This proposal formally requests the Minnesota State High School League to officially sanction a Unified Basketball Season starting during the 2022-2023 school year.
PROPOSAL TO AMEND TO BYLAWS

MSHSL member schools, with the support of Special Olympics Minnesota, are requesting the addition of a co-ed Unified Basketball season as part of the winter season starting in the 2022-2023 school year.

Submitted by:
1. Region 4A- Dr. Natalia Rico Hernández, Head of School at Breck School
2. Region 7A- Tim Rohweder, Principal at Proctor High School
3. Region 8A- Gregg Parks, Superintendent at Nevis Public Schools
4. Region 2AA- Pat Devine, Superintendent at Waconia Public Schools
5. Region 2AA- Matt Hanson, Athletic Director at Shakopee High School
6. Region 2AA- Bucky Mieras, Activities Director at Orono High School
7. Region 4AA- Ricky Michel, Activities Director at Stillwater High School
8. Region 6AA- Ed Graff, Superintendent at Minneapolis Public Schools
9. Region 7AA- Paul Riess, Activities Director at Cloquet Public Schools
10. Region 8AA- Troy Hendricks, Activities Director at Bemidji High School

Current Bylaw:
There currently are no bylaws and no officially sanctioned Unified Basketball season with the MSHSL.

Proposed Changes:
Unified Sports joins students with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. By using sports as a catalyst for change, students work together towards a common goal and are educated, motivated, and activated to recognize abilities rather than disabilities.

The desired outcome of adding a Unified Basketball season is for both organizations to benefit from: further reach related to missional focus, heightened visibility of organizational programs, and to be the premier interscholastic league related to opportunities for students with disabilities.

Unified Basketball

• In Unified Basketball three athletes (students with an intellectual disability) and two Unified partners (students without an intellectual disability) compete on the court.

• Unified Sport competitions are based on the idea that student-athletes of all abilities should be given an equitable chance of succeeding, whether it is a personal best or a first place finish. Special Olympics calls this competition-level matching “divisioning.” It is a fundamental rule that athletes in competitions are matched up with others of about the same competitive ability to provide meaningful experiences. With Unified Basketball, each school will have the opportunity to have a Division A and/or Division B team.

   Division A (The Competitive Model): All athletes and partners on a Unified Sports competitive team must have the necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current rule and all players possess similar ability levels.

   Division B (The Player Development Model): Teammates are not required to be of similar abilities and 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. Because of differences in abilities, rules modifications could be explored, which should ensure the meaningful involvement of all teammates as well as define the role of higher ability players.

• Unified Basketball teams could follow the MSHSL Basketball maximum number of contests stipulations per bylaw 501.00.
• Winter season, running parallel with the current MSHSL basketball season.

1. **Equity:** For too long students with disabilities have been on the sidelines cheering on their fellow students during athletic competitions and extracurricular activities. By having Unified Basketball in the winter season it gives student-athletes and teams the same access to opportunities as their peers related to fans, facilities, and support systems. This time frame aligns with the current MSHSL basketball season to which will help validate the sport with the school community.

2. **National guidance:** The National Federation of State High School Associations recently published resource states, “[Unified] Teams are administered and supported in a similar fashion as other interscholastic sports teams.” *(see appendix 6)*

3. **State program best practices:** Among the state interscholastic athletic associations which sanction Unified Basketball, a majority of them hold Unified Basketball in the same season as the other sanctioned basketball offerings.

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**Rationale**

• In 2021, eight region committees (1A, 4A, 5A, 6A, 8A, 2AA, 3AA, 4AA) voted “yes” to move forward with the Unified Basketball proposal in the representative assembly process.

• **Special Olympics Minnesota will financially support Unified Sports in the following areas until a sustainable model is created in collaboration with the MSHSL:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Olympics Minnesota will financially support the MSHSL by:</th>
<th>Special Olympics Minnesota will financially support schools by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding additional MSHSL staff FTEs</td>
<td>providing funding to support the formation of new Unified Sports teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>providing additional revenue stream opportunities</td>
<td>Year 1: $5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subsidizing costs affiliated with state tournaments</td>
<td>Year 2: $3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 3: $1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Funds can be used for uniforms, coach pay, equipment, transportation, etc.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• In Unified Sports, there is a space for everyone to compete regardless of ability level.

• Unified Sports attracts students who would otherwise not participate in an extracurricular activity.

• This has been an 84% participation growth rate of Unified Sports in Minnesota schools since 2015.

• 94 schools in Minnesota have participated in a Unified Sports event since 2015.

• Unified Basketball continues to prove to be Minnesota’s most popular Unified Sport among student-athletes.

• Unified Sports provides an opportunity for the league to expand its sports offering for student-athletes with disabilities and provide a competitively equitable experience.

• As seen from other state programs, Unified Sports brings in additional revenue sources from sponsors, new donor acquisitions, and foundations.
Today’s schools are tomorrow’s communities. By adding Unified Basketball to the Minnesota State High School League’s officially sanctioned interscholastic sport offering, schools will have the chance to reach more students while showcasing and teaching meaningful inclusion.

This partnership will enhance the Minnesota State High School League’s belief of “participation in school-sponsored activities must be inclusive, not exclusive.” Unified Basketball will bring competitive equity to the league and instill that, regardless of ability, students with disabilities are valued and celebrated within the school community. We thank you for your consideration and are optimistic for the future of the unified movement within schools across the great state of Minnesota!
This proposal formally requests the Minnesota State High School League to officially sanction a Unified Basketball Season starting during the 2022-2023 school year.
Unified Sports joins students with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. By using sports as a catalyst for change, students work together towards a common goal and are educated, motivated, and activated to recognize abilities rather than disabilities.

This grassroots sports movement is driven by a unified generation of students who choose to include. Students lead the mission, creating a ripple effect in their schools and communities. Unified Sports is part of a larger initiative called Unified Champion Schools (see appendix 1), a strategy that promotes acceptance and inclusion in over 10,000 schools nationwide through various initiatives under three programming pillars: Unified Sports, Inclusive Student Leadership, and Whole School Engagement.

In Minnesota, there were over 3,000 Unified Sports student experiences during the 2018-2019 school year reaching schools from Minneapolis to Bemidji, Redwood to Stillwater, and from Proctor to Shakopee. While Unified Sports draws traditional varsity High School student-athletes, Unified Sports also provides a place for students to participate who would never choose to engage with an extracurricular opportunity or student-athletes who did not make their school’s athletic team. In Unified Sports, there is a space for everyone regardless of ability and because of this, schools that have Unified Sports start to see a shift towards a more respectful and inclusive school culture.

Special Olympics Minnesota (SOMN) is excited to cultivate a partnership with the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL). With Adapted Sports (see appendix 2) and Unified Sports already present in Minnesota schools, the Minnesota State High School League is positioned to be the premier interscholastic association in the nation to showcase how to effectively sanction multiple interscholastic sport offerings to students with disabilities. The collective power of these organizations allow for unlimited potential to change school culture and provide meaningful experiences for students with and without disabilities.

The desired outcome of adding a Unified Basketball season is for both organizations to benefit from: further reach related to missional focus, heightened visibility of organizational programs, and to be the premier interscholastic league related to opportunities for students with disabilities.
THE IMPACT

Special Olympics embraced Unified Sports in 1989 and has reached hundreds of thousands of students worldwide. In the United States, 46 of 50 State Interscholastic Athletic Associations (see appendix 3) have an official or emerging relationship with their local Special Olympics state program to provide statewide Interscholastic Athletic Association sanctioned Unified Sports.

Unified Sports participation in Minnesota schools has seen an 84% growth rate since 2015. By sanctioning various Unified Sports through the MSHSL, the amount of opportunities for students of all abilities to participate in interscholastic sports will increase. Since 2015, 94 schools in Minnesota (see appendix 4) have participated in Unified Sports events. These sport offerings have included Unified Basketball, Unified Soccer, Unified Bowling, Unified Flag Football, Unified Bocce, and Unified Track and Field. In 2020, Special Olympics hosted the first ever Minnesota State High School Unified Basketball State Tournament in which high school teams from across state competed for the title of State Champion in two divisions.

In 2018, the National Federation of State High School Associations and Special Olympics North America signed a Memorandum of Understanding (see appendix 5) to continue their collaborative efforts to advance inclusion programs for students with disabilities. While mobilizing the organizational structures of both organizations, the stated goals of the partnership are to:

1. Increase participation of students with intellectual disabilities through interscholastic Special Olympics Unified Sports and other inclusive school programs;

2. Support official partnerships between NFHS member state associations and/or local schools and Special Olympics state Programs; and

3. Increase the quality of inclusion programs in schools nationwide by serving as a resource for NFHS state associations and Special Olympics state Programs.

National Partners

Unified Basketball continues to prove to be Minnesota's most popular Unified sport among student-athletes. In Unified Basketball three athletes (students with an intellectual disability) and two Unified partners (students without an intellectual disability) compete on the court.

Unified Sports competitions are based on the idea that student-athletes of all abilities should be given an equitable chance of succeeding, whether it is a personal best or a gold medal. Special Olympics calls this competition-level matching “divisioning.” It is a fundamental rule at Special Olympics that athletes in competitions are matched up with others of about the same competitive ability to provide meaningful experiences. With Unified Basketball, each school will have the opportunity to have a Division A and/or Division B team.

**Division A** (The Competitive Model): All athletes and partners on a Unified Sports competitive team must have the necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current rule and all players possess similar ability levels.

**Division B** (The Player Development Model): Teammates are not required to be of similar abilities and 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. Because of differences in abilities, rules modifications could be explored, which should ensure the meaningful involvement of all teammates as well as define the role of higher ability players.
It is proposed that Unified Basketball is to be played during the winter season starting in the 2021-2022 school year. The rationale includes:

1. **Equity:** For too long students with disabilities have been on the sidelines cheering on their fellow students during athletic competitions and extracurricular activities. By having Unified Basketball in the winter season it gives student-athletes and teams the same access to opportunities as their peers related to fans, facilities, and support systems. This time frame aligns with the current MSHSL basketball season to which will help validate the sport with the school community.

2. **National guidance:** The National Federation of State High School Associations recently published resource states, “[Unified] Teams are administered and supported in a similar fashion as other interscholastic sports teams.” *(see appendix 6)*

3. **State program best practices:** among the state interscholastic athletic associations which sanction Unified Basketball, a majority of them hold Unified Basketball in the same season as the other sanctioned basketball offerings.

## THE SUPPORT

### Finances

SOMN is prepared to invest in a partnership with the MSHSL to grow the missions and shared goals of each organization. SOMN’s goal with this investment is to relieve the barriers of time and money so schools and organizations can implement a quality Unified Sports program and create long-term financial sustainability for said schools and organizations.

**Staffing Support:** SOMN is willing to financially support the hiring of up to two positions related to the titles of ‘Assistant/Associate Director’ and ‘Administrative Assistant’ for the MSHSL to cover all areas related to Unified Sports as workload demands. Job duties could include state tournament oversight, program quality and growth, staff liaison to SOMN, conference attendance, school technical assistance, student leadership innovation, etc. SOMN is willing to make a financial contribution until a sustainable financial model is created to support said positions.

**School Support:** SOMN is willing to financially support individual schools interested in adding a new Unified Sports team to its sanctioned athletic offering. We are also committed to working with individual schools to create a sustainability plan to successfully support Unified Sports teams for years to come through various fundraising options, revenue share events, and other revenue streams. An example of this model could look like the following:

Seed Funding to Support Addition of a New Unified Sports Team Draft
_Funds could be spent on uniforms, coach pay, transportation, equipment, etc._

- School year 1 - $5,000
- School year 2 - $3,000
- School year 3 - $1,000

**Event Support:** SOMN is willing to provide financial support for Unified Sports State Tournament costs related to facilities, awards, equipment, tournament staff, referees, and other costs incurred until a sustainable financial model is created to support said tournaments.
Future Revenue Opportunities: As seen from other Interscholastic Athletic Associations and Special Olympics Program partnerships across the nation, this collaborative partnership provides the opportunity to bring in additional revenue sources from new sponsors and foundations, revenue share events such as the Polar Plunge, ticket sales with the addition of events offered, and new donor acquisitions. Examples of sponsors investing in Unified Sport partnerships in other states includes ESPN and Spalding.

Coach Recruitment

As seen with other state associations Unified Sports teams attract coaches from a variety of areas. Some of those areas include, Special Education Teachers, coaches who want to start their coaching career in a less intimidating environment, and alumni who participated in Unified Sports while in High School. From SOMN’s own experience, recruitment of Unified Sports coaches has not been an issue since it’s initial offering in 2015. In addition, NFHS and Special Olympics have many resources related to recruiting, supporting, and training Unified Sports coaches easily accessible for schools to utilize.

Best Practices

With over 46 Interscholastic Athletic Association and Special Olympics state program partnerships in the Unified States, it is imperative both organizations lean on these colleagues for best practices. In addition to the National Federation of State High School Associations and Special Olympics North America, SOMN is willing to commit resources to gather several existing partnerships and organizations to help the MSHSL and SOMN explore, advise, and mentor a new partnership.

Tentative Maximum Number of Contests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Weeks of Season</th>
<th>Weeks of Practice/Weeks of Tournaments</th>
<th>Maximum Number of Contests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basketball, Unified</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gym Space Solutions

By adding a Unified Basketball season, schools might be faced with gym space availability scenarios. It is our responsibility as educators, administration, and coaches to support the MSHSL belief that “students should have an equal opportunity to participate in all activities offered by their school” and students of all abilities deserve this when it comes to practice and game space. A mindset of competitive equity will enhance student-athlete experiences when they train and compete. Below are best practices in how to address those scenarios:

1. Offer practices right after school.
2. Explore other practice spaces within district and community.
3. Offer practice times in the mornings.
4. Schedule games alternating with other level games.
5. Combine transportation and game locations with other level offerings.
6. Reduce practice times of other teams.
7. Combine practices with other level offerings.
8. Unified Sport teams do not need to have the same practice and game schedule as other varsity teams.
**Future Phases of a Unified Sports Partnership with the MSHSL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Proposed Sport Season</th>
<th>School Year Start Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basketball, Unified</td>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>2022 - 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bocce, Unified</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>2023 - 2024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flag Football, Unified</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>2023 - 2024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track &amp; Field, Unified</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>2024 - 2025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CLOSING**

Today’s schools are tomorrow’s communities. By adding Unified Basketball to the Minnesota State High School League’s officially sanctioned interscholastic sport offering, schools will have the chance to reach more students while showcasing and teaching meaningful inclusion.

This partnership will enhance the Minnesota State High School League’s belief of “participation in school-sponsored activities must be inclusive, not exclusive.” Unified Basketball will bring competitive equity to the league and instill that, regardless of ability, students with disabilities are valued and celebrated within the school community.

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