

UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS

A New Chapter for Unified Champion Schools

Special Olympics Ontario is strengthening its commitment to inclusive school communities. As we evolve Unified Champion Schools, we're shifting from a model defined by one-time events to a predictable, year-round sport and leadership program that reaches more students, more often. The UCS Secondary School Sport Program Model reflects what educators, students, and partners have been telling us:

schools need **sustainable programming**, local access, and **consistent opportunities** for every student regardless of ability to play, lead, and belong. This evolution isn't about reducing opportunity; it's about expanding it. By reinvesting in local programming, creating clearer seasonal structures, and moving School Championships to a two-year cycle, UCS is building a model that is accessible, equitable, and built for long-term impact.

Our Purpose

The purpose of this new model is built on three fundamental pillars:

- **Sustainability:** By moving to a year-round seasonal structure, we provide consistent programming that schools can rely on. This allows coaches and educators to plan ahead with clear deadlines, sport-specific resources, and predictable timing.
- **Radical Inclusion:** We are expanding opportunities so that participation is the goal, not just qualification. By shifting the focus of our Regional Invitationals, we ensure that more students than ever before can experience the pride of representing their school without the pressure of a "win-or-go-home" system.
- **Empowered Leadership:** We are placing the future of the program in the hands of the students. By shifting the focus of our Regional Invitationals, we ensure that more students than ever before can experience the pride of representing their school through a more inclusive format that creates space for broader participation.

The Goal

The goal of the new UCS model is to transition from a one-time event system to a fully developed, year-round program that supports ongoing participation, leadership development, and equitable access for all schools.

Through structured seasonal programming, strengthened local opportunities, and a more sustainable approach to School Championships, this model removes financial barriers and builds capacity directly within schools. The result is a framework that can grow over time, reach more athletes and partners, and deliver consistent, high-quality inclusive sport experiences province-wide.



**#FREE
PARTICIPATION**



JR. BOYS BASKETBALL	
1	William Henderson
2	Henry Winkler
3	Michael Carlson
4	Brandon Russell
5	Justin Martin
6	Adam Mungler
7	Steve Landford
8	Mike Martin
9	John Fry
10	Michael
11	Michael
12	Michael
13	Michael
14	Michael
15	Michael
16	Michael
17	Michael
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28	Michael
29	Michael
30	Michael

What's Changing

- UCS becomes a **year-round program**, not just a series of events.
- Events focus on **participation and development**, not qualification.
- **More students** have the opportunity to participate in major sports events, not limiting these experiences to just those who advance to championships.
- **Schools & students have the opportunity to take on more leadership**, helping Special Olympics Ontario grow the program sustainably.
- School Championships evolves to a more **financially manageable** and scalable format.

Key Components

1. Seasonal sport programming with fitness challenges, and sport-specific resources & training sessions
2. Consistent structured programming that ensures each sports season incorporates a sport, youth leadership & whole school engagement initiative and that programs offered, timing and information remain predictable and clear.
3. Invitational events (formerly called qualifiers), our four-sport regional events, will continue with a focus on increasing participation, expanding developmental divisions, and improving access.
4. Simplified regional advancement model for schools seeking a pathway to Championships.
5. 3-Stage Hosting Development Framework to build school independence, expand unstaffed events, and support educator/student-led hosting.
6. 2-Year Provincial School Championship Cycle: Traditional Provincial School Championships will occur every two years, alternating with a flexible development year focused on delivering a smaller-scale School Champs-related experience (e.g., Youth Summit, targeted sport event such as Handball Championships, etc.).

All UCS programs will be organized into Seasonal Sport Programming offerings.

Season Timing

- **Soccer Season: September - October**
- **Basketball Season: November - December**
- **Bocce Season: February - March**
- **Floorball Season: April - May**



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NEW Core Components of Each Season (4 Seasons)

- **Kickoff Coaches Call:** For educators/coaches and athletes to review programs, rules, deadlines, and ask questions.
- **Unified Information Sessions:** Held in October and February to review core guiding principles and impact.
- **Sport-Specific Practice Prep Week:** Includes virtual training and skill development challenges/sessions for each sport.
- **UCS Monthly Fitness Challenges:** Fitness, healthy eating, and mindfulness competitions with leaderboards and prizes.
- **Youth Leadership Activity:** One leadership-focused initiative per season.
- **Whole-School Engagement Activity:** One per season (e.g., awareness or inclusion events).
- **Photo Challenge:** Schools are encouraged to share pictures, videos and stories from each season for prizes, with provided social media resources.

Invitational UCS Events (formerly known as UCS qualifiers)

Beginning in the 2026–27 school year, UCS will shift the purpose of its annual regional sport events from qualification-based to strictly participation-focused regional invitational events. Our annual 5 sports events (soccer, basketball, bocce, floorball, & track & field) will largely remain unchanged (only the purpose & name of the event are changing).

Each event will continue offering a **Unified, Traditional, and Developmental Divisions** and follow our current structure:

Registration → Ceremonies → Coaches Meeting → Round Robin Games

SOO will also update its ability ranking systems to ensure more equitable divisions.

NEW Conference Qualification Events

Beginning in the **2026–27 school year**, SOO will run annual Conference Qualifier Events – putting schools into conferences (where schools would play schools outside their local region). [CLICK HERE](#) to see your conference.

Note: Transportation grants will be available to support longer travel times

These events will be exclusively for schools wishing to advance to provincial championships. There will be Unified and Traditional divisions. The day will be as follows:

Registration → Coaches Meeting → Round Robin Play → Finals → Medal Ceremonies
(put teams will receive medals and banners)

SOO will host a Conference Qualifier annually, with two sports occurring simultaneously for each event. Schools can enter teams in one or both sports (maximum of 3 teams per sport per school). To align with our 2-Year School Champs Cycle, the events will be:

Year 1: Bocce & Floorball Conference Qualifier – Last 2 Weeks of May

Year 2: Soccer & Basketball Conference Qualifiers – First 2 Weeks of April

Northern Ontario Adjustment: Note that some regions (ex. Timmins, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste Marie), due to their large geography, will not have conference qualifiers and will instead have their invitational be considered qualifiers for advancement to championships.

NEW

3-STAGE HOSTING DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Stage 1: Staffed Events

- For the first time in 2025–26
- SOO staff run all major operational components
- Identical to the current model
- *Note: Schools that have hosted an staffed event for two years will be asked to host events unstaffed or risk losing hosting privileges to another school.*

Stage 2: Unstaffed Events

- For schools with:
 - An unstaffed event completed prior to September 2026 OR
 - At least two consecutive years hosting staffed events
- Schools host the event independently using the current unstaffed guidelines
- **Hosting Grant:** \$300–400 based on capacity

Stage 3: School-Lead Events (*Optional for Schools deemed eligible by SOO*)

- For schools with 3+ years of unstaffed hosting
- Schools assume full operational responsibility, strongly encouraged to leverage leadership classes or student leadership teams
 - Additional responsibilities will include **1. Event Schedule, Final communication to participants (educators)**
- **Hosting Grant:** \$400–600 based on capacity
- *Note: All conference qualifiers will be staffed events by SOO with Officials provided for the next 2 years.*

Fee Update

As of September 2026, SOO will no longer charge any event participation fees (including invitationals, qualifiers & pilots; The only exception being for Provincial events. The \$50 fee will remain.)

As of September 2027, SOO will no longer provide certified officials for Unstaffed/School-led soccer & basketball invitational events. Host schools will be responsible for training students or educators to officiate, similar to bocce and floorball, or use grant money to hire officials.

2-Year School Championships Cycle – Starting 2027-2028 School Year

Year 1 of the school championships 2-year cycle will feature a bi-annual Provincial Unified Youth Summit occurring in the first week of April.

Number of participants depending the financial an hosting capacity of the host city.

Starting in 2027, Provincial School Championships will now occur every two years, offering all five core sports in Traditional and Unified divisions every other year.

Ex. 2026 - School Championships

2027 - Youth Summit (no School Championships)

2028 - School Championships

2028 will hold regular school championships with the goal of the *last week of May date.*

Number of participants depending the financial an hosting capacity of the host city.

Qualification

Provincial Youth Summit

- Schools will be selected based on the submission of an application form & video **by January 15th**
 - A 3-person Special Olympics Ontario panel will select participants
 - Specific selection criteria will be provided

Provincial School Championships (5 Sports)

- In each Conference Qualifier, the **division winner from each division (both unified and traditional) will be identified for qualification consideration**
- **One Traditional team and one Unified Team** will be selected from each conference qualifier (one team per sport) through a live, Random computerized draw. Where all division winners will have their team/school entered once
 - Division winners that are Gold & All-Province Level Unified Champion Schools will have their team/school entered twice.
- Note **rural/northern regions** that do not have conference qualifiers **will follow the same sport qualification cycle. All division winners from all the Northern local qualifiers** (Thunder Bay, Timmins, SSM) **will be entered into a randomized draw per sport**, one unified and one traditional team will be selected per sport.

Wild Card-Discretionary Quota

- If quota space allows, any **remaining unselected teams** that **won their division** within their conference will be entered into the **Wild-Card pool and selected by random draw per ability level and classification**
- The number of teams selected from each category will be determined by the need to **appropriately match the competition level and classification** of teams already selected for the Championship.

Each school championship year, there will also be an **opportunity for four new schools** (that have not participated at the Provincial level) **to be nominated to attend** based on their commitment to the Unified movement, sportsmanship, and leadership.

- Specific criteria will be provided

