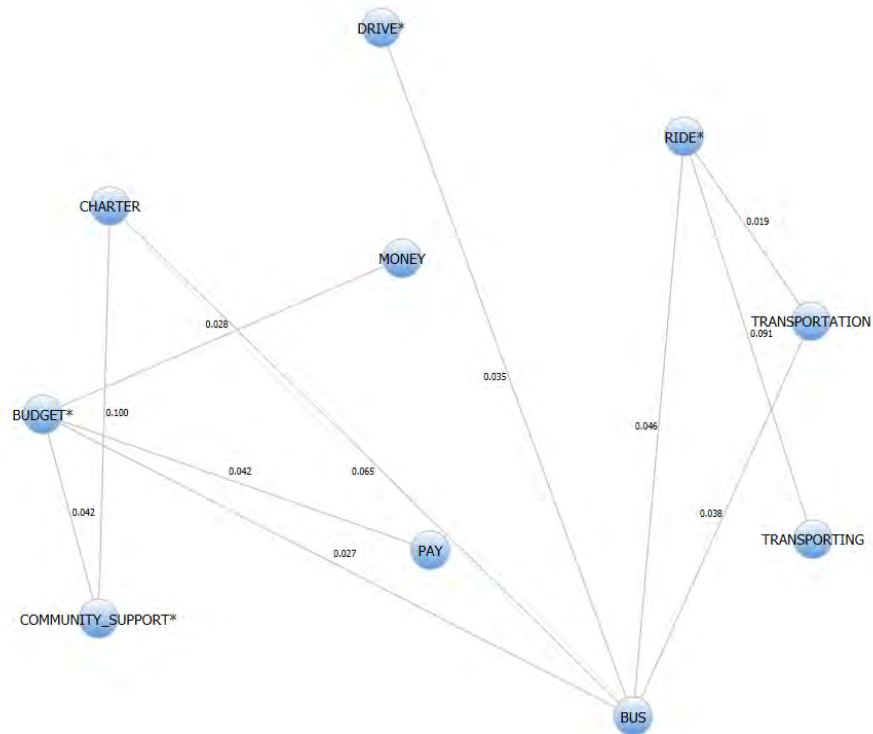
Partnerships with Community Programs and Organizations

Participants across locales discussed the impact of partnerships with the community or aspired to develop a stronger partnership. Often relationships between schools and communities arose when either students or adults were participating in programs in both places and were thus able to facilitate the development of a connection between the community and UCS programs. Through these partnerships, UCS city schools were able to gain access to new resources and forms of support.

When participants from urban schools made mention of students participating in community programs, such as those at local recreational centers, or collaborations between UCS and local SO programs in the community, the mentions largely reflected a desire on the part of Unified Sports coaches and liaisons to build stronger bridges between so that students could better participate in each. Participants from UCS city schools drew connections between involvement in school and both SO and other community programs and spoke about the idea of building community (see Figure 27).

Though participants at UCS city schools did not speak frequently about their relationships with community SO programs (presumably, and as noted earlier, because this has not been a common line of inquiry for any schools over the years of the annual evaluation), participants at urban schools did often speak about their school’s relationship to the community or community partners in general, and how this had shaped UCS implementation. Community support was linked to both transportation and budget in the responses of participants from city schools (see Figure 28).

Figure 28. Link analysis of words related to “community support,” among UCS city schools.



On the idea of schools connecting with their surrounding community, a parent from a Developing Unified high school in a large city, with no Leadership Team, explained back in 2019-20:

The school itself has a lot of interaction now with the community because of a resource center that’s connected to [it]. They built us a resource center there for the community, for different things that you may need help with, whether it's trying to find a job or you just need help with utilities or just anything like that. If you're trying to go back to school or anything, you come to that resource center, and so the community is always there. At different holidays they put on stuff for the kids, and so the community has a lot of interaction with that school. (7589)

Connections like this one can ground schools in their communities, and if urban schools can create resources to meet the needs of the community they can become further embedded, which may open up more opportunities for the community, the school, and ultimately, UCS to benefit from these relationships. This was the case for one liaison from a Full-implementation K-8 school in a small city, with a Leadership Team. In 2019-20 this liaison reflected:

It's so incredible because [community partner] not only runs the rec center but I'm sure they both told you he drives the bus for us, the van. And so, he comes to [the school], picks up the kids, takes them to the rec center, and then, door to door, drives them home. We're the luckiest district in the country. I'm still appreciative of [community partner] for what he does because he goes above and beyond. That's not part of his job responsibility but he makes it work so that those kids can be included, so they could have fun. And it's incredible. And so now, they have gotten so comfortable, right, seeing each other and playing together that you see it, number one, in school. You see them talking more and laughing on a Monday saying, "Oh, on Friday we did this," and you just see more kind of a typical middle school experience, which is incredible. But also, now we're seeing when we do have parent nights, whether it's parent-teacher conferences or a dance after school, we see parents making more of an effort in getting their kids there or getting themselves there because they feel like their kids are more included in the school. It's been phenomenal. (2967)

The presence of this community partnership not only reshaped the resources available for students in UCS to have access to activities that expand their social experience, but also the relationship between parents and the school. By making it possible for students to access extracurricular activities through the community rec center, the community partner helped the school to establish trust and respect with the parents, which in turn bolstered their involvement. These kinds of relationships came up often when speaking with participants at UCS city schools and they seemed to rely on community partnerships to broker access to resources and increased opportunities for students. By providing resources to the community, both schools and UCS programs benefitted from a better rapport with families. Connecting UCS city schools with their local SO program and other organizations in the community would enhance the ability of liaisons to implement UCS in these schools.

Summary

More than schools in suburban areas and towns, participants from UCS city schools were worried about finding enough space for implementation. For some schools, this was due to a lack of sports facilities on school grounds, while for others, this was a result of competition for the limited spaces available during the school day when other school activities and mandatory events were offered alongside UCS. These challenges were enhanced when participants were also trying to find spaces that were safe for students. When it was possible to mitigate space challenges in UCS city schools, liaisons tended to do so through personal relationships with other school staff who exercised oversight over certain school spaces and help from community members who opened up locations outside of school for UCS activities.

Family support as it related to implementation was also discussed among participants from UCS city schools. Though most UCS schools have discussed the challenges of securing familial participation over the years, for schools in urban areas, the resources that families have available to share with varies more widely. Cultural differences between students and staff, along with extenuating personal circumstances for students, meant that students did not have the bandwidth to participate, nor did parents have the bandwidth to support their participation. Especially for students for whom coming to school is already a challenge, finding ways for them to meaningfully participate in UCS was even more difficult. However, for families who were able

to be involved, participants noted seeing impacts for families as well, acknowledging that often there are not as many social spaces for parents of students with ID to connect. Participants also saw participation as a way for parents and guardians to find time for themselves. Conversely, some liaisons limited the degree that parents could be involved in certain UCS activities in an effort to protect one of the few independent social times available for students with ID.

While in suburban schools, some parents may be able to use personal vehicles to mitigate a gap in transportation for UCS activities, parents in urban areas were less likely to have their own cars and therefore could not help with program implementation in this way. This, coupled with the existing transportation challenges like finding funds to charter a bus, made transportation more difficult for UCS city schools. Liaisons mitigated this by arranging transportation through community partners or teachers who volunteered to drive students back home. In some cases, liaisons were able to secure additional funding for transportation from the State SO Program or school administrators were able to find money in the school budget. By developing strong support networks, liaisons and coaches were able to resolve transportation gaps.

Though participants at UCS city schools did not speak much about relationships with community SO programs, though they aspired to have a relationship, they did have strong relationships with their surrounding community and local community organizations. Through burgeoning partnerships with community businesses and ongoing relationships with community partners, they were able to gain access to new resources and provide students with new opportunities. These relationships, and those within in-school support networks of administrators, coaches, students, and families, allowed urban schools to better navigate implementation challenges. Though facing difficulties with space, transportation, and family involvement, participants at UCS city schools worked together to find solutions.

Summary: Qualitative Perspectives on UCS Implementation

The qualitative archive of UCS transcripts represents a new and exciting way to analyze the vast amount of qualitative data collected as part of the annual evaluation. As of this report, there are 1,793 transcripts from approximately 2,066 participants across 197 UCS schools in 34 states. These transcripts represent mainly Full-implementation UCS high schools, and although that may limit the generalizability of the findings in some cases, in the overwhelming majority of cases these qualitative perspectives align with and enhance what liaisons have been reporting for years in the *UCS Liaison Survey*. With all transcripts in one location, the archive provides insight into the outcomes of past evaluation objectives, the alignment of topics across objectives and evaluation years, and current or previous quantitative findings. By comparing the occurrence of topics and key words in the questions asked and in participants answers across, time, participants, type of school, and many more factors, the archive is another tool for more clearly and comprehensively illustrating the history and evolution of UCS.

The 2021-22 analyses with the qualitative archive focused specifically on resource use, support, and sustainability for UCS, partnerships with community SO programs and local community organizations, and the unique challenges faced by urban/city UCS schools. Drawing on frequency and occurrence data alongside the thematic analysis of participants' opinions and

feelings, this new approach explored more comprehensively how UCS participants have historically talked about their schools' most pertinent implementation needs and illustrated patterns among data previously siloed across annual evaluation years and objectives. This approach also amplified the voices of participants to deepen understanding of critical factors for implementation over time and across schools.

One of the most prominent implementation resources that participants discussed was support, often considering their relationships with others some of their most helpful resources. State SO Program staff and school administrators spoke about support the most frequently, and administrators were often associated with support or named as important sources of support by Unified Sports coaches and liaisons. This indicates the importance of administrative support for program implementation. Monetary resources and funding were tied to program sustainability, largely by State SO Program staff. The compiled frequency of budget-related words was highest for Emerging Unified schools, likely because schools with more robust implementation have more established funding plans, often through community organizations, local businesses, and family support. When asked about sustainability, participants overwhelmingly spoke about the importance of dedicated individuals who were committed to the program's success. They stressed the support networks that made implementation possible and worried if their programs were too dependent on any one individual for long-term sustainability of the program to be viable. Student leadership also was a factor participants saw as connected to program sustainability, as student interest in the program drove school prioritization of extracurriculars, such as UCS. Administrators, State SO Program staff, and Unified Sports coaches advocated for stipends as a way to ensure strong and sustainable implementation year over year by retaining qualified and passionate people. Overall, resources, support, and sustainability were often discussed concurrently by participants, especially by those coordinating implementation, and the repeated combination of these three topics highlights how interrelated they are. Moreover, throughout the discussions of resources, support, and sustainability, people remained at the center. The relationships between those facilitating program implementation were discussed as cherished resources, a critical source of support, and drivers of program sustainability.

Relationships with community SO programs and the impacts of those partnerships were also explored. Community SO programs were discussed more among participants of suburb, town, and rural schools, while participants from UCS city schools tended to talk instead about relationships to the community through partnerships with local organizations. The overlap in student and school staff participation in both community SO programs and school-based UCS programs, when it existed, seemed to bolster partnerships and support for cross-participation in activities. Participants generally thought that both community SO programs and UCS would benefit from stronger bridges between them, largely to facilitate ongoing student participation in SO after graduation from high school. Once again, people were at the center of participants' responses as they acknowledged the importance of volunteers participating in both programs and of community members whose personal investment reshaped student access to extracurricular programming.

A final aspect of this analysis sought to better understand how UCS city schools approached common implementation factors, such as support and transportation, that have been explored

as part of the annual evaluation over the years. Three implementation challenges emerged as prominent for city schools: access to space, familial involvement, and transportation. Though these challenges have often come up for schools in other locales, the nuanced way they occurred in urban schools provided new considerations for how to structure resources and facilitate effective support for urban schools. Participants explained the many difficulties of finding space for UCS activities, mainly Unified Sports, as a challenge already compounded by a broader lack of space in city schools and made worse with any weather complications. Unified Sports coaches and liaisons at city schools also struggled to secure the same level of familial involvement as other UCS schools, which in turn exacerbated challenges like transportation, which have been more easily mitigated by parents at suburban UCS schools. For urban schools in particular, where families were more dependent on public transportation, they were less likely to be able to volunteer to drive students to UCS activities in the community or pick students up after school. When city schools faced this challenge, they found support in their relationships with community organizations and passionate school staff. Often, administrators and State SO Program staff were able to secure transportation or funding for transportation. Though city schools did not tend to have many relationships with community SO programs, they understood their importance and reflected on ways to build those connections. Rather, UCS in city schools seemed to be strengthened by the strong community ties that surrounded schools and the resources that schools offered to communities. In city schools, people once again emerged as important sources of support, whether through administrators' providing access to school space or parents finding accessible ways to support their child's participation, or community members' donations to UCS.

Throughout these analyses, participants reflected on those working hard to facilitate implementation as most essential for the program's success. These reflections point to the need to support liaisons in developing strong relationships with administrators at the school and district level, families, and community programs and partners. By supporting liaisons to establish robust support networks they will then be able to more easily access to new resources, which in turn will enhance UCS sustainability and longevity.

Recommendations

Given the wealth of information amassed over more than a decade of annual evaluation, CSDE approached the 2021-22 evaluation seeking to add more depth and context to what is already known. By continuing to align newer data with older data, complementing quantitative data with qualitative data, and shifting from a largely cross-sectional examination of UCS to one steeped in history and context, the evaluation is in the strongest position yet to examine program implementation trends and the various factors that influence implementation in the context of what has been and what is yet to come.

In light of the findings of the 2021-22 evaluation, the following recommendations are offered as SO embarks on its 15th year of UCS programming:

Strengthen training and technical assistance plans so that program health and sustainability factors, as informed by the annual evaluation, continue to drive how State SO Programs and schools are supported.

Recent annual evaluations have focused more intentionally on historical context for findings and on aligning new and old data to provide the most comprehensive picture of UCS implementation. These efforts have illuminated important trends in implementation around UCS Leadership Teams, resource awareness and use, sustainability plans, and other factors that can impact what or how a school implements UCS. Given what is now known about the importance of forming a UCS Leadership Team, about using SO implementation resources, and about offering enhanced supports to liaisons who are general education teachers, it is recommended that SO audit their training and technical assistance plans to ensure they are based on all current and former evaluation findings regarding program implementation success factors. For example, the 2020-21 and 2021-22 evaluation findings regarding the importance of a Leadership Team for reaching the Full-implementation level and that schools are twice as likely to have a Leadership Team if the liaison is a general education teacher, indicate that better supporting schools to form a Leadership Team when they first start UCS should be a best practice moving forward because it helps schools implement a more robust UCS program and also ensures UCS is not siloed in special education. Moreover, regular, systematic reviews of training and technical assistance approaches (e.g., annually) ensures that State SO Programs and schools are fully supported to the maximum extent possible. This review could enlist the services of educational training and technical assistance experts to offer outside opinions and new insights, or even involve the CSDE evaluation team as experts on the annual evaluation findings to date. In addition, new evaluation findings, as they relate to enhancements to the training and technical assistance plans, should be discussed with each State SO Program individually to further tailor and customize the approaches.

Develop more relevant programming models and impact benchmarks for the oldest UCS schools so that the positive impacts of UCS over time are highlighted, understood, and celebrated more widely.

The annual evaluation measures liaisons' perceptions of UCS impact on the school and students through a series of benchmarks set forth by the U.S. Department of Education. These benchmarks concern a variety of outcomes for students with ID (e.g., confidence), students without ID (e.g., involvement in school activities), and the school as a whole (e.g., inclusive school culture). Liaisons respond with one of six options, from "0 – UCS activities did not make a difference" to "5 – UCS activities made a big difference" for each benchmark. For the last decade, since the evaluation began monitoring these benchmarks, liaison report has been almost as positive as it could be with 90% or more of liaisons indicating UCS activities have made a difference (answer options from 2 – 5) for each benchmark. Recently, however, there has been some decline in the number of liaisons selecting the most positive option (5) and the number of liaisons selecting positive options between 2 – 4 has increased. COVID-19 exacerbated this trend, but it had begun before the pandemic and likely indicates that these benchmarks may no longer be sensitive enough to detect change in a UCS school after fourteen years. It is therefore recommended that SO work with the U.S. Department of Education to develop new benchmarks

that account for the ways that schools might change in their later years of UCS implementation, after their inclusion goals have been met and they seek to maintain the positive impacts of UCS long-term. It is also recommended that SO consider a new implementation level/model that older UCS schools can strive for, perhaps before applying for National Banner Recognition. This new model could consider the number of UCS activities implemented in addition to the number of core experiences, or could take into account the length of time a school has been implementing UCS at the Full-implementation level.

Connect more school UCS programs with more community SO programs so students in UCS schools have expanded, long-term opportunities to participate in inclusive activities and liaisons and Unified Sports coaches have expanded, long-term support and resource networks.

Recent annual evaluation findings underscore the importance of a support network for UCS implementation that is both broad and deep. The 2021-22 findings in particular emphasize the positive benefits for implementation and impact that liaisons and school staff observed for UCS when there was overlap in students participating in both the school UCS program and the community SO program and adults involved in both. By bridging the existing support networks of school UCS programs with those of community SO programs, each program can have increased access to volunteers and support with program implementation, while providing more opportunities for sports participation as students age out of high school. It is therefore recommended that SO support State SO Programs to be more deliberate in connecting the leaders of school UCS programs with nearby leaders of community SO programs to facilitate the development of these school-community partnerships. In alignment with the first recommendation on training and technical assistance, schools should be deliberately connected to the local community SO program when they first begin implementing UCS. This could be done through 1:1 meetings facilitated by the State SO Program, larger group info sessions held in a school district where parents and community businesses are also welcome, or something like a Special Olympics community fair to showcase all the programming options available in an area or region. Deliberate connections between school UCS programs and community SO programs may, in turn, also help bring Unified Sports (or other inclusive activities the school implements) outside school walls and into the community. With so many UCS schools already implementing Unified Sports, this particular UCS activity could be the key to developing more and stronger school-community partnerships.

Support all UCS schools by identifying better practices for UCS implementation and training and technical assistance in UCS city schools, as what benefits UCS schools in urban locales benefits all UCS schools.

Urban UCS schools have been a focal point of the annual evaluation for close to a decade. Over the years the findings have demonstrated that the same implementation challenges exist across a variety of UCS school locales, but schools in cities often face different manifestations of those challenges or do not have the same solutions available as schools in rural or suburban locales. When UCS city schools have overcome implementation challenges the emphasis has largely been on finding the best and most effective ways to use and repurpose the resources they already

had available. Therefore, it is recommended that SO create resources that help new UCS schools, in any locale, identify the physical, monetary, and other resources that they already have available and be supported to plan more intentionally about how to use them for UCS implementation. This could be a checklist, rubric, or self-assessment to help schools audit their resources, supports, and sustainability plans at the outset of implementation. For example, if the school does not have access to a safe track for Unified Track and Field, and can identify this early on, they can be supported to implement a different Unified Sports team or a different Unified Sports activity altogether. This would help UCS city schools make the most of the limited resources they have available from the beginning, when challenges might be more likely to manifest, but it would also help all UCS schools maximize their resources for short and long-term sustainability. By creating additional implementation resources that provide schools with the ability to identify gaps in resources and ideas about how to work around them while emphasizing existing possibilities, SO can better support UCS city schools, or any UCS school, to navigate implementation challenges more successfully.

Appendix A: 2021-22 Evaluation Data Tables

Table 1. Liaison demographics.

Demographic Characteristics	Percent of Liaisons¹ (n = 4237)
Liaison for more than one school	17%
Position within school	
Special Education Teacher	48%
Administrator	7%
Athletic Director	4%
District Coordinator	3%
Physical Education Teacher	7%
General Education Teacher	5%
Adapted Physical Education Teacher	6%
Special Education Aide	3%
Special Education Services Provider	2%
School Psychologist/Counselor/Social Worker	2%
Other position not specified	11%
Number of years as liaison	
1 year or less	30%
2-3 years	33%
4-6 years	23%
7-10 years	9%
10 or more years	5%

¹Exact sample may vary between variables based on data availability, such as if a liaison skipped the question.

Table 2. UCS Liaison Survey response rate, by State Program.

State Program	Surveys Completed ¹	Completion Rate
Alaska	31	43%
Arizona	113	80%
Arkansas	45	25%
Colorado	114	27%
Connecticut	58	71%
Delaware	28	80%
District of Columbia	23	45%
Florida	268	83%
Georgia	46	76%
Hawaii	29	43%
Idaho	10	45%
Illinois	153	69%
Iowa	106	99%
Kansas	57	88%
Kentucky	35	74%
Louisiana	61	23%
Maine	58	52%
Maryland	89	85%
Massachusetts	145	68%
Michigan	259	96%
Minnesota	128	77%
Missouri	25	24%
Montana	79	96%
Nebraska	125	60%
Nevada	36	42%
New Hampshire	43	54%
New Jersey	164	86%
New Mexico	33	100%
New York	39	48%
North Carolina	348	63%
Northern California	102	41%
Oklahoma	69	90%
Oregon	43	78%
Pennsylvania	233	92%
Puerto Rico	6	38%
Rhode Island	50	78%
South Carolina	218	84%
South Dakota	27	50%
Southern California	57	92%
Tennessee	36	82%
Texas	257	68%
Utah	23	49%
Vermont	18	39%
Virginia	88	51%
Washington	86	79%
West Virginia	7	64%
Wisconsin	59	84%

² Surveys completed takes into account only liaisons who satisfactorily completed the survey. Partial responses were not counted.

Table 3. School level, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys ¹	Elementary ²	Middle	High	Other
Alaska	31	10 (33%)	5 (17%)	13 (43%)	2 (7%)
Arizona	113	29 (27%)	14 (13%)	62 (57%)	3 (3%)
Arkansas	45	13 (30%)	11 (25%)	18 (41%)	2 (4%)
Colorado	114	65 (60%)	17 (16%)	26 (24%)	0 (0%)
Connecticut	58	6 (10%)	27 (47%)	24 (41%)	1 (2%)
Delaware	28	7 (25%)	5 (18%)	13 (46%)	3 (11%)
District of Columbia	23	9 (53%)	0 (0%)	8 (47%)	0 (0%)
Florida	268	104 (39%)	52 (20%)	95 (36%)	14 (5%)
Georgia	46	17 (42%)	9 (12%)	14 (34%)	1 (2%)
Hawaii	29	10 (35%)	3 (10%)	16 (55%)	0 (0%)
Idaho	10	1 (9%)	1 (9%)	9 (82%)	0 (0%)
Illinois	153	58 (38%)	29 (19%)	63 (41%)	3 (2%)
Iowa	106	41 (39%)	27 (25%)	35 (33%)	3 (3%)
Kansas	57	5 (9%)	5 (9%)	45 (82%)	0 (0%)
Kentucky	35	9 (26%)	5 (14%)	21 (60%)	0 (0%)
Louisiana	61	31 (51%)	11 (18%)	14 (23%)	5 (8%)
Maine	58	3 (5%)	13 (22%)	40 (68%)	3 (5%)
Maryland	89	50 (58%)	0 (0%)	35 (41%)	1 (1%)
Massachusetts	145	38 (26%)	21 (14%)	85 (57%)	4 (3%)
Michigan	259	119 (46%)	37 (14%)	83 (32%)	19 (8%)
Minnesota	128	24 (19%)	38 (29%)	65 (50%)	2 (2%)
Missouri	25	5 (20%)	3 (12%)	17 (68%)	0 (0%)
Montana	79	37 (51%)	16 (22%)	20 (27%)	0 (0%)
Nebraska	125	66 (55%)	14 (12%)	39 (33%)	0 (0%)
Nevada	36	14 (39%)	9 (25%)	12 (33%)	1 (3%)
New Hampshire	43	3 (6%)	9 (21%)	23 (52%)	9 (21%)
New Jersey	164	43 (26%)	45 (28%)	74 (45%)	1 (1%)
New Mexico	33	15 (47%)	8 (25%)	9 (28%)	0 (0%)
New York	39	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	39 (98%)	1 (2%)
North Carolina	348	123 (37%)	85 (25%)	121 (36%)	8 (2%)
Northern California	102	41 (38%)	20 (18%)	43 (40%)	4 (4%)
Oklahoma	69	11 (17%)	19 (29%)	36 (54%)	0 (0%)
Oregon	43	2 (5%)	10 (23%)	31 (72%)	0 (0%)
Pennsylvania	233	14 (6%)	12 (5%)	203 (88%)	3 (1%)
Puerto Rico	6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Rhode Island	50	18 (35%)	13 (26%)	19 (37%)	1 (2%)
South Carolina	218	97 (45%)	54 (25%)	63 (29%)	3 (1%)
South Dakota	27	6 (22%)	6 (22%)	15 (56%)	0 (0%)
Southern California	57	17 (29%)	9 (15%)	33 (56%)	0 (0%)
Tennessee	36	4 (11%)	7 (20%)	23 (66%)	1 (3%)
Texas	257	91 (36%)	66 (26%)	93 (37%)	4 (1%)
Utah	23	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	20 (77%)	2 (8%)
Vermont	18	2 (12%)	3 (17%)	10 (59%)	2 (12%)
Virginia	88	28 (32%)	21 (24%)	38 (43%)	1 (1%)
Washington	86	16 (20%)	6 (7%)	57 (70%)	2 (3%)
West Virginia	7	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)	0 (0%)
Wisconsin	59	18 (31%)	15 (25%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
ALL	4127	1323 (32%)	781 (19%)	1854 (45%)	110 (3%)

¹The number of schools at each school level, when totaled, may not equal the number of completed surveys due to partially completed surveys, which were retained in the dataset for analysis when possible, or missing school level information from NCES.

²Preschool/kindergarten level schools were combined with elementary schools.

Table 4. Demographics of schools in the 2021-22 evaluation.

Variable	Percentage of schools¹
Locale	
Urban	28%
Suburban	37%
Town	12%
Rural	23%
New to UCS this year²	22%
Title I	63%
Title I School Wide	46%
School Level	
Elementary	32%
Middle	19%
High	46%
Other	3%
Student Enrollment³	
<500	30%
501-1000	38%
1001-1500	15%
>1500	17%
Students with ID	
0-10	30%
11-20	30%
21-30	16%
31-50	13%
51-100	7%
More than 100	4%
Students receiving free/reduced lunch	
0%-25%	23%
26%-50%	34%
51%-75%	23%
76%-100%	20%
Students of racial/ethnic minority	
0%-25%	34%
26%-50%	28%
51%-75%	19%
76%-100%	19%
Education Mode³	
In-person	88%
Hybrid	12%
Virtual	<1%

¹ Note: Percentages in table may not add to 100% due to “other” responses.

² Data on “new” schools is based on liaison reports, which may be inaccurate. Inaccurate liaison reports may be due to liaison turnover or misunderstanding the question.

³ Reflects the primary education model reported by liaisons; the school may not have operated under this model for the entire year.

Table 5. UCS activities, by implementation level.

Activity¹	Full- implementation Unified Schools n = 2173	Developing Unified Schools n = 1048	Emerging Unified Schools n = 1021
Unified Sports programs	100%	100%	33%
Unified Sports team	66%	48%	12%
Unified PE	66%	59%	18%
Young Athletes ²	20%	21%	8%
Unified eSports	9%	4%	1%
Unified Fitness	28%	19%	4%
Unified Developmental Sports	21%	14%	3%
Inclusive Youth Leadership	100%	19%	24%
Unified Club	72%	10%	17%
Leadership Training/Class	44%	6%	7%
Young Athletes Volunteers	33%	6%	5%
Youth Summit	22%	2%	1%
Youth Activation Committee	12%	1%	1%
Whole School Engagement	100%	81%	41%
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	83%	54%	34%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Rally	46%	24%	6%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	37%	27%	10%
Fundraising	46%	19%	12%
SO Play/Performance	12%	7%	3%
Unified Fitness Challenge	23%	13%	3%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experiences.

² Because Young Athletes is a program for children ages 2 to 7, the “Young Athletes” row only includes responses from preschool, prekindergarten, and elementary schools.

Table 6. Level of UCS implementation, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys	Full-implementation Unified Schools ¹	Developing Unified Schools ²	Emerging Unified Schools ³
Alaska	31	29%	19%	52%
Arizona	113	50%	28%	22%
Arkansas	45	46%	12%	42%
Colorado	114	35%	34%	31%
Connecticut	58	66%	24%	10%
Delaware	28	68%	32%	0%
District of Columbia	23	43%	35%	22%
Florida	268	66%	19%	15%
Georgia	46	59%	19%	22%
Hawaii	29	55%	4%	41%
Idaho	10	36%	55%	9%
Illinois	153	53%	27%	20%
Iowa	106	44%	24%	32%
Kansas	57	68%	14%	18%
Kentucky	35	51%	26%	23%
Louisiana	61	28%	42%	30%
Maine	58	37%	39%	24%
Maryland	89	26%	41%	33%
Massachusetts	145	78%	19%	3%
Michigan	259	46%	27%	27%
Minnesota	128	42%	18%	40%
Missouri	25	36%	32%	32%
Montana	79	52%	28%	20%
Nebraska	125	42%	35%	23%
Nevada	36	35%	32%	33%
New Hampshire	43	43%	32%	25%
New Jersey	164	62%	17%	21%
New Mexico	33	42%	40%	18%
New York	39	73%	15%	12%
North Carolina	348	35%	22%	43%
Northern California	102	41%	29%	30%
Oklahoma	69	78%	12%	10%
Oregon	43	51%	21%	28%
Pennsylvania	233	77%	17%	6%
Puerto Rico	6	67%	33%	0%
Rhode Island	50	51%	43%	6%
South Carolina	218	47%	24%	29%
South Dakota	27	48%	37%	15%
Southern California	57	85%	10%	5%
Tennessee	36	81%	11%	8%
Texas	257	50%	25%	25%
Utah	23	50%	38%	12%
Vermont	18	33%	29%	39%
Virginia	88	41%	32%	27%
Washington	86	32%	35%	33%
West Virginia	7	72%	14%	14%
Wisconsin	59	57%	21%	22%
ALL	4127	51%	25%	24%

¹ Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools implemented 3 core experiences.

² Developing Unified Champion Schools implemented 2 core experiences (one of which had to be Unified Sports).

³ Emerging Unified Champion Schools implemented either 2 core experiences (neither of which was Unified Sports) or just 1 core experience.

Table 7. Percentage of schools implementing each activity as part of UCS, by State Program.¹

State Program	Completed Surveys	Unified Sports program	Unified Sports team	Unified PE	Unified Fitness	Unified eSports	Young Athletes ²	Unified Developmental Sports ³
Alaska	31	68%	39%	39%	23%	16%	10%	7%
Arizona	113	83%	56%	63%	16%	12%	22%	5%
Arkansas	45	69%	42%	38%	13%	4%	19%	21%
Colorado	114	88%	32%	30%	3%	3%	50%	7%
Connecticut	58	97%	90%	61%	17%	5%	9%	10%
Delaware	28	100%	86%	36%	18%	7%	29%	25%
District of Columbia	23	91%	30%	61%	39%	9%	48%	17%
Florida	268	87%	49%	47%	21%	6%	31%	30%
Georgia	46	80%	48%	48%	26%	11%	35%	28%
Hawaii	29	69%	41%	41%	28%	3%	3%	10%
Idaho	10	91%	64%	46%	18%	0%	0%	0%
Illinois	153	87%	38%	64%	18%	8%	26%	8%
Iowa	106	70%	39%	51%	13%	3%	20%	13%
Kansas	57	88%	72%	42%	21%	2%	2%	11%
Kentucky	35	80%	69%	49%	14%	3%	3%	6%
Louisiana	61	81%	30%	77%	31%	2%	19%	23%
Maine	58	93%	92%	34%	14%	0%	0%	7%
Maryland	89	93%	43%	49%	12%	0%	52%	0%
Massachusetts	145	98%	66%	66%	26%	3%	20%	16%
Michigan	259	85%	29%	43%	45%	2%	14%	23%
Minnesota	128	70%	43%	51%	12%	2%	5%	5%
Missouri	25	76%	32%	48%	28%	4%	12%	12%
Montana	79	90%	47%	66%	20%	8%	23%	13%
Nebraska	125	83%	44%	51%	16%	2%	16%	19%
Nevada	36	73%	38%	57%	24%	8%	5%	24%
New Hampshire	43	86%	82%	64%	18%	9%	5%	16%
New Jersey	164	83%	51%	46%	15%	13%	10%	11%
New Mexico	33	85%	58%	46%	21%	6%	15%	30%
New York	39	93%	88%	50%	25%	8%	10%	18%
North Carolina	348	71%	22%	51%	23%	5%	17%	11%
Northern California	102	77%	45%	50%	19%	3%	10%	14%
Oklahoma	69	91%	83%	52%	23%	35%	17%	19%
Oregon	43	93%	74%	56%	14%	5%	2%	5%
Pennsylvania	233	96%	90%	50%	17%	3%	5%	7%
Puerto Rico	6	100%	100%	67%	33%	50%	50%	100%
Rhode Island	50	100%	71%	67%	14%	0%	14%	18%
South Carolina	218	74%	28%	56%	21%	5%	8%	22%
South Dakota	27	85%	48%	59%	15%	4%	15%	15%
Southern California	57	95%	59%	63%	20%	9%	19%	14%
Tennessee	36	92%	72%	61%	19%	11%	17%	19%
Texas	257	83%	36%	66%	16%	5%	16%	24%
Utah	23	86%	73%	46%	15%	0%	0%	4%
Vermont	18	94%	89%	33%	28%	17%	0%	6%
Virginia	88	82%	48%	43%	21%	6%	14%	3%
Washington	86	94%	64%	50%	16%	7%	23%	9%
West Virginia	7	86%	43%	86%	14%	0%	0%	0%
Wisconsin	59	83%	20%	52%	23%	0%	17%	22%
ALL	4127	84%	49%	52%	20%	5%	18%	15%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

² The “Young Athletes” column only includes responses from preschool, prekindergarten, and elementary schools.

³ The “Unified Developmental Sports” column only includes responses from elementary and middle schools.

Table 7, Continued. Percentage of schools implementing each activity as part of UCS, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys	Inclusive Youth Leadership	Unified Club	Inclusive Leadership Training/C lass	Young Athletes Volunteers	Youth Summit	Youth Activation Committee
Alaska	31	39%	32%	19%	7%	3%	3%
Arizona	113	56%	44%	19%	18%	12%	11%
Arkansas	45	56%	46%	17%	21%	4%	10%
Colorado	114	43%	18%	17%	21%	5%	4%
Connecticut	58	75%	56%	27%	9%	36%	7%
Delaware	28	68%	54%	25%	32%	7%	0%
District of Columbia	23	48%	22%	22%	17%	13%	4%
Florida	268	71%	49%	26%	31%	12%	1%
Georgia	46	74%	59%	30%	35%	4%	4%
Hawaii	29	62%	45%	17%	14%	3%	17%
Idaho	10	46%	46%	27%	9%	0%	0%
Illinois	153	63%	41%	26%	22%	25%	12%
Iowa	106	57%	33%	22%	22%	8%	0%
Kansas	57	72%	37%	47%	21%	23%	11%
Kentucky	35	57%	54%	23%	0%	0%	0%
Louisiana	61	33%	27%	11%	14%	2%	2%
Maine	58	44%	31%	12%	15%	5%	3%
Maryland	89	32%	18%	16%	15%	7%	1%
Massachusetts	145	82%	49%	32%	30%	17%	9%
Michigan	259	58%	36%	27%	13%	5%	16%
Minnesota	128	65%	57%	25%	12%	11%	12%
Missouri	25	48%	20%	32%	24%	4%	0%
Montana	79	60%	38%	34%	20%	4%	5%
Nebraska	125	48%	29%	27%	13%	6%	5%
Nevada	36	46%	19%	27%	30%	3%	0%
New Hampshire	43	55%	43%	11%	21%	2%	11%
New Jersey	164	86%	79%	29%	16%	15%	4%
New Mexico	33	49%	36%	21%	21%	0%	3%
New York	39	85%	35%	38%	15%	60%	60%
North Carolina	348	49%	35%	17%	17%	3%	4%
Northern California	102	51%	28%	30%	22%	3%	5%
Oklahoma	69	83%	65%	44%	30%	38%	16%
Oregon	43	61%	35%	37%	5%	33%	0%
Pennsylvania	233	83%	72%	32%	12%	55%	5%
Puerto Rico	6	83%	83%	67%	17%	50%	50%
Rhode Island	50	55%	35%	26%	22%	4%	4%
South Carolina	218	60%	43%	31%	24%	8%	7%
South Dakota	27	52%	26%	19%	26%	0%	0%
Southern California	57	92%	73%	39%	27%	7%	0%
Tennessee	36	86%	72%	44%	22%	11%	11%
Texas	257	63%	44%	26%	27%	3%	3%
Utah	23	58%	27%	19%	23%	19%	27%
Vermont	18	56%	44%	22%	6%	6%	0%
Virginia	88	51%	41%	19%	18%	7%	4%
Washington	86	52%	33%	23%	11%	7%	6%
West Virginia	7	100%	57%	43%	29%	0%	0%
Wisconsin	59	75%	55%	23%	18%	7%	2%
ALL	4127	62%	43%	26%	20%	12%	6%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

Table 7, Continued. Percentage of schools implementing each activity as part of UCS, by State Program.

State Program	Completed Surveys ¹	Whole School Engagement	Spread the Word Campaign	Fans in the Stands	Unified Sports Day/Festival	Fund-raising Events	SO Play/Performance	Unified Fitness Challenge
Alaska	31	58%	42%	10%	7%	26%	3%	23%
Arizona	113	79%	65%	32%	29%	35%	15%	10%
Arkansas	45	77%	67%	33%	23%	42%	15%	8%
Colorado	114	66%	51%	18%	25%	15%	6%	3%
Connecticut	58	85%	63%	48%	29%	46%	10%	19%
Delaware	28	100%	100%	36%	21%	75%	0%	18%
District of Columbia	23	74%	57%	17%	22%	9%	22%	30%
Florida	268	96%	93%	24%	35%	13%	15%	19%
Georgia	46	89%	74%	37%	52%	15%	9%	24%
Hawaii	29	72%	62%	10%	10%	14%	7%	31%
Idaho	10	82%	55%	46%	36%	36%	9%	9%
Illinois	153	87%	78%	28%	24%	41%	5%	10%
Iowa	106	96%	92%	18%	30%	26%	5%	13%
Kansas	57	91%	83%	23%	5%	23%	2%	30%
Kentucky	35	94%	91%	11%	17%	29%	3%	11%
Louisiana	61	69%	41%	22%	48%	5%	30%	20%
Maine	58	73%	32%	63%	15%	15%	3%	5%
Maryland	89	62%	39%	19%	25%	23%	3%	15%
Massachusetts	145	96%	71%	58%	46%	38%	8%	17%
Michigan	259	79%	61%	14%	32%	17%	2%	11%
Minnesota	128	78%	61%	19%	19%	50%	7%	5%
Missouri	25	84%	28%	28%	32%	56%	4%	12%
Montana	79	87%	73%	38%	23%	49%	0%	15
Nebraska	125	83%	70%	27%	22%	25%	6%	21%
Nevada	36	84%	60%	27%	41%	16%	14%	30%
New Hampshire	43	80%	30%	39%	14%	64%	2%	7%
New Jersey	164	84%	77%	27%	27%	52%	6%	11%
New Mexico	33	82%	67%	40%	55%	24%	6%	12%
New York	39	88%	60%	53%	25%	60%	13%	28%
North Carolina	348	60%	42%	17%	17%	19%	13%	22%
Northern California	102	73%	53%	33%	29%	14%	12%	25%
Oklahoma	69	88%	54%	65%	19%	61%	9%	10%
Oregon	43	67%	33%	28%	9%	40%	5%	9%
Pennsylvania	233	92%	80%	55%	15%	54%	8%	13%
Puerto Rico	6	83%	83%	0%	50%	17%	33%	33%
Rhode Island	50	90%	65%	63%	33%	39%	2%	14%
South Carolina	218	92%	77%	28%	46%	31%	12%	20%
South Dakota	27	96%	96%	22%	15%	41%	7%	7%
Southern California	57	95%	78%	61%	56%	49%	9%	15%
Tennessee	36	100%	89%	36%	31%	75%	17%	19%
Texas	257	80%	48%	35%	38%	25%	11%	19%
Utah	23	89%	81%	46%	27%	27%	7%	12%
Vermont	18	44%	22%	22%	6%	28%	6%	6%
Virginia	88	80%	65%	36%	29%	28%	10%	12%
Washington	86	51%	27%	28%	13%	14%	2%	10%
West Virginia	7	86%	86%	14%	43%	14%	0%	14%
Wisconsin	59	73%	57%	32%	23%	40%	3%	17%
ALL	4127	82%	64%	31%	28%	31%	9%	16%

¹ Activity percentages are calculated out of *all* schools in the analysis sample, rather than out of only schools participating in the overall core experience.

Table 8. Liaison awareness, use, and perceived helpfulness of UCS implementation resources.

Resource	Aware of resource¹	Used resource²	Usefulness (“very useful”)³
Elementary School Playbook	48%	33%	67%
Middle Level Playbook	42%	25%	60%
High School Playbook	49%	38%	58%
State Program Playbook	49%	29%	68%
SO Fitness Guide for Schools	44%	21%	70%
Unified Physical Education Resources	44%	34%	73%
SO Young Athletes Activity Guide	42%	36%	77%
Inclusive Youth Leadership Training: Facilitator Guide	36%	15%	69%
Planning and Hosting a Youth Leadership Experience	26%	6%	87%
Generation Unified Website	38%	n/a	n/a
Unified Classroom lessons and activities	55%	40%	73%
Generation Unified YouTube channel or Generation Unified videos	68%	37%	74%
Inclusion Tiles activity or Inclusion Tiles Facilitator Guide	72%	28%	67%

¹Percentage of liaisons aware of each resource is out of the total sample of liaisons.

²Percentage of liaisons that used each resource is out of the number of liaisons who indicated awareness of that resource.

³Liaisons were only asked how useful a resource was if they first indicated they had used it.

Table 9. Number of transcripts in the qualitative archive, by key archive variables.

Number of Transcripts

(n = 1,793)	
Participants	
Administrator	115
Liaison/Coach/Special Education Teacher*	415
General Education Teacher	120
Parent	153
Student w ID	490
Student w/o ID	414
Other	64
Evaluation Year	
(Y2) 2009-10	44
(Y3) 2010-11	1
(Y4) 2011-12	10
(Y5) 2012-13	136
(Y6) 2013-14	185
(Y7) 2014-15	225
(Y8) 2015-16	180
(Y9) 2016-17	117
(Y10) 2017-18	82
(Y11) 2018-19	296
(Y12) 2019-20	168
(Y13) 2020-21	13
(Y14) 2021-22	158
SO Texas, 2021-22	157
School Level	
Elementary School	122
High School	1370
Middle School	187
Other	93
School Locale	
City	172
Rural	349
Suburb	775
Town	196
Implementation Level**	
Emerging	164
Developing	209
Full implementation	1103
Unidentified	16
Leadership Team**	
No	727
Yes	733
Unidentified	32

* Due to the high level of overlap among these roles (for example one participant can hold all three roles), they have been combined into one group for analyses.

** This data comes from the latest year of UCS Liaison Survey data available for the school each participant is from.

Table 10. Number of transcripts from UCS city schools, by key archive variables.

Number of Transcripts (n = 182)	
Participants	
Administrator	16
Liaison/Coach/Special Education Teacher*	71
General Education Teacher	2
Parent	9
Student w ID	40
Student w/o ID	41
Evaluation Year	
(Y2) 2009-10	12
(Y3) 2010-11	0
(Y4) 2011-12	5
(Y5) 2012-13	26
(Y6) 2013-14	32
(Y7) 2014-15	23
(Y8) 2015-16	7
(Y9) 2016-17	0
(Y10) 2017-18	0
(Y11) 2018-19	35
(Y12) 2019-20	16
(Y13) 2020-21	4
(Y14) 2021-22	0
SO Texas, 2021-22	22
School Level	
Elementary School	9
High School	142
Middle School	30
Implementation Level**	
Emerging	13
Developing	26
Full implementation	141
Unidentified	2
Leadership Team**	
No	83
Yes	89
Unidentified	10

* Due to the high level of overlap among these roles (for example one participant can hold all three roles), they have been combined into one group for analyses.

** This data comes from the latest year of UCS Liaison Survey data available for the school each participant is from.

Appendix B: Special Olympics Guidelines

SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities affecting system-wide change. With sports as the foundation, the three-component model offers a unique combination of activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classrooms, and school climates of acceptance. These are school climates where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities, opportunities, and functions.

UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS CORE EXPERIENCES

Unified Sports

A fully-inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities. Examples include such things as Interscholastic Unified Sports, Unified PE, Unified Fitness, or Young Athletes. These activities occur throughout the school year with the support of an adult coach and include opportunities for competition.

Inclusive Youth Leadership

Students with and without intellectual disabilities work to lead awareness, Unified Sports, advocacy, inclusion, and other SO activities throughout the school year. Examples include such things as Unified Clubs, Young Athletes Volunteers, or similar types of inclusive student groups. The clubs are supported by an adult liaison and offer leadership opportunities and/or training for students with and without disabilities. Youth leadership may also include participation in state-, regional-, or national-level inclusive youth leadership trainings, events, or conferences.

Whole School Engagement

These awareness and education activities promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population. Examples include such things as Spread the Word to End the Word (R-word)/Respect Campaigns, Pep Rallies/"Fans in the Stands" for Unified Sports teams, or student fundraising. Ideally students with and without disabilities are involved with planning and leading awareness events with the support of an adult in the school.

FULL-IMPLEMENTATION UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOL

These schools implement activities from all three Unified Champion Schools core experiences (Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, Whole School Engagement). Through various levels of intensity, the combination of the three core experiences creates the maximum impact within a school.

DEVELOPING UNIFIED SCHOOL

These schools are on their way to becoming full-implementation Unified Champion Schools. Developing Unified schools implement activities from two out of three core experiences (Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, Whole School Engagement), and Unified Sports must be one of the two experiences implemented. These schools are expected to become Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools within three years.

EMERGING UNIFIED SCHOOL

These schools implement activities from just one core experience, or the Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole School Engagement experiences but not the Unified Sports experience. Emerging Unified schools are expected to typically be in their first year of UCS implementation.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION PROGRAM

National Banner Schools are nationally recognized for having exemplary Unified Champion Schools programs. To be recognized as a National Banner School, schools must meet ten criteria, differing slightly by school type (elementary school, middle school, high school, or college). Among these criteria, schools must implement Unified Sports or Young Athletes throughout the school year. These Unified sporting activities must be recognized by the school at the same level as other school activities and coached by an adult who has received SO Unified Sports training. These schools must also implement Inclusive Youth Leadership with a Unified Club that meets regularly throughout the year and is supervised by an adult liaison, similar to other school activities. The Inclusive Youth Leadership program must give leadership opportunities to both students with and without ID. National Banner Schools must also implement two Whole School Engagement activities per year that are planned by both students with and without ID. Finally, National Banner Schools must be self-sustainable or have a plan in place to sustain each of the three components in the future.

Schools must apply to become a National Banner School, demonstrating that they meet each of the above criteria. Schools must reapply every four years to maintain the National Banner School title. The 2022 class of National Banner Unified Champion Schools included 166 schools. To date, there have been 683 schools recognized.

UNIFIED SPORTS TEAM MODELS

Competitive

The Unified Sports Competitive model combines Athletes (individuals with ID) and Partners (individuals without ID) as teammates on sport teams for training and competition. Two things differentiate the Competitive Unified Sports model from the other two models: 1) all Athletes and Partners on a Unified Sports Competitive team must have attained the necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current SO Official Sports Rules;⁸ and 2) teams that participate in this model may be eligible for advancement to Regional and World Games. A Unified Sports team is an inclusive sports program with approximately equal numbers of Athletes and Partners.

⁸ SO Official Sports Rules: https://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/general/Sports-Rules-Article-1-2017.pdf?_ga=2.128522444.1795695031.1544735922-1605599380.1544735922

Player Development

The Unified Sports Player Development model combines approximately equal numbers of Athletes and Partners as teammates on sports teams for training and competition. What differentiates Unified Sports Player Development from the other two models is: 1) teammates are not required to be of similar abilities, and 2) teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics and in successfully participating in a cooperative team environment.

Recreation

Unified Sports Recreation consists of inclusive recreational sports opportunities for SO Athletes and Partners. This model does not follow any prescribed training, competition, or team composition requirements established by SO. These recreational opportunities may take place in partnership with schools, sport clubs, the community, and other private or public organizations as introductory one-day events, exhibitions or demonstrations (including Unified Sports Experiences), or ongoing activities such as physical education classes and intramurals.

UNIFIED FITNESS

Unified Fitness, and the associated *SO Fitness Guide for Schools*, was officially introduced as a component of SO and the UCS program in the summer of 2019. Unified Fitness marks the first intentional Unified Sports activity option that both keeps students physically active and teaches them about their overall health/wellness. Unified Fitness can be implemented using three models:

- Fit Families & Friends – A six-week fitness and wellness challenge. Participants set physical activity and nutrition goals and track their progress with encouragement from their Fit Families & Friends team.
- Unified Fitness Club – A year-round program that meets weekly and is based around one main physical activity (e.g., walking, hiking, yoga, etc.). The club members earn incentives through tracking their progress.
- SOFit – An eight-week holistic health education class combining four pillars of wellness: physical, nutritional, emotional, and social.

In conjunction with any of the models, schools are also encouraged to use Fit 5, a resource guide based on three fitness goals: exercising five times per week, eating five total fruits and vegetables per day, and drinking five bottles of water per day. The Fit 5 guide also provides schools with fitness cards and videos that offer exercises to challenge all abilities.

Appendix C: WordStat Categorization Dictionary

- Resources
 - Resource*

- Time*
 - People
 - A.D.
 - AD
 - Admin
 - Administrator
 - Athletic Director
 - Coach*
 - Community
 - District
 - Liaison
 - Paraprofessional
 - Para
 - Paras
 - Superintendent*
 - Teacher
 - Family
 - Aunt*
 - Brother*
 - Child
 - Children
 - Cousin*
 - Dad*
 - Daughter*
 - Families
 - Family
 - Father*
 - Grandfather*
 - Grandma*
 - Grandmother
 - Grandpa*
 - Grandparent*
 - Guardian*
 - Mom*
 - Mother*
 - Parent*
 - Sibling*
 - Son
 - Sister*
 - Uncle*
- Space
 - Academic
 - Classroom*
 - Resource room

- Special Education class
- Special Education hallway
- Special education room
- Special education wing
- Special Ed class
- Special Ed hallway
- Special Ed room
- Special Ed wing
- Facilities
- Facility
- Nowhere
- No where
- Place
- Room*
- Safe*
- Space*
- Social
 - Advisory
 - Café
 - Cafeteria
 - Homeroom
 - Lunchroom
 - Lunch room
 - Recess
- Sports
 - Bowling alley*
 - Court*
 - Field*
 - Gym*
 - Gymnasium*
 - Track
- Community
 - Community center*
 - Rec center
 - Recreational center
 - YMCA
 - Youth center
 - Community programs
 - State SO
 - Local SO
 - Local program*
 - County SO
 - County program*

- Community SO
 - Community program*
- Funding
 - Budget*
 - Cash
 - Cents
 - Allocate*
 - Cost*
 - Dollar*
 - Funding
 - Fund
 - Funds
 - Money
 - Pay
 - Paying
 - Payment
 - Spend
 - Compensation
 - Compensation
 - Extra pay
 - Incentive*
 - Paycheck
 - Salary
 - Stipend*
 - Paid
- Transportation
 - Bus
 - Buses
 - Car
 - Carpool*
 - Cars
 - Charter
 - Drive*
 - Driving
 - Dropping off
 - Drop off
 - Getting from
 - Getting there
 - Getting to
 - Get from
 - Get there
 - Get to
 - Pick up
 - Picking up

- Public transportation
 - Ride*
 - Subway*
 - Train
 - Transport
 - Transportation
 - Transporting
 - Travel*
 - Liaison Resources
 - Activity Card*
 - Cards
 - Conference*
 - Guide
 - P.D.
 - PD
 - Playbook*
 - Play book*
 - Workshop*
 - Professional Development
 - Equipment
 - Ball
 - Balls
 - Cleat*
 - Equipment*
 - Gear
 - Jersey
 - Shorts
 - Sneaker*
 - Uniform*
 - Participation
 - Attendance
 - Participate*
 - Student participation
 - Participation*
 - Volunteer*
- Support
 - Administrative help
 - Administrative support
 - Assist
 - Assistance
 - Community assistance
 - Community help
 - Community support*
 - District Assistance
 - District help

- District support*
- Families support*
- Family support*
- Help*
- Help from
- Administrative Assistance
- Leadership Team
- Parental Assistance
- Parental Help
- Parental Support
- Parental Support*
- Parents Support*
- Support*
- Sustainability
 - Continue without
 - Keep going
 - Long-term
 - Long term
 - Longevity
 - Next five years
 - Next ten years
 - Next year
 - Over time
 - Sustain
 - Sustainability
- Challenges
 - Barrier*
 - Challenge*
 - Challenging
 - Difficult
 - Difficulties
 - Difficulty
 - Hard
 - Hurdle
 - Issue
 - Limited
 - Problem*
 - Uphill
 - Struggle*
- Lack of
 - Do not have enough
 - Insufficient
 - Is not enough
 - Lack of
 - Not enough

- Sufficient

Appendix D: Interview Questions Posed to Participants

Alongside the broad framing of the most common words and phrases from participants, the most frequently mentioned topics, and the top five overarching themes, it is important to consider the questions that the evaluation team have asked participants over the years. This is necessary to better understand where the UCS annual evaluation has historically focused its attention and how this might influence the results of the content analysis and qualitative coding processes employed through WordStat and QDA Miner. Using WordStat’s capabilities to only consider text from the interviewer in each transcript, a preliminary content analysis of the questions asked between 2009 and 2022 was conducted. By gaining insight into where the emphasis has been placed in the past (e.g., what topic areas, with which participants), the evaluation team can better plan for future evaluation efforts that add depth and fill in gaps in the qualitative archive and in the field. Moreover, as stated previously, it provides necessary context for the results presented in this report.

For these analyses, because each occurrence of a word was analyzed as a singular occurrence, their frequency illustrates the true scale of how often the evaluation team brought these topics up in interviews. Figure 1 below illustrates the words that occurred most often in interview questions. In order to better illustrate the most common themes from the interview protocols, words with frequencies greater than 10,000 occurrences were removed (words whose incidental use dominated the frequencies of thematic words (e.g., school and student)).

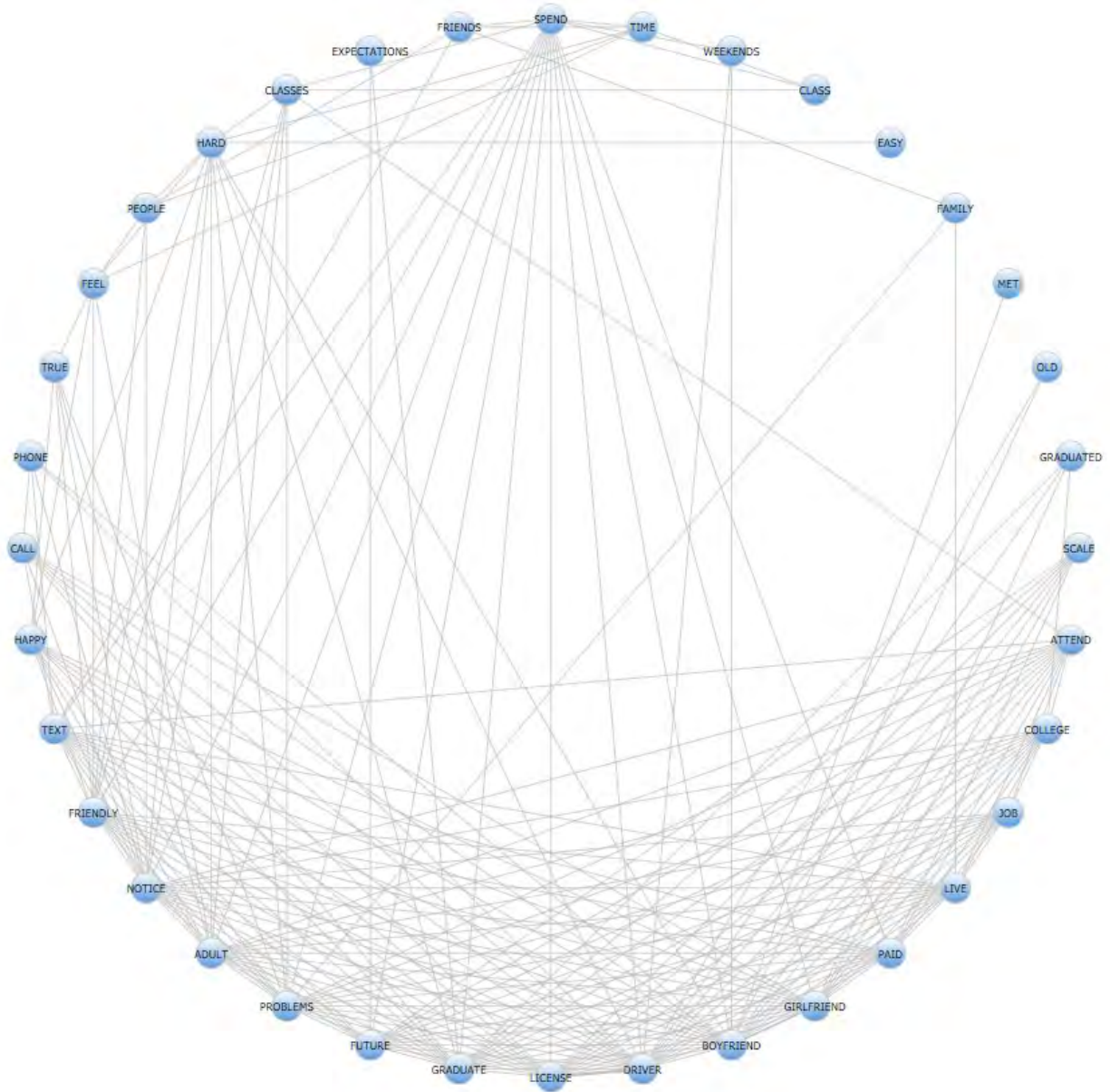
Figure 1. Word cloud representing the words used most often in the questions posed to participants across fourteen years of the UCS annual evaluation



It is clear that one of the words used most often in questions to participants was “friends,” with that and related words totaling a frequency of 13,444 occurrences. The evaluation team regularly asked questions about when and where students spent time with friends, how friendships had formed, and the impact of those friendships on belonging and inclusion. Figure 2 below illustrates the words that the evaluation team used most often when posing questions to participants about friendship. The words that emerge in the cluster below illustrate a broader emphasis on students’ social lives, likely deriving from the annual evaluation’s consistent attempt to paint a picture of students’ social worlds by learning how much time they spent and the things they did with various people in their lives (such as through words like “weekends”

“lunch,” “text,” and “family”) and factors associated with their independence, such as having a driver’s license or going to college. This analysis also revealed that the topic of friendship came up the most in interviews conducted with students with ID, indicating there is a wealth of information about students’ social lives provided by them directly.

Figure 2. Circular chart of words that co-occurred with friendship keywords

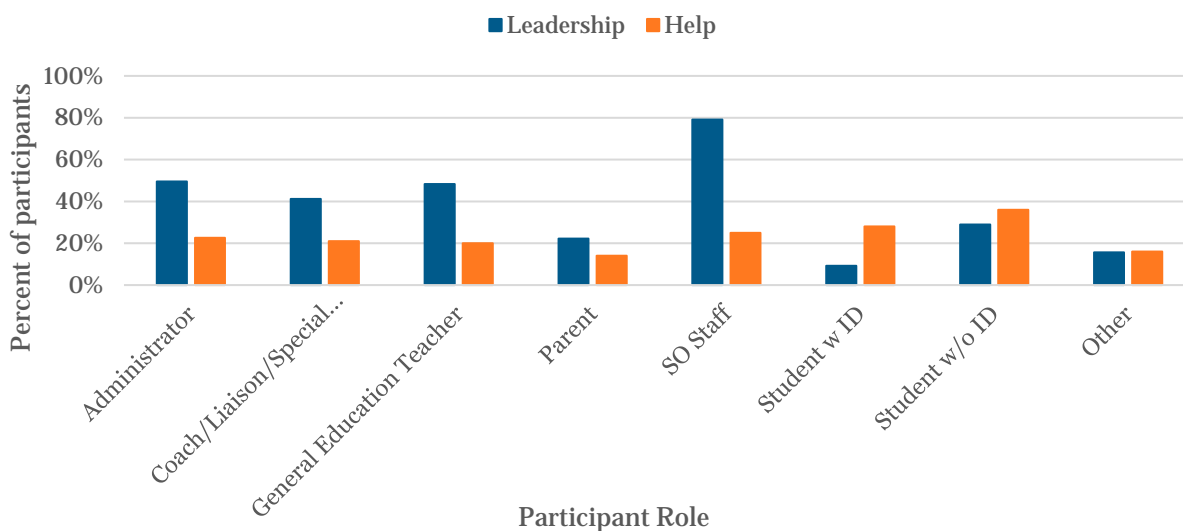


The evaluation team also often asked questions with the word “team” (5,906 word occurrences). For students and parents, this was often to gauge student’s experiences on a Unified Sports team and what the idea of team meant to them. Coaches, liaisons, teachers, and administrators were often asked to reflect on implementation as it pertained to the team and the team’s impact on the school. Questions with the word “team” were often aimed at their experience of implementation during practices and games, how team participation influenced students’ school

experience, and how having a Unified Sports team shaped the school environment. This illustrates the historical focus on the Unified Sports experience as it is a core experience for students participating in UCS. For coaches and administrators.

Another prominent topic that emerged in the question analysis was “leadership” (3,109 word occurrences). Questions with the word “leader(ship)” have historically been about student leadership opportunities (such as through the Inclusive Youth Leadership experience), to gain a sense of how inclusive these opportunities were, and what leadership in the context of UCS activities like Unified Club and Unified Sports looked like. Of all the participant roles, students with ID were asked about leadership the least (aside from parents, who are not well represented in the archive). However, students with ID were asked more often about their role in helping (such as in helping the Unified Sports team; see Figure 3). Further, students with ID were only asked questions about leadership beginning in 2015 whereas students without ID were asked questions about leadership beginning in 2012, indicating that talking to students with ID about leadership experiences and roles is a newer aspect of the evaluation. This indicates that more emphasis could be placed on student leadership in future annual evaluations to continue highlighting this key component of the UCS experience for students with and without ID.

Figure 3. Percent of participants where “leadership” and “help” occurred in questions they were asked



Similarly, questions were often asked about “disability(ies)” (4,830 word occurrences). This word was used in questions seeking to establish a baseline of abilities of an individual or a Unified Sports team among parents or Unified Sports coaches, but also to ask about relationships or perceptions of individuals with disabilities among students without ID. Like “leadership,” the word “disability” (and related words) has not come up often in questions posed to students with ID (see Figure 4). Instead, the evaluation has typically focused on the perceptions and experiences of students without ID toward their peers with ID, and the impacts of UCS for students with disabilities (such as when asked of parents and school staff). This indicates a tendency on the part of the annual evaluation to gather opinions about disability

from those without a disability, rather than centering the experiences of those with disabilities and allowing them to speak about themselves in this way. This emphasizes the importance of seeking out and giving weight to the perspectives of students with ID on who they are, what they have experienced, and how UCS has changed them.

Figure 4. Percent of participants where “disability” occurred in questions they were asked

