



Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools: Year 14 State Program Report 2021-2022 *Special Olympics Connecticut*

Center for Social Development and Education
University of Massachusetts Boston



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I. Executive Summary

Implementation

- This year, a total of 58 liaisons (71%) completed the 2021-22 UCS Liaison Survey in Connecticut.
- Within Connecticut, 66% of schools reported the Full-implementation model, 24% the Developing model, and 10% the Emerging model.
- Schools in Connecticut most frequently reported implementing Unified Sports experiences.

COVID-19

- Despite the ongoing effects of COVID-19, most liaisons reported a return to an in-person modality in Connecticut.
- With this return to in-person education, liaisons also felt that UCS experiences were beginning to rebound. Liaisons in Connecticut reported that implementation had rebounded an average of 75% for Unified Sports, 59% for Inclusive Youth Leadership experiences, and 62% for Whole School Engagement experiences.

Leadership and sustainability

- In 2021-22, 24% of responding liaisons in Connecticut reported that their school had a Leadership Team to support UCS.
- Overall, 79% of responding liaisons reported that they considered UCS self-sustainable at their school.
- As one measure of perceived sustainability, liaisons rated the likelihood that UCS would continue at their school without the involvement of themselves or their State Program. In Connecticut, nearly two-thirds or more of liaisons felt that UCS would be “very” or “somewhat” likely to continue at their school without their direct involvement (74%) or without the involvement of Special Olympics Connecticut (65%).

Implementation Support

- In Connecticut, the majority of liaisons reported that administrators and general education teachers were involved in UCS implementation (81% and 75% respectively), implementation support which they were very or somewhat satisfied with.
- In Connecticut, half of liaisons reported using at least one implementation resource developed by Special Olympics North America. Of the liaisons that used these implementation resources, an overwhelming majority found them somewhat or very useful.

Impact

- In Connecticut, liaisons had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of UCS for students with ID, without ID, and the school as a whole. Of all liaisons in Connecticut, 86% or more rated UCS as “very valuable” to all three groups.

- Liaisons likewise reported largely positive perceptions of UCS influence between specific impact areas, with approximately three-quarters or more of liaisons in Connecticut reporting that UCS made a difference or a big difference in each measured area.

II. Introduction

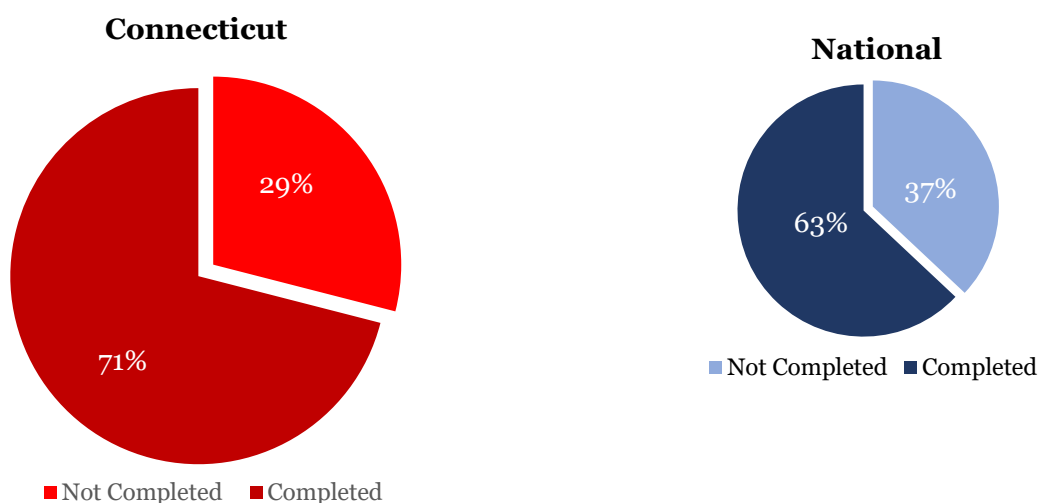
Each year, the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston conducts an evaluation of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS), providing data to Special Olympics North America and the U. S. Department of Education. For over a decade, UCS has been assessed through a comprehensive annual survey of UCS school “liaisons,” the school staff person responsible for overseeing UCS implementation and reporting at each school. Liaisons provide key insights into the implementation and impact of UCS both nationally and on a state-by-state basis.

The following report synthesizes UCS Liaison Survey data from Unified Champion Schools across the 51 participating State Special Olympics Programs in the 2021-22 school year. The purpose of the following report is to provide insight into the implementation of Unified Champion Schools in each state and to provide each State Program with data that can be used to assess its own Unified Champion Schools programming, within the context of your State Program goals and the national context. To that end, this year’s report includes information about school demographics, program implementation, leadership and sustainability, COVID-19 rebounding, implementation support, and program impact.

III. Completion Rate

This year, a total of 58 liaisons (71%) completed the 2021-22 UCS Liaison Survey in Connecticut. This is an average completion rate compared to the national response. See Figure 1 for the UCS Liaison Survey completion rate in Connecticut. The following figure is based on the liaisons that fully completed the survey in Connecticut.

Figure 1. UCS Liaison Survey completion rates in Connecticut



IV. School Characteristics

UCS is implemented at a range of schools across different school levels, sizes, and locations. Table 1 displays the school characteristics of UCS schools as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for all responding UCS schools in Connecticut and nationally.

Table 1. Characteristics of responding UCS schools in 2021-22.

Characteristic	Connecticut (<i>n</i> = 58 ¹)	National (<i>n</i> = 4242 ¹)
School Level		
Elementary	10%	33%
Middle	47%	19%
High	41%	46%
Other	2%	2%
School locale		
Rural	19%	23%
Town	3%	12%
Suburban	75%	37%
Urban	3%	28%
Student Enrollment		
< 500	33%	30%
501-1,000	43%	38%
1,001-1,500	19%	15%
More than 1,500	5%	17%
Students receiving free/reduced lunch		
0%-25%	48%	23%
26%-50%	28%	34%
51%-75%	17%	23%
76%-100%	7%	20%
Students of racial/ethnic minority		
0%-25%	58%	34%
26%-50%	25%	28%
51%-75%	4%	19%
76%-100%	13%	19%

¹ Exact sample sizes may vary based on data availability

V. Program Implementation

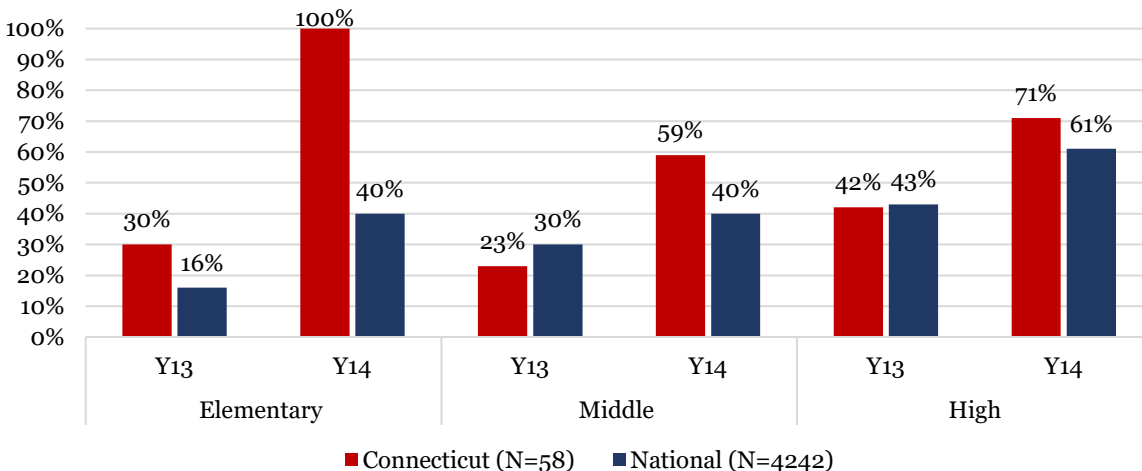
UCS can be implemented at a variety of levels to best suit individual school and student needs and maximize the potential for sustainable participation. Special Olympics categorizes the levels as follows: **Full-implementation** Unified Champion Schools are those that implement at least one activity from all three core experiences, **Developing** Unified Schools implement activities from Unified Sports and one other core experiences, and **Emerging** Unified Schools implement activities from some other combination of core experiences (i.e., two core experiences but not Unified Sports, or fewer than two core experience). While there are benefits for schools and students at all implementation levels, the most impactful model is Full-implementation (Siperstein et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2019). Table 2. illustrates implementation levels among UCS schools in Connecticut and nationally across the past three years of the liaison survey.

Table 2. Implementation levels across time.

	Connecticut			National		
	Year 14 (n=58)	Year 13 (n = 60)	Year 12 (n = 64)	Year 14 (n=4242)	Year 13 (n =3586)	Year 12 (n = 4073)
Full	66%	34%	56%	51%	31%	48%
Emerging	10%	33%	19%	24%	43%	23%
Developing	24%	33%	25%	25%	26%	29%

Nationally, implementation level is strongly associated with school level, with Full-implementation reported at the highest rate among high schools and lower rates among elementary and middle schools. This pattern is not seen in Connecticut. See Figure 2 for full implementation status by school level.

Figure 2. Percent of liaisons reporting Full-implementation status, by school level, 2020-21 (Y13) vs. 2021-22 (Y14).



UCS activities are grouped into three core experiences: Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement. 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 3 for a diagram of the core experiences and their associated activities (based on Special Olympics North America groupings) included in the 2021-22 evaluation. Table 3 illustrates the percentage of schools implementing each core experience, by school level.

Figure 3. UCS core experiences and activities evaluated in 2021-22.

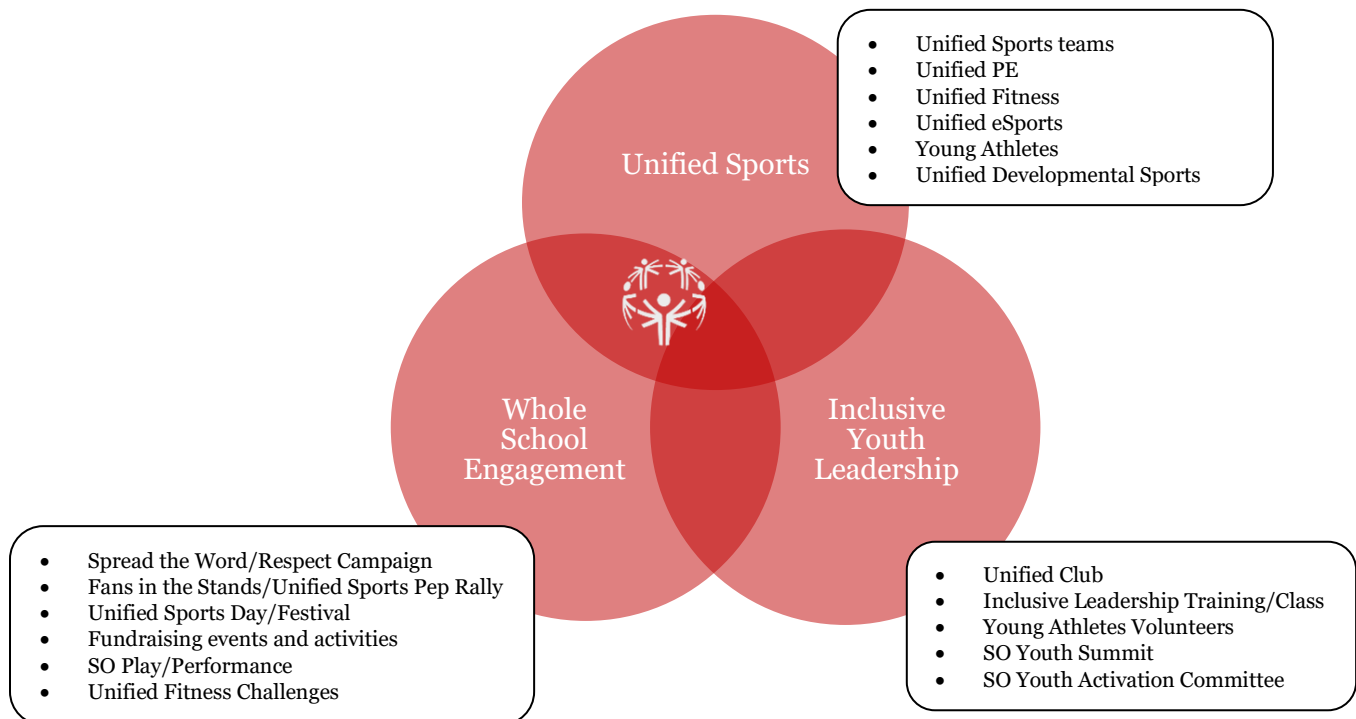


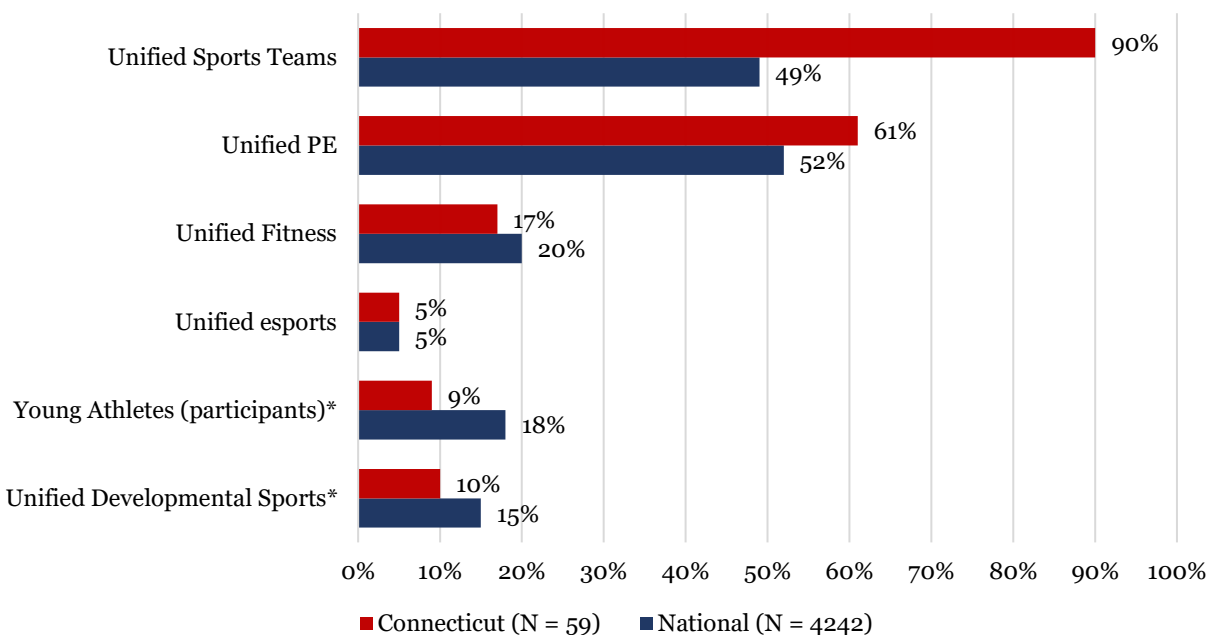
Table 3. Percentage of schools implementing each core UCS experience in Connecticut, by school level.

Core Experience	Connecticut			National		
	Elementary (n = 6)	Middle (n = 27)	High (n = 24)	Elementary (n = 1120)	Middle (n = 669)	High (n = 1580)
Unified Sports	100%	100%	96%	79%	82%	88%
Inclusive Youth Leadership	100%	67%	79%	49%	62%	71%
Whole School Engagement	100%	82%	92%	77%	80%	86%

A. Unified Sports

Unified Sports is a key aspect of UCS implementation and impact. Within this core experience, schools can choose from a range of sport-based activities including Unified Sports teams, Unified PE, Unified Fitness, Unified eSports, Young Athletes, and Unified Developmental Sports. In Connecticut, 97% of liaisons reported implementing at least one Unified Sports activity as part of their UCS programming, relatively higher than the national average (84%). Figure 4 shows the Unified Sports activities that responding liaisons in Connecticut reported implementing at their schools in 2021-22, as well as the national numbers for those same activities.

Figure 4. Percentage of schools implementing each Unified Sports activity.

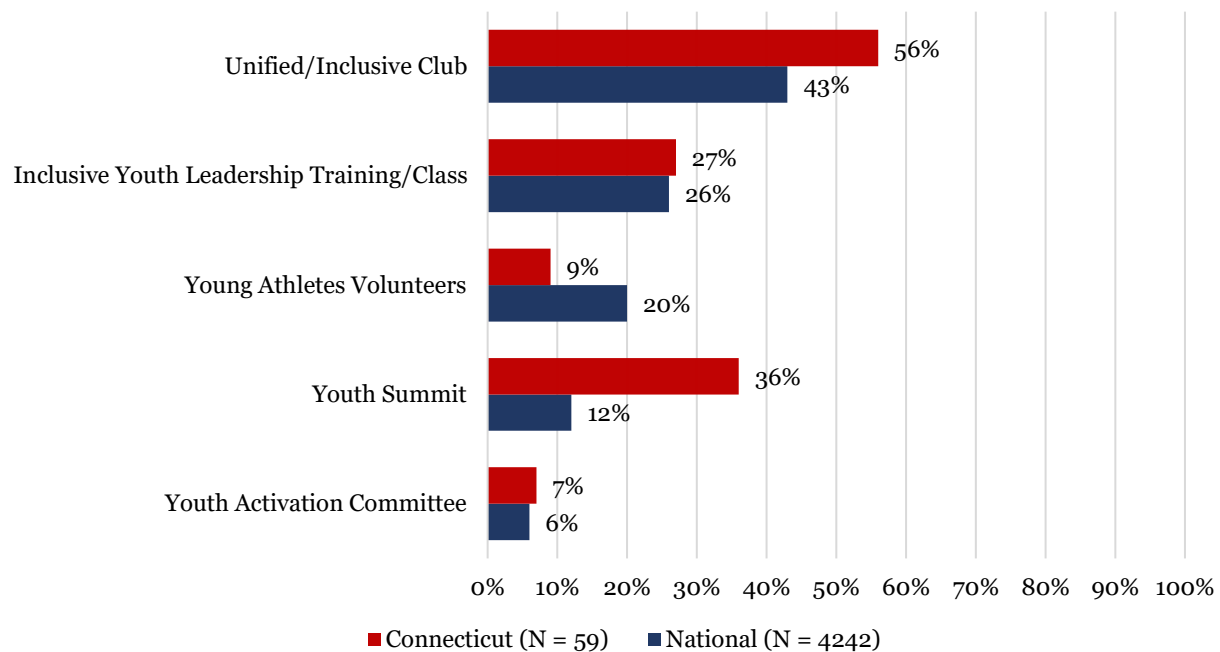


Note: * Young Athletes (participants) and Unified Developmental Sports are only applicable to students and schools at the elementary level. Percentages calculated from this subsample.

B. Inclusive Youth Leadership

The mission of Inclusive Youth Leadership within UCS is to provide all students with access to meaningful leadership opportunities. Similar to the flexible structure of Unified Sports, schools can choose from a range of Inclusive Youth Leadership activities including Unified Club, Inclusive Leadership training/classes, Young Athletes Volunteers, Special Olympics Youth Summit, and Youth Activation Committee. In Connecticut, 75% of liaisons reported implementing at least one Inclusive Youth Leadership activity, compared to 62% nationally. Figure 5 demonstrates the percent of responding liaisons in Connecticut that reported implementing each Inclusive Youth Leadership experience in 2021-22 and the national numbers for those same experiences.

Figure 5. Percentage of schools implementing each Inclusive Youth Leadership activity.



Liaisons who reported that their school implemented a particular activity were also asked to report on leadership opportunities for students with IDD embedded within each Unified Sports and Whole School Engagement activity. Table 4 notes the percentage of liaisons in Connecticut that indicated students with IDD took on leadership roles within specific activities.

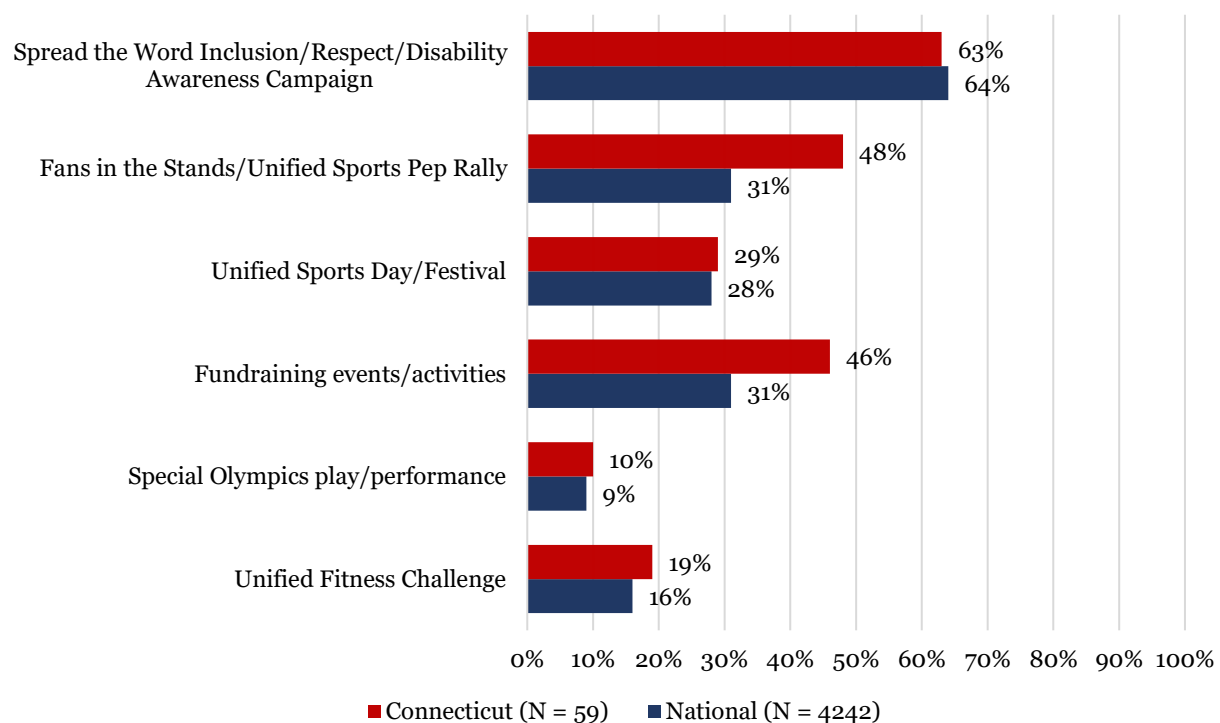
Table 4. Leadership Opportunities for Students with IDD within UCS

Characteristic	Connecticut (n=58)	National (n = 4242)
Unified Sports		
Unified Sports Team	91%	75%
Unified PE	58%	51%
Unified Fitness	70%	39%
Unified esports	0%	33%
Young Athletes Participants	40%	45%
Unified Developmental Sports	17%	33%
Whole School Engagement		
Spread the Word/Respect Campaign	75%	60%
Fans in the Stands/Unified Sports Pep Rally	54%	51%
Unified Sports Day/Festival	50%	50%
Fundraising Events and Activities	56%	58%
Special Olympics Play/Performance	83%	65%
Unified Fitness Challenge	55%	42%

C. Whole School Engagement

Whole School Engagement gives all students in a school the opportunity to participate in UCS and support a socially inclusive school culture. These events and activities are vital to the impact UCS has at the schoolwide level. Whole School Engagement experiences include a wide range of activities and events, including the Spread the Word/Respect Campaign, Fans in the Stands, and fundraising events, among others. In Connecticut, 85% of liaisons reported implementing at least one Whole School Engagement experience, compared to 81% nationally. Figure 6 demonstrates the percent of responding liaisons in Connecticut that reported implementing each Whole School Engagement experience in 2021-22 and the national numbers for those same activities.

Figure 6. Percentage of all schools implementing each Whole School Engagement activity.



D. COVID-19 Rebounding

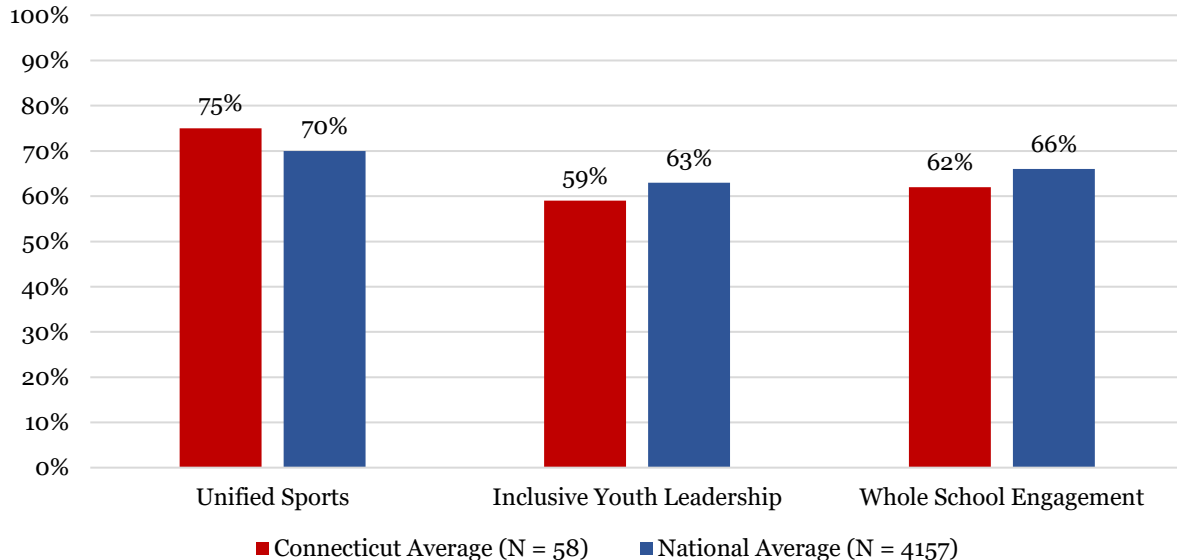
Although COVID-19 has continued to impact school programming, the majority of UCS schools nationally (88%) reported returning to an entirely in-person modality for the 2021-2022, with none reporting a fully remote model. This is lower than Connecticut, where 97% reported fully in-person programming. See Table 5 for a comparison of reported education modalities in Connecticut and nationally.

Table 5. Education Modalities in Connecticut and nationally for the 2021-22 school year.

Characteristic	Connecticut (<i>n</i> = 58)	National (<i>n</i> = 4236)
Education Model		
In-person	97%	88%
Hybrid	3%	12%
Virtual	0%	0%

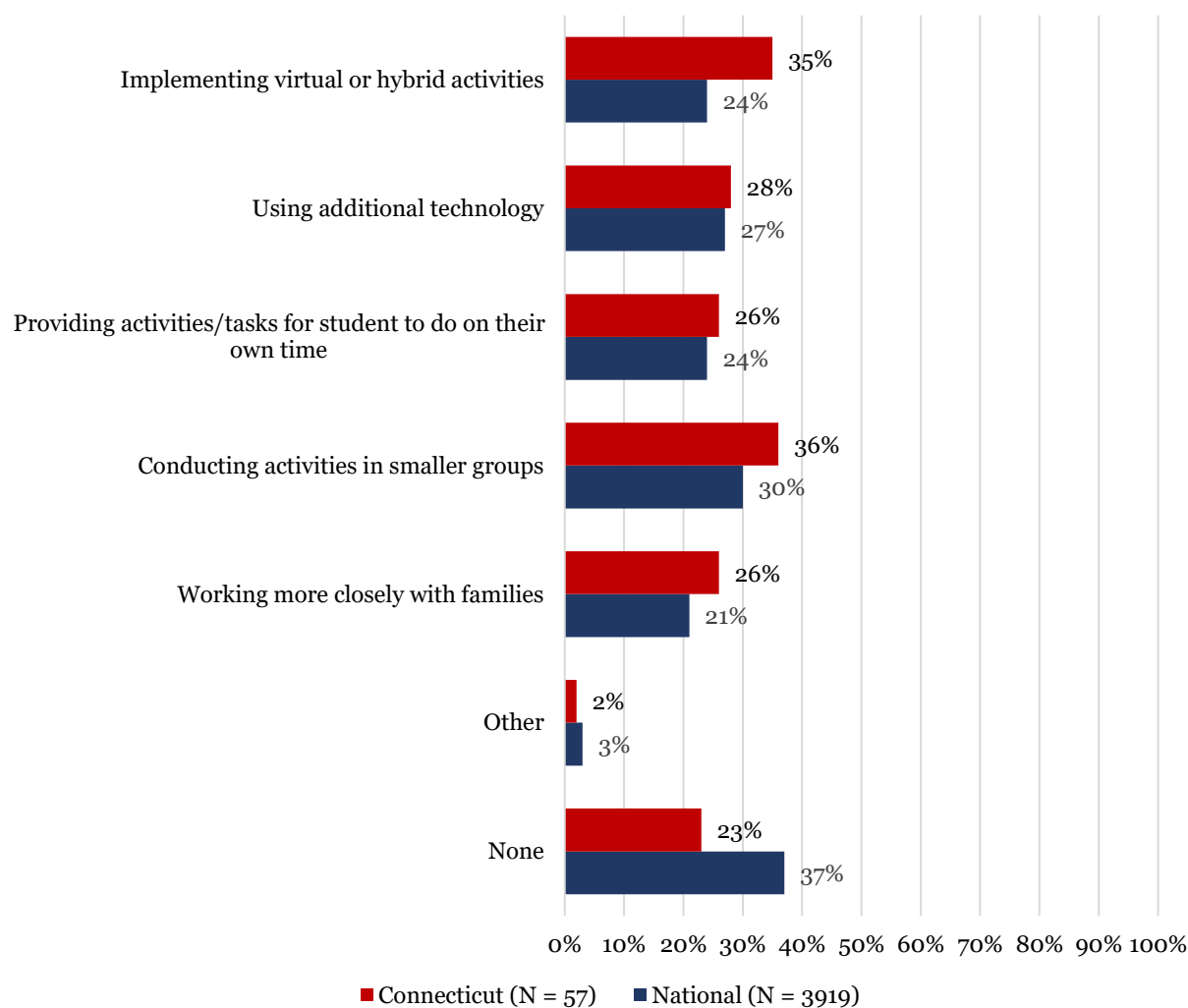
With a return to in-person learning, Unified Champion School experiences also began rebounding to pre-pandemic functioning. Liaisons were asked to report to what extent they felt their UCS activities within each of the core experiences had recovered or rebounded from COVID-19 impacts over the last two years. See Figure 7 for Connecticut and national averages of the extent to which liaisons reported implementation of each core activity has rebounded. Additionally, 95% of liaisons in Connecticut felt that a return to pre-pandemic implementation would be possible within the next two years, a rate comparable to that reported nationally (87%).

Figure 7. Extent to which each core experience implementation has rebounded since COVID-19 began.



Over the past several years, some UCS programs have noted that COVID-19 modifications had the unexpected benefit of increasing access to programming and forming partnerships with communities and families. Given that, liaisons were asked to share any modifications made during COVID-19 that they planned on keeping in the future. See Figure 8 for the percentage of liaisons reporting that they will continue certain modifications in the future in Connecticut and nationally.

Figure 8. Intent to continue popular COVID-19 modifications.



VI. Leadership and sustainability

A. Leadership Teams

Leadership Teams are a primary method of support and sustainability for UCS implementation. Past annual evaluations have documented a positive association between having a Leadership Team and reaching the Full-implementation level as well as having a Leadership Team and liaisons' perceptions of program sustainability. In 2021-22, 24% of responding liaisons in Connecticut, and 28% nationally, reported that their school had a Leadership Team to support UCS. Of those schools with a leadership team, 69% of leadership teams nationally had been formed within the past five years, compared to 57% in Connecticut. See Table 6 for a full list of common participants and the percent of liaisons that reported each group as a part of their school's Leadership Team in Connecticut and nationally.

Table 6. Frequency of Leadership Team membership among common types of participants.

Participant	Connecticut (n =58)	National (n = 1164)
Special Education Teachers	79%	88%
Students without IDD	64%	64%
Student with IDD	64%	61%
School Administrators	50%	47%
General Education Teachers	57%	51%
Physical Education (PE) Teachers	29%	41%
Athletic Director	21%	22%
Adapted PE teachers	14%	24%
Parents of Students with IDD	14%	26%
Parents of Students without IDD	7%	12%
School Psychologist/ Counselor/Social Worker	36%	18%
Special Olympics State Program Staff	7%	18%

Nationally, liaisons reported that they themselves were most often the person who started the Leadership Team (86%), relatively consistent with Connecticut (92%). The most common tactic for forming the initial Leadership Team in Connecticut was asking for volunteers/people volunteered (83%). Liaisons in Connecticut most commonly reported that barriers to forming Leadership Teams included difficulty finding time for the Leadership Team to meet (46%).

B. Sustainability

Within Connecticut, 79% of responding liaisons reported that they considered UCS self-sustainable at their school, with 83% having a concrete plan in place for sustainability next year. This is a relatively higher percentage than the national level (63%). As one measure of perceived sustainability, liaisons rated the likelihood that UCS would continue at their school without their direct involvement or without the involvement of Special Olympics Connecticut. See Figure 9 and Figure 10 for a comparison of these reports to the national averages.

Figure 9. Reported likelihood of UCS continuation without the responding liaison's direct involvement.

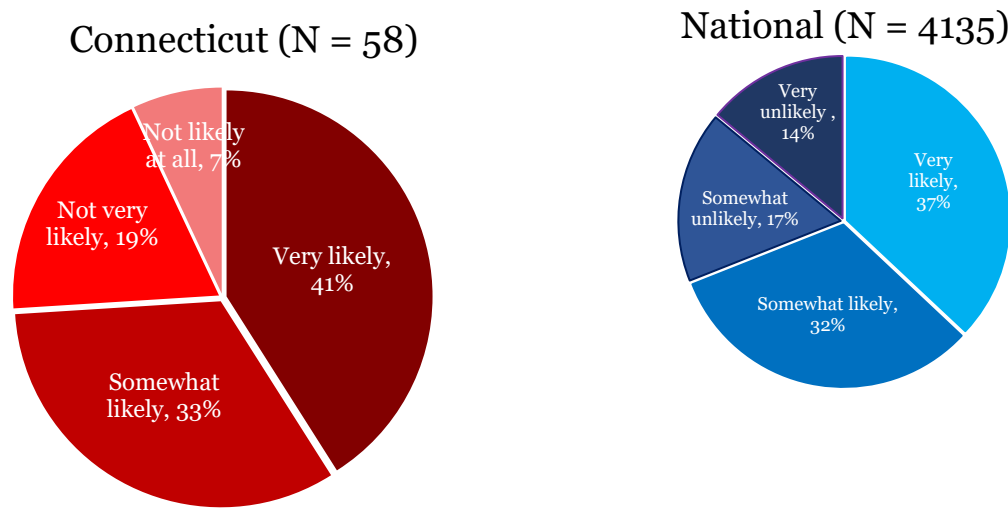
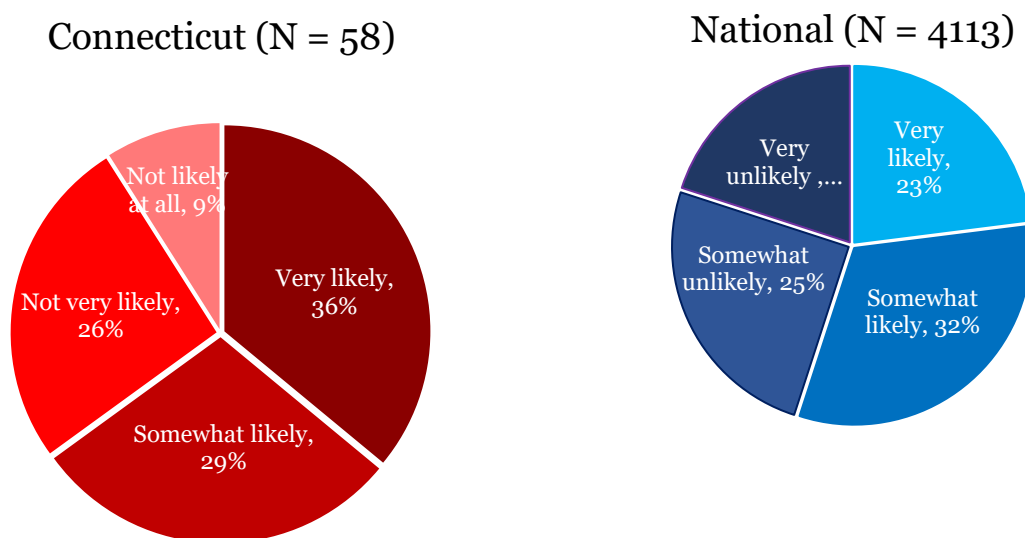


Figure 10. Reported likelihood of UCS continuation without involvement from the State Program.



VII. Implementation Support

A. School Personnel

The support of school staff is instrumental to the sustainability and effective implementation of UCS experiences. As part of the Y14 survey, liaisons rated the level of support they received from internal sources, such as administrators and general education teachers, and the degree to which they felt satisfied with these supports. In Connecticut, 81% of liaisons reported that administrators at the school contributed to UCS implementation, compared to 66% nationally. Of those whose administrators contributed, 83% were satisfied or very satisfied with the contributions, comparable to the national average (81%). Furthermore, in Connecticut, 75% of liaisons reported that general education teachers were involved in implementation, compared to 65% of liaisons nationally. Of those who indicated yes in Connecticut, 76% reported being somewhat or very satisfied with their contributions (76% nationally).

B. Funding

Sufficient funding is critical to the sustainable implementation of UCS in schools. This year, the most frequent source of funding nationally was Special Olympics State Programs, with 64% of liaisons indicating they received funding for UCS from their Special Olympics State Program. In Connecticut, 29% of liaisons reported receiving funding from Special Olympics Connecticut, with an average of 57% of overall funding coming from Special Olympics Connecticut. 91% of liaisons in Connecticut felt somewhat or very satisfied with the level of funding received from Special Olympics Connecticut, compared to the national average of 89%. See Table 7 for other sources of funding in Connecticut and nationally.

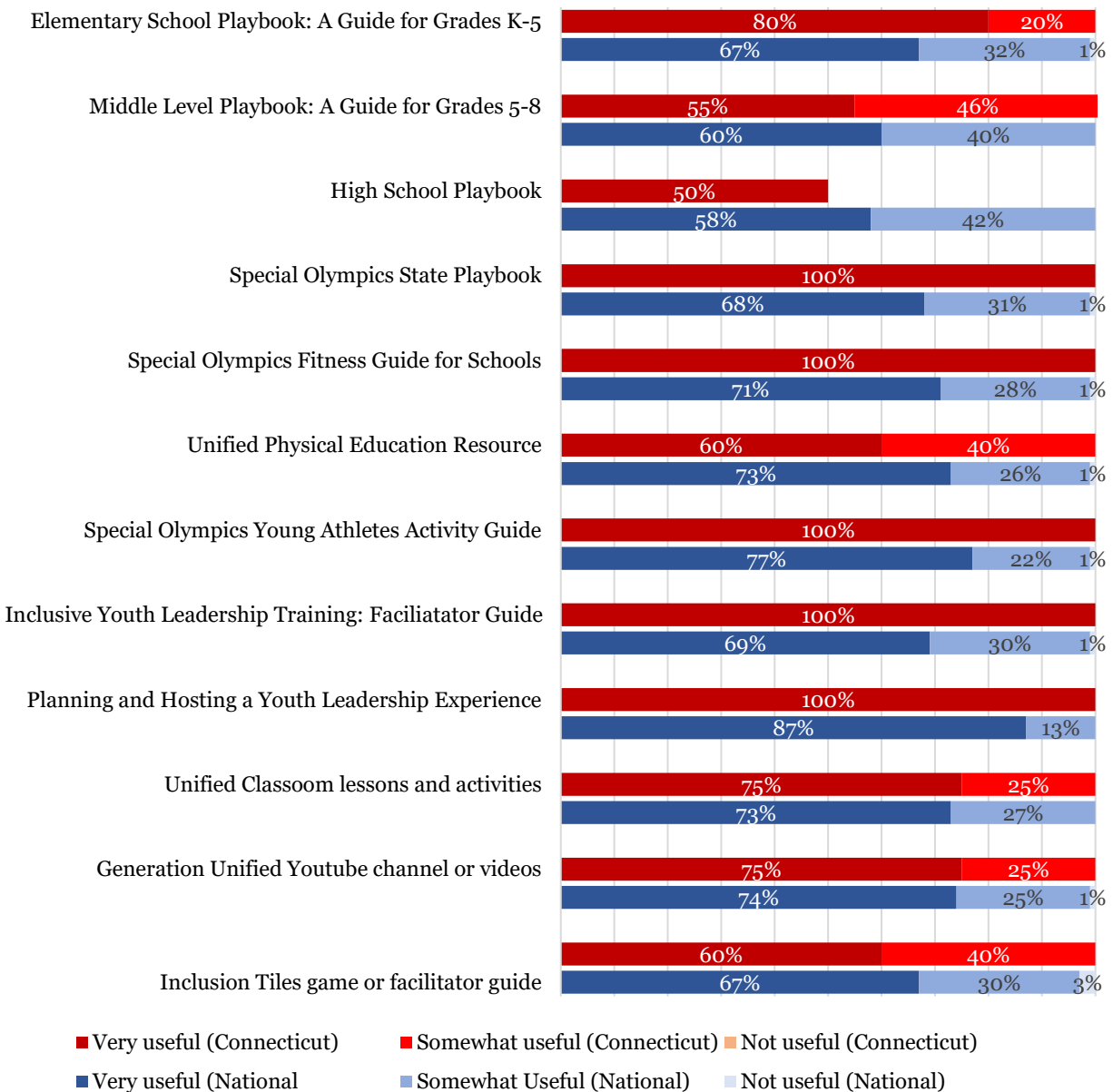
Table 7. Sources of funding for UCS implementation in Connecticut.

Funding Source	Connecticut (<i>n</i> = 58)	National (<i>n</i> = 4128)
Special Olympics State Program	29%	64%
Fundraising activities	28%	26%
Personal Donations	19%	20%
Partner/Community Organizations	7%	9%
School Budget	72%	36%
Other	16%	8%
None of the above	9%	13%

C. Implementation Support from Special Olympics

Special Olympics North America regularly develops and disseminates resources to help schools implement UCS. Overall, approximately half (47%) of liaisons in Connecticut indicated that they used at least one resource, consistent with liaisons nationwide (50%). Of those who reported using each specific resource, most liaisons nationally reported finding the resources useful. See Figure 11 for the percentage of liaisons in Connecticut and nationally that found each resource useful.

Figure 11. Percentage of liaisons who found SONA resources useful.



Liaisons also reported on the support received from their Special Olympics State Program. The most frequently reported supports utilized in Connecticut were getting questions answered, receiving equipment, and training. Table 8 describes the various types of support schools received from Special Olympics Connecticut and nationally. 43% of liaisons in Connecticut reported participating in specific trainings provided by Special Olympics Connecticut, compared to 39% nationally. 64% of liaisons in Connecticut reported feeling very satisfied with the level of support and contributions they received from Special Olympics Connecticut, compared to 65% of liaisons nationally who reported feeling very satisfied.

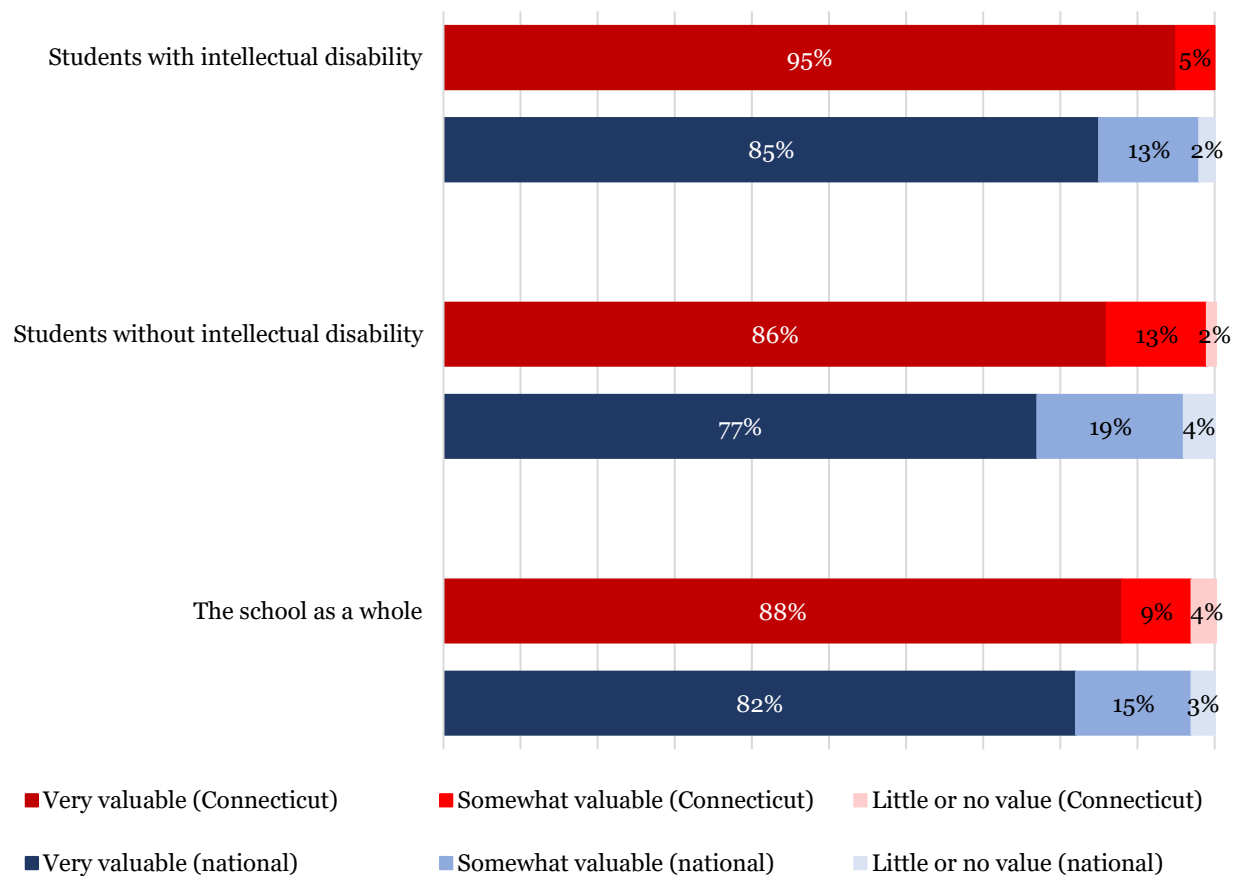
Table 8. Support from Special Olympics Connecticut for UCS implementation.

Type of Support	Connecticut (n = 58)	National (n = 4052)
Funding for Unified Champion Schools	33%	41%
Equipment for Unified Champion Schools (e.g., fitness kits, sports equipment, inclusion tiles)	39%	44%
In-person visits to your school (from state staff member)	16%	29%
Timely answers to questions (from state staff members)	56%	55%
Training for coaches or teachers	39%	31%
Opportunity to network with teachers or staff at another Unified Champion School	21%	26%
Opportunity to participate in a virtual event plan or hosted by Special Olympics Connecticut	25%	26%
Opportunity to participate in an in-person event plan or hosted by Special Olympics Connecticut	18%	29%
Assistance holding a virtual school event or transforming an in-person event to be virtual	4%	3%
Assistance holding an in-person school event	18%	19%
Help generating ideas for an inclusive activity	21%	27%
Help recruiting or engaging students with IDD virtually/remotely	0%	5%
Help recruiting or engaging students without IDD virtually/remotely	0%	5%
Help getting families/parents more involved with Unified Champion Activities	2%	8%
None	5%	10%
Something else	7%	5%

VIII. Impact

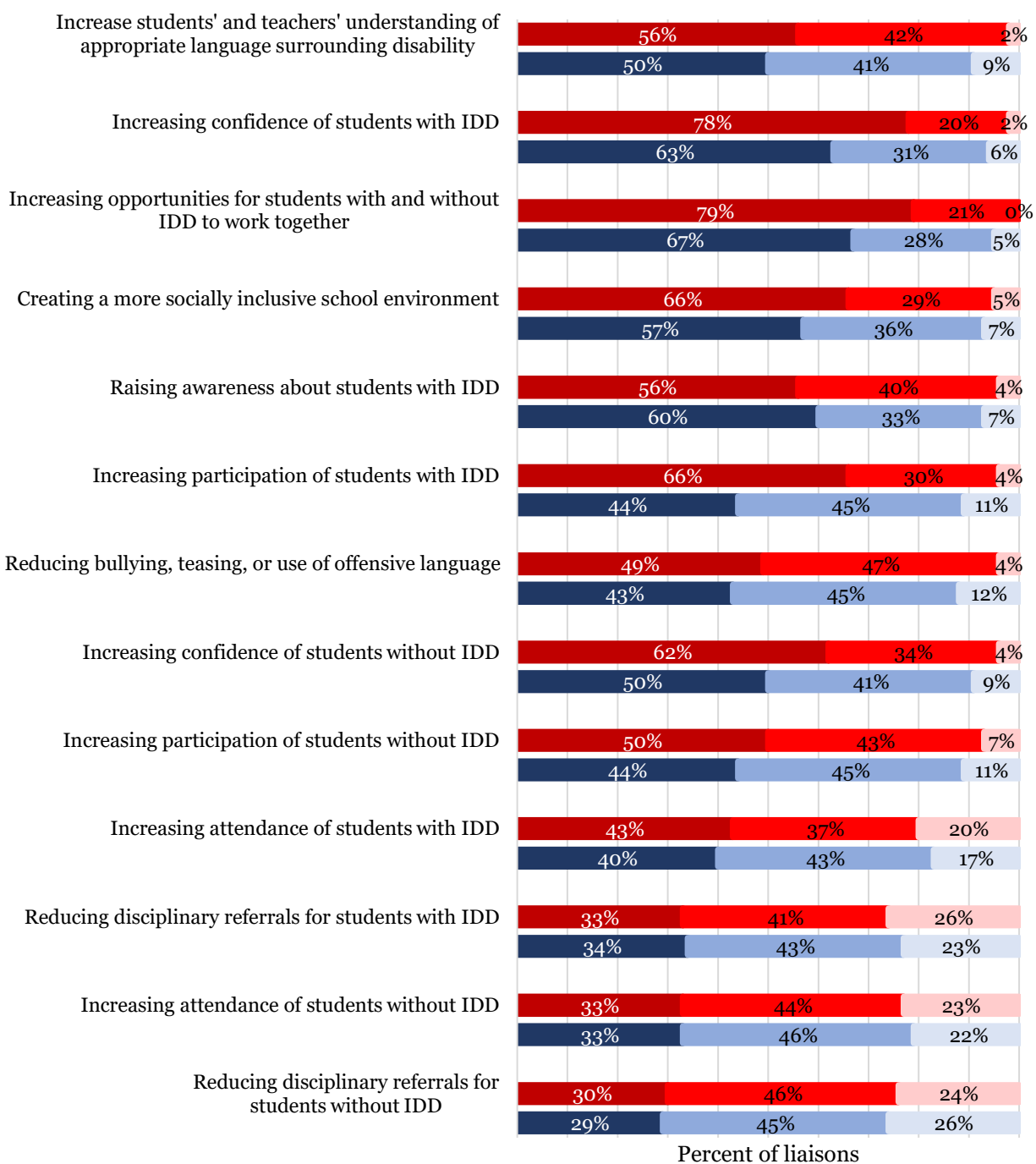
To evaluate program impact, liaisons rated the value and influence they felt UCS had on their school and student body. In Connecticut and nationally, liaisons had overwhelmingly positive perceptions of UCS for students with and without ID, as well as the school as a whole. Figure 12 demonstrates how valuable liaisons felt the program was to each of these groups at the state and national levels.

Figure 12. Value to the school as reported by school liaison.



Liaisons likewise reported largely positive perceptions of UCS influence between specific impact areas, with approximately three-quarters or more of liaisons reporting that UCS made a difference or a big difference in each measured area. See Figure 13 for a full list of impact areas and liaisons' perceptions of UCS for each.

Figure 13. Impact on the school as reported by school liaisons.

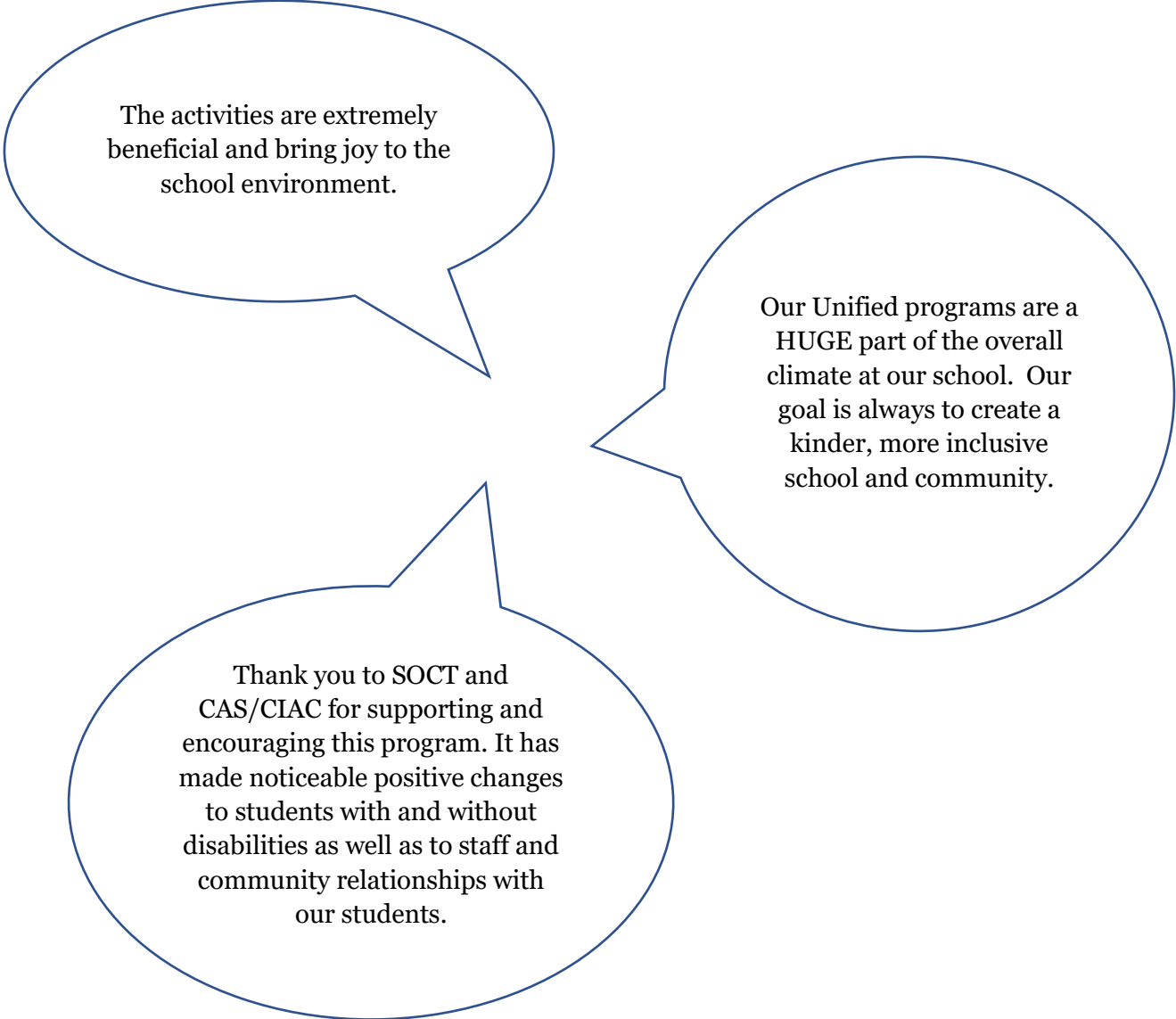


■ Made a big difference (Connecticut)
 ■ Made a difference (Connecticut)
 ■ Made no difference (Connecticut)

■ Made a big difference (national)
 ■ Made a difference (national)
 ■ Made no difference (national)

IX. Reflections

The most insightful indications of success come from the liaisons themselves. Below is a short compilation of reflections about Unified Champion Schools in 2021-22 from liaisons in Connecticut.



The activities are extremely beneficial and bring joy to the school environment.

Our Unified programs are a HUGE part of the overall climate at our school. Our goal is always to create a kinder, more inclusive school and community.

Thank you to SOCT and CAS/CIAC for supporting and encouraging this program. It has made noticeable positive changes to students with and without disabilities as well as to staff and community relationships with our students.

We hope that this report will be useful to your State Program as you continue to plan and implement the Unified Champion Schools program in the coming years. If you have any questions, comments, or requests for additional data, please contact the Unified Champion Schools Evaluation Team at the Center for Social Development and Education.

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