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# Fostering Inclusive Youth Leaders: A Review of Key Findings and Best Practices

Special Olympics Global Center  
for Inclusion in Education

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Easy-to-Read



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Ray Lane of Lane Global Youth Leadership joins youth from Special Olympics Oman at the Global Youth Leadership Summit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates



## About This Document

This document is called a **research brief**.

- A **brief** is a short report that explains the most important points about something.
- **Research** means studying something to learn new things about it.
- We made an easy-to-read brief so more people can learn new things.



The **Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education** made this brief.



**Inclusion** means making everyone feel welcome in a place or in an activity.

- Inclusion helps persons with intellectual disabilities and their families have fuller and happier lives.
- A person with **intellectual disabilities** may learn things at different times and in different ways than most people do.



- The Global Center works with friends around the world to help schools and towns and people be more inclusive.



Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Kansas (U.S.) encourage each other at the 2023 Special Olympics Global Youth Leadership Summit in Berlin, Germany



The Global Center asked four of its friends to write a research brief.

These four friends are the authors.

- The authors are Jennifer Donahue, Kaitlyn Hamrick, Katharine Brush Gilmore, and Lily Massaro.
- They work in research and programs about youth and education.
- They wrote this brief about helping young people with and without intellectual disabilities to become leaders for inclusion.

## Young People and Inclusion

Persons with intellectual disabilities know a lot.  
They have tons of great ideas and they do great work.

But many people do not understand this.

They think that persons with intellectual disabilities  
should not go to school.

They think that persons with intellectual disabilities  
cannot work at a job.

They think that persons with intellectual disabilities  
should stay at home and should not be part  
of the life of the community.

This kind of thinking is all wrong.

This kind of thinking is a problem that needs to be fixed all over the world.

Special Olympics is working on this problem every day.

Special Olympics believes in inclusion.

Special Olympics wants people to understand that persons with intellectual disabilities are mostly just like everyone else.



Special Olympics thinks the best time to start learning about inclusion is when people are young.

When youth with and without intellectual disabilities go to school together and play sports together, they learn how alike they are.

They learn that everyone has good ideas.



They learn that everyone can live together and work together to make the world a better and happier place for all people.

## Youth As Leaders for Inclusion



Special Olympics believes that youth *with* and *without* intellectual disabilities can lead the world to be inclusive.

Special Olympics asked the authors of this brief to find out what the research says about preparing youth to be leaders.

This is what the authors found out.



Young people show they are leaders when they do 3 important things.



1. They encourage people to work together toward a goal.



2. They get people ready to face challenges together.



3. They help people act together because of what they all believe.

Youth leaders for inclusion need to have these **skills and knowledge**.



They need to be able to explain what inclusion is and why it is important.



They need to understand other people's feelings and ideas.



They need to get along with different people and work with them.



They need to manage their own emotions.



They need to know what they do well and when they need help.



They need to be able to think about choices and make decisions.

Youth leaders for inclusion need to have these **values and attitudes**.



They need to want to be leaders and to reach goals.



They need to care about other people and their needs.



They need to respect other people's ideas and talents.



They need to be confident they can make a positive difference.



They need the courage to speak up and act on behalf of inclusion.



They need to keep learning more about how to lead.

# Helping Youth Learn to Be Leaders

Around the world, programs are preparing youth to be leaders.

The best programs do these things.

The best programs **bring adults together to work with the youth.**



The adults teach the youth and encourage them.

The adults show the youth what leadership looks like.

The adults break down barriers to inclusion.

The adults introduce the youth to many opportunities to be with many different people.

The best programs **make youth feel safe.**



When youth feel safe, they can talk about their hopes and fears.

When youth feel safe, they learn to understand themselves.

When youth feel safe, they learn to understand others better.



Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Mongolia connect digitally with Youth Leaders from across the globe

The best programs **start preparing youth to be leaders while they are still young and in school.**

The programs provide youth with formal training in leadership.



The programs teach students of all ages to advocate for themselves.

The programs provide youth with many ways to practice leading year after year after year.

The best programs **encourage youth to do their best work in school.**

When students do well academically, they see themselves as leaders.



When students do well academically, they become self-advocates.

When students do well academically, they seek and accept leadership roles.

The best programs **teach youth to work with others.**



When youth work with many different people, they learn to communicate better with words and with actions.

When youth work with many different people, they learn to listen to what others have to say and to work out problems.

The best programs **make it easier for youth to take part in the programs.**

The programs make sure youth have a way to get to the program.



The programs make sure youth have the technology they need for program activities.

The programs make sure youth have other people to support them if they need help.

The best programs **offer the opportunity to practice in real settings.**



Youth learn best when they practice their leadership skills in community places, such as a store or a gym.

Youth learn best when their leadership skills are practiced in a real setting, such as a youth club.

The best programs **enable youth with and without disabilities to interact with each other.**

Youth without disabilities can model what youth leaders do.



Youth with disabilities can gain confidence in practicing new leadership skills while being supported by peers without disabilities.

Youth without disabilities can gain new appreciation of the skills and personalities of youth with disabilities.

## Making Youth Leadership Programs Stronger

Strong programs develop strong youth leaders.

Here are some ways to make youth leadership programs stronger.

Include **youth voice**.



Ask young people to share their ideas about how the program should be run and what activities it should offer.

Use those ideas to plan and present the program.

Train youth to **lead today** and not wait until they become adults.

Ensure that youth with disabilities are included in general community projects.



Involve youth with disabilities in planning, making decisions, and presenting activities.

Ensure that youth with disabilities are included on community youth councils and in community youth training events.



Global Youth Leadership Council members representing Special Olympics Africa, Special Olympics Asia Pacific, Special Olympics East Asia, Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia, Special Olympics Latin America, Special Olympics Middle East/North Africa, and Special Olympics North America discuss ways to elevate youth voice through Special Olympics' work around the world

Give youth genuine **power to lead change** in their own settings.



Respect the ideas of young people and include their ideas when decisions are being made.

Encourage youth to speak up for themselves and others.

Make youth aware that **all people can learn to be strong leaders.**

Point out everyday examples of adults and youth who are acting as leaders.



Help youth see their own leadership skills.

Help youth identify the skills they want to improve and make a plan to improve them.

## Conclusion



We need more research about how to help youth become leaders—especially youth with disabilities.

Special Olympics and other programs are working to support this research.

Special Olympics believes in the power of youth with and without disabilities to make the world more inclusive.



Special Olympics will keep working to help young people use their voice and grow their skills to become leaders for inclusion all over the world.



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Youth Leaders from Special Olympics Connecticut (U.S.) admire a mural installed as part of a youth-led inclusion project called "Project Kindness"

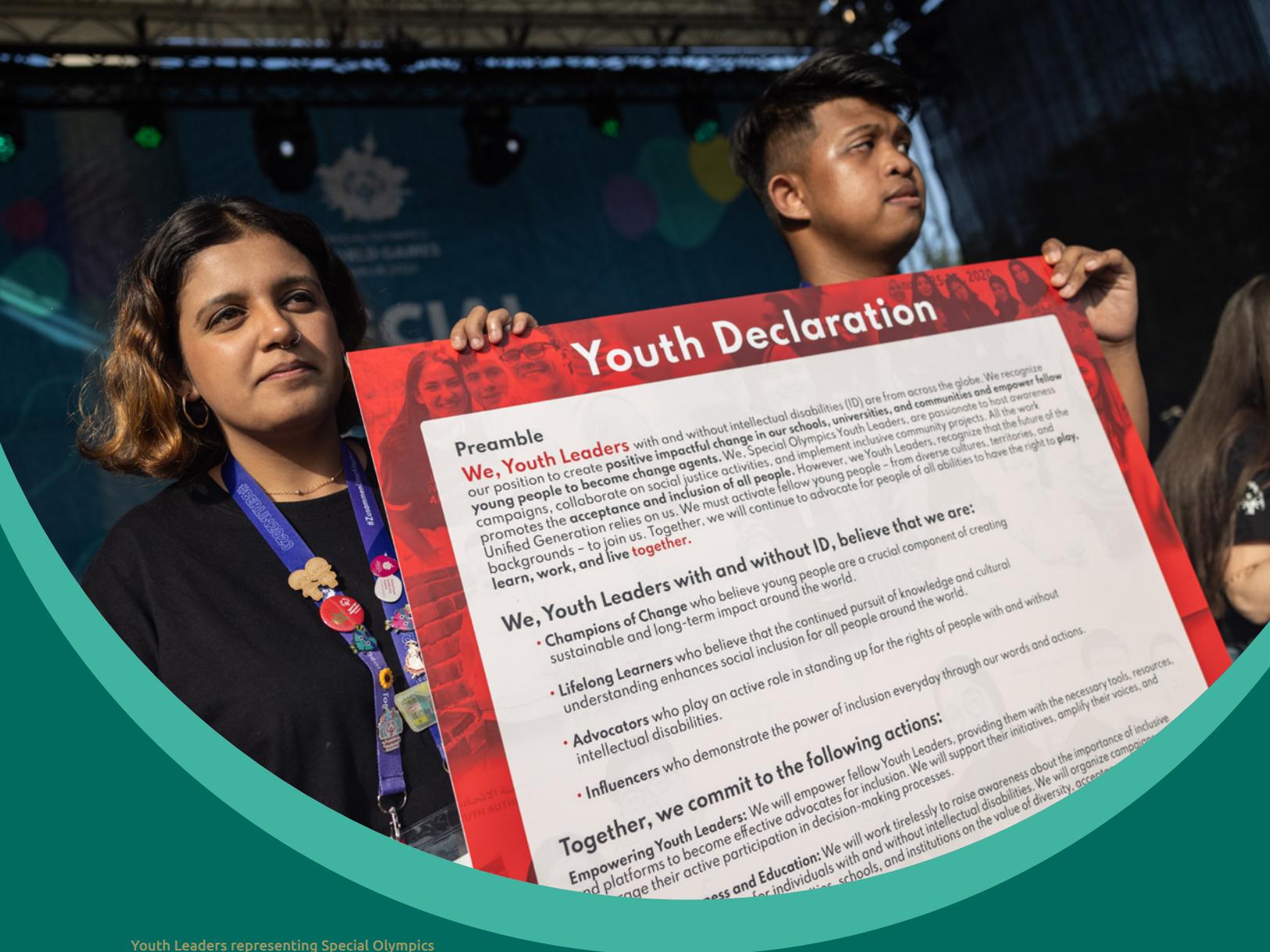


## Learn more here:

1. Special Olympics Center for Inclusive Health (2020). *Unified Leadership*. <https://ihc.brightspotcdn.com/6d/f0/ce3c1e3e42db950bbe883e22cf61/unified-leadership-external-overview-2-sept-2020.pdf>
2. Special Olympics (2022). *Called to connect: Special Olympics 2022 Virtual Global Youth Leadership Summit: Event impact report*. <https://www.flipsnack.com/specialolympicsglobalyouth/virtual-global-youth-leadership-summit-final-report/full-view.html>



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Youth Leaders representing Special Olympics Asia Pacific present the Special Olympics Youth Declaration created by young people at the 2023 Special Olympics Global Youth Leadership Summit in Berlin, Germany



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