



Special Olympics

TESTIMONY
of
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May 18, 2010

Good afternoon Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee. My name is Timothy P. Shriver and I am CEO of Special Olympics, and Board Chairman of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the health, wellness and academic achievement of our nation's young people.

My background now includes some 30 years of experience in these issues. Throughout my many roles in the world of Special Olympics and through my experience in public education, I have always considered myself an educator first. I began in the field of education as an Upward Bound counselor in 1981 and then became a teacher and then Supervisor of Social Development in the Public Schools of New Haven, Connecticut in the late 1980's and early 1990's. I earned advanced degrees in religious education, in education administration, and in educational psychology. In 1993, together with a small group of pioneering colleagues, I helped shape the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), where I now serve as Board Chairman. CASEL is the world's leading organization advancing research, school practice, and public policy focused on the development of children's social and emotional competence. Our mission is to establish evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) as an essential part of preschool through high school education. For the last 15 years, I have been on the worldwide team at Special Olympics focused on the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities. In my capacity there, my focus has been to make Special Olympics a powerful force for teaching young people these same lessons – the power of service, joy, and dignity. As you know, Special Olympics now reaches over 3.3 million athletes around the world with over 44,000 events per year. My hope is that each of these events is a classroom all unto itself – that as the athletes of Special Olympics run their races and score their goals, they are making a bold and unconditional proclamation to their peers, their communities, and their countries – everyone counts. No exceptions. No one can be left out!! What a privilege it has been to have a front row seat watching some of our country's most inspiring human beings – young people with and without intellectual disabilities – claim their place as leaders in renewing our national belief in freedom, dignity, and opportunity. It has been a joy.

In preparing my testimony, it was clear that the work of both Special Olympics and CASEL has a direct bearing on the issues before this Committee and before the nation. Special Olympics uses

sports, school-based classroom activities, service opportunities, and school climate programs to promote acceptance, inclusion and respect for individuals with intellectual disabilities. CASEL translates the latest scientific advances to inform school-family-community programming that improves social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all children. Both organizations emphasize the value of relationships and of improving the climate for learning. Both focus on building students' capacity to take charge of their own success. And, both recognize the crucial connection between health, wellness, and academic achievement. The fundamental beliefs that drive both Special Olympics and CASEL are more than just good ideas. Rigorous research shows that how a person feels – physically and emotionally – and how they interact with others – has a direct bearing on school and life success.

We see this daily at Special Olympics as the sting of stigma and loneliness creates a cancer that blocks learning and life success. For nearly 42 years, Special Olympics has fought that cancer. We have always understood that young people with intellectual disabilities will not be able to reach their potential in learning, in personal development, in independence, and in full societal participation, if school environments are not accepting, supportive, and responsive to their needs. In recent years, this conviction has been validated through research. Where intolerance, rejection, or indifference toward youth with intellectual disabilities are the prevailing attitudes in schools, they are inflicting lifelong damage on those children. And, let me be quick to add, they are inflicting damage on those who discriminate as well.

Children Will Struggle Until We Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

No Child Left Behind provided a focus on academic rigor and accountability that brought important progress. Achievement gaps have been exposed. 'Data' is now a decision-making watchword. Performance and improvement is now expected for all children. I welcome these changes. But, the job is far from done. Far too many children are still achieving well below their potential and far too many children are still exhibiting a level of stress and disengagement that suggests an epidemic of behavioral and social problems. Even a small snapshot of the statistics can be shocking.

Bullying and safety concerns. Feeling unsafe has a negative impact on learning, and as high profile tragedies illustrate, we have not made the grade:

- 28% of students say they were bullied at school within the last six months.ⁱ Among students with intellectual/developmental disabilities, some estimates suggest that up to 9% are bullied or victimized once a week or more.ⁱⁱ
- 75% of parents and adults feel bullying and violence are serious problems in local schools.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In 2007, 35.5% of students reported being in a physical fight within the previous year.^{iv}

Disconnection and disengagement. Students who feel connected to their schools and engaged in their learning are more successful academically and have healthier behavior, yet:

- Isolation for children with disabilities remains the norm. Only 10% of youth say they have a classmate or friend with intellectual disabilities.^v
- 1.2 million students drop out every year, or 7,000 every school day.^{vi}
- By high school, 40%-60% of students are chronically disengaged from school.^{vii} Only 55% of high school students feel they are an important part of their school community.^{viii}

- Substance abuse and early sexual activity remain rampant with 26% of high school students reporting engaging in binge drinking (5 or more drinks within a couple of hours) within the last 30 days, 14.9% of high school students report having had sexual intercourse with 4 or more persons during their life, and 18% reported carrying a weapon (a gun, knife, or club) within the last 30 days.
- Only between 11%-25% of persons of employment age with intellectual disability have jobs as their transition from school to work leaves huge numbers lost and alone.

Emotional distress and unhealthy behavior. Students must be healthy, safe and ready to succeed; yet, many are struggling:

- Despite rising obesity, only 34% of students engage in enough regular physical activity.
- 15% of high school students say they have seriously considered suicide within the last year, 11% have made plans for suicide, and 7% have actually attempted to take their own lives.^{ix}
- 44 % of children report stress-related sleeping difficulties.^x

In short, the business of making our schools places of success for all children is unfinished. For that reason, I am honored to be able to share some of the challenges and possible solutions I believe our country faces as we seek to reauthorize NCLB.

School Districts are Hungry for Strategies to Teach the Whole Child

The challenges are real, but not insurmountable. Rigor and accountability alone, however, cannot improve teaching and learning. NCLB has focused the nation on how we measure and monitor achievement, but the reauthorization should match that focus on accountability with a focus on teaching and learning, on school climate, on community engagement, and on the ways in which schools can respond to the crisis facing far too many of our children nationwide.

The good news is that solutions exist and are ready for scale. Thanks to you, Senator Harkin, and to the colleagues you have brought to this issue, Special Olympics was able to launch **Project UNIFY (PU)** in 2008, a new national demonstration project (now a program) to address the challenges that we saw and experienced over four decades. PU is a strategy to activate youth, engage educators, and promote school communities of acceptance and inclusion *where all young people are agents of change* – fostering respect and dignity for people with intellectual disabilities, utilizing the sports and education initiatives of Special Olympics. PU utilizes four main approaches: youth leadership development, unified activities including Unified Sports®, communications strategies including social networking, and standards-aligned service learning curricula.

Project Unify is designed to bring all the resources of Special Olympics together and to implement them in schools in such a way that we can achieve a tipping point in our progress toward healthier and more accepting schools. We were fortunate to have a portfolio of successful initiatives developed over the years that we could pull together in an integrated way and supplement with new approaches that take advantage of our research findings and the emerging social networking strategies among young people.

The building blocks of Project Unify are as follows:

- Special Olympics Young Athletes Program, a developmental physical activity program for children ages 2-7.
- Special Olympics Get Into It classroom activities focused on service learning and the values of diversity.
- Special Olympics Games and Sports Events, our traditional joy-filled celebrations of sports.
- Special Olympics Unified Sports Teams where athletes with and without intellectual disabilities compete on the same teams.
- Special Olympics R-Word campaigns, assemblies and rallies.
- Special Olympics inclusive Athlete Leadership Programs where our athletes and their non-disabled peers are trained to speak publicly, serve on boards, advocate for their own interests and officiate at sports events, among other roles.

These components are being implemented by our leaders in states around the country in partnership with teachers, community leaders, and administrators. We are now coming to the end of year 2 of Project Unify and are anxious to start year 3. We are performing rigorous evaluation and will continue to apply the lessons learned as best practices going forward.

Even though PU is still in its early stages, I would like to share some select data about how well this program is being received and some of the positive impacts it is having.

- There are a number of important lessons that we have learned from PU thus far:
 - 45 US State Special Olympics Programs have been involved; 1,700 schools are participating; 667,000 youth have been exposed to PU; 11,000 new SO athletes have been recruited; and, 85,000 youth have engaged with PU.
 - In participating schools, 27% have principal involvement and 76% of the schools have teachers as the key administrators of the project; 36% involve 4 or more teachers or adults.
 - Schools are involving students with and without intellectual disability in the planning and implementation of PU, as well as other school-based groups, which are developing leadership skills among youth with and without intellectual disability.
 - Young Athletes, serving 2 ½ - 7 year- olds, has now reached 17,446 children in North America. Evaluation demonstrates that 75% of teachers reported improvements in cognitive development; 65% of teachers reported improvement in social development; 69% of teachers reported improvement in self help skills; and, 62% of teachers reported improvement in communications development.

- For Unified Sports athletes, they, their families, and coaches report substantial gains in self-esteem, self-confidence, social skills, sport skills, and health; interestingly, similar findings were made regarding Unified Sports partners (without ID).
- The R-Word “Spread the Word” campaign has secured 131,248 pledges to not use the R-Word and discourage its use by others and there are 36,591 members of the Facebook community.
- PU is a fun, gateway experience that helps bridge the divide between children with and without disabilities. Sports remain a powerful factor in breaking down stigma, in contributing to personal satisfaction, and in promoting health.
- PU addresses the primary determinants of school climate – social norms, behavioral expectations, and interpersonal relationship patterns.
- Young people want to be part of a meaningful movement and can be entrusted with leadership.
- Social justice is a theme that young people respond to and sports can be a concrete demonstration of social justice.
- Young people themselves can advance true inclusion at school and in their communities through sports and education activities.
- Project Unify is very inexpensive and government funding is being highly leveraged through volunteer and community resources.

The early success of Special Olympics Project Unify is promising and leads to key conclusions:

First, physical education and sports remain powerful vehicles for promoting health and for fighting social and attitudinal barriers. ESEA ought to elevate the importance of physical education and sport for all students. Play and physical activity are serious business and ought to be treated as such.

Second, children with intellectual disabilities will only be successful if school climates establish the expectation that they are full and valued members of the school community. The barriers to their life success are frequently social and relational. ESEA ought to include a new focus on school climate that will enable proven strategies that create supportive and respectful climates to be at the core of educational progress.

Finally, young people themselves must be invited to lead. Education is not simply a knowledge transmission business; it is also a process of discovery, of unleashing the spirit within each child, of recognizing that young people have gifts to give, not just brains to receive. ESEA ought to encourage schools to implement effective student leadership and service – learning strategies that are both classroom and community-based.

The Larger Context

As proud as I am to be a small part of the extraordinary work being done by Special Olympics athletes and volunteers and by the educators who have welcomed them to a place of central importance in

schools, I also realize that we are only one part of what it will take to make schools more responsive to the needs of all children – to all of their needs and potential. For that reason, I am a firm believer in the need for a new approach to school reform that blends the breakthrough science and proven practices of the entire field of social and emotional learning with the accountability culture of contemporary education. I believe that the social and emotional elements of development are the missing piece in school reform and that the neglect of the social and emotional factors in learning is one of the reasons why it has been so difficult to enable students with intellectual disabilities to be accepted. And, that same neglect is contributing to frustration on the part of non-disabled students, but also on the part of thousands of teachers, administrators, and parents.

A school improvement strategy that has an integrated SEL framework will be rooted in a fundamentally different vision that integrates the science of child development with a more complete concept of what it means to be an educated person. Our expectations of young people will include, but go beyond, academic competence. Success as a student must also mean becoming a caring, compassionate, and confident citizen. Schools will go beyond knowledge transfer to become sites for community building and development.

CASEL has reviewed research and educational practice literatures from the past 30 years and has established guidelines for effective strategies and programming to promote children’s social, emotional, and academic growth. State-of-the-art SEL practice has the following characteristics:

1. **Grounded in theory and research.** It is based on sound theories of child development, incorporating approaches that demonstrate beneficial effects on children’s attitudes, behaviors, and school performance through scientific research.
2. **Teaches children to apply SEL skills and ethical values in school and daily life.** Through systematic instruction and application of learning to everyday situations, it enhances children’s social, emotional, and ethical behavior. Children learn to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively. They also develop responsible and respectful attitudes and values about self, others, work, health, and citizenship.
3. **Builds connection to school through caring, engaging classroom and school practices.** It uses diverse teaching methods to engage students in creating classroom and school atmospheres where caring, responsibility, and a commitment to learning thrive. It nurtures students’ sense of emotional security and safety, and it strengthens relationships among students, teachers, other school personnel, and families.
4. **Provides developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction.** It offers developmentally appropriate classroom instruction, including clearly specified learning objectives, for each grade level from preschool through high school. It also emphasizes culturally sensitivity and respect for diversity.
5. **Helps schools coordinate and unify programs that are often fragmented.** It offers schools a coherent, unifying framework to promote the positive social, emotional, and academic growth of all students. It coordinates school programs that promote positive behavior and youth development, problem prevention, health, character, service-learning, and citizenship.
6. **Enhances academic achievement by addressing the affective and social dimensions of teaching and learning.** It teaches students social and emotional competencies that encourage classroom participation, positive interactions with teachers, and good study habits. It introduces engaging teaching and learning methods, such as problem solving approaches and cooperative learning, that motivates students to learn and to succeed academically.

7. **Involves families and communities as partners.** It involves school staff, peers, parents, and community members in applying and modeling SEL-related skills and attitudes at school, at home, and in the community.
8. **Establishes organizational supports and aligns policies that foster success.** It ensures high quality program implementation by addressing factors that determine long-term success or failures of school-based programs. These include leadership, active participation in program planning by everyone involved, adequate time and resources, and alignment with school, district, state, and federal policies.
9. **Provides high-quality staff development and support.** It offers well-planned professional development for all school personnel. This includes basic theoretical knowledge, modeling and practice of effective teaching methods, regular coaching, and constructive feedback from colleagues.
10. **Incorporates continuing evaluation and improvement.** It begins with an assessment of school/district resources and needs to establish a good fit between the school's concerns and aspirations with the best evidence-based SEL programming approaches. It continues gathering implementation and student outcome data to assess progress, ensure accountability, and shape program improvement.

In summary, quality SEL-based school reform efforts have three main components:

Classrooms

Successful SEL-based school reform equips teachers to support and engage students in their classrooms using evidence-based SEL strategies. Teachers are able to teach school and life skills such as problem solving, stress management, and conflict resolution; are able to infuse the curriculum with core values such as respect for self and others, truth telling, and responsibility; are able to promote self awareness, empathy, and caring all in ways that are compatible with academic goals and which improve time-on-task and classroom discipline. These competencies are not only designed to improve classroom performance, but are also highly correlated with life and work success and engaged citizenship.

Climate

Successful SEL-based school reform programs also improve school climate and student connection to their schools and teachers. In recent years, school climate has become an increasingly important indicator of school effectiveness. The best evidence-based SEL programs help schools become sophisticated architects of a productive and trusting learning environment, providing tools and strategies to help teachers and administrators transform discipline practices and convey consistent messages of inclusion, respect for all children, safety, and service. Students are able to apply the social and emotional competencies they learn outside the classroom, becoming agents for positive change and full partners in the life of the school. Special Olympics activities are particularly focused on school climate change and present hopeful strategies for improvement.

Community

Successful SEL-based school reform efforts promote strategies that engage students in community activities, while also engaging parents and community leaders in the life of the school. Parents are routinely involved in planning and support roles and invited to reinforce learning and healthy development at home. Service activities, after school enrichment programs, and cooperative partnerships with community-based organizations become the norm. An atmosphere of openness fosters new relationships that integrate new resources into a coherent plan that support student success.

Again, Special Olympics activities can help by offering children didactic lessons in human exceptionality while also connecting them to meaningful service learning opportunities in the community.

Research Tells a Hopeful Story: Success Is Possible

Several decades of research, practice, and policy innovation now demonstrate that it is possible to promote the academic, social, and emotional growth of preschool through high school students and the adults who care for them. The research indicates the classroom and school-wide programming benefits are powerful. In a landmark study that will appear in *Child Development* next year, CASEL analyzed 213 school-based SEL studies – with experimental and control groups - involving 270,034 students, and found that students who experienced high-quality SEL programming benefited in multiple ways:

- Improved attendance, enhanced social relationships, and stronger commitment to learning and healthy development;
- Decreased negative behavior and emotional distress and more constructive classroom behavior;
- Decreased aggressive behavior and substance use that can lead to school failure;
- Standardized test scores 11 percentile points higher than the control group.

This study also showed SEL can be effectively delivered by regular classroom teachers,^{xi} meaning it can be brought to scale in the schools we have now.

The Policy Opportunity

There are many states and school districts that include the promotion of children’s social and emotional skills as part of their student learning goals and standards. One state, Illinois, has adopted formal “SEL Student Learning Standards” which have helped educators address the fragmentation that plagues schools and sets a framework for an integrated, child development driven, education policy. Similar to English-language arts and mathematics standards, the SEL standards highlight the social-emotional competencies that students should know and be able to do. The Illinois SEL standards and developmental benchmarks are organized around three learning goals: (1) Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success; (2) Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; and (3) Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. Leaders within Illinois are now developing a regional model to support district-wide SEL in a cost-effective way across districts and schools. Similarly, in Alaska’s Anchorage School District, comprehensive SEL Learning Standards have been adopted and teachers have developed innovative teaching strategies that integrate SEL instruction into academic subjects. Finally, Ohio's school climate guidelines now embrace SEL and the state is retooling its teacher preparation standards to include SEL. At the same time, the state PTA recently voted to put SEL at the top of its policy agenda.

Moving Forward with ESEA

Without a cohesive national strategy to integrate the many dimensions of learning, many students will not get the help and support they need. Social and emotional learning offers a positive solution that has already benefited children in thousands of classrooms, schools and districts. Now, ESEA provides an opportunity to put this solution into the hands of more young people and schools. A practical first

step would be incorporating the provisions of the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act into ESEA.

The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (HR 4223) was introduced by with bipartisan support in December. The bill authorizes the Department of Education to address the substantial rise in demand for SEL and builds the long-term infrastructure to bring SEL to scale:

- **Reach More Children with Evidence-based Social and Emotional Learning.** Award five-year competitive grants for district or state SEL initiatives.
- **Rigorously Measure and Broadly Share Results.** Conduct an independent evaluation of grantees to determine the program’s impact on student achievement, attainment, and behavioral outcomes.
- **Build a National SEL Support System for Teachers, Administrators, School Districts, and States.** Establish a national training and technical assistance center to provide high-quality information about research-based practices, professional development, and student assessment, and implementation tools.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I hope our brief moments together can help set the stage for a future ESEA that benefits all students in new and meaningful ways.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2005.

ⁱⁱ [Developmental Neurorehabilitation](#) 2009, Vol. 12, No. 3, Pages 146-151 , DOI 10.1080/17518420902971356

ⁱⁱⁱ Public Agenda Survey, April 2010.

^{iv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007. *MMWR* 2008; 57

^v Siperstein, G. N., Parker, R.C., Norins Bardon, J., & Widaman, K. F. (2007). A National Study of Youth Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 73, 435-455.

^{vi} White House press release, March 2009.

^{vii} Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 262–273.

^{viii} Yazzie-Mintz, E. (2007). *Voices of students on engagement: A report on the 2006 high school survey of student engagement*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, Indiana University School of Education.

^{ix} Center for Disease Control, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/Suicide/youthsuicide.htm>, downloaded 5/13/10.

^x APA Stress in America Report, 2009

^{xi} Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K. B. (in press). “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-analysis of School-based Universal Interventions.” *Child Development*.