

## Featured Mental Health Initiative

### MVHS Special Olympics Ambassadors

#### Miramichi Valley High School (Miramichi, NB)

##### Background

Miramichi Valley High School includes students from both urban and rural communities in the surrounding region. There are approximately 550 students in grades 9-12, all with a range of interests and abilities. The staff at Miramichi Valley High School work to foster well-being within the school environment, with a focus on academics, mental health, wellness, inclusion, and diversity.

##### Promising Practice

Over the past two years, the school has supported [Special Olympics](#) in the following ways:

- Organizing and hosting events for the New Brunswick Special Olympic Winter Games
- Starting a [Unified Sports](#) program for students
- volunteering over 300 hours with Special Olympics Miramichi and [Special Olympics New Brunswick](#)
- Organizing a full day summit for eight high schools showcasing and sharing best practices for personalized learning and community inclusion

This work has provided students with the ability to critically evaluate gaps and barriers to inclusion both in the school and community setting, with the goal of creating awareness about the importance of Special Olympics, while also showcasing how participating in programming has a positive effect on the mental health of both the athletes and the coaches.



MVHS Special Olympics Ambassadors is a cross-curricular course that provides students with the opportunity to support the Special Olympics community at the school and in the greater Miramichi region. Unfortunately, many Special Olympics sports have been postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. This initiative will create new outdoor opportunities that follow COVID-19 regulations, allowing relationships between Special Olympic athletes and students (coaches) to continue to grow. The staff recognize that sport and physical activity have a strong and positive influence on mental health, and to continue to support mental health of the athletes and the coaches, students (coaches) will be partnered with Special Olympic athletes for weekly socially distanced hikes, and in the winter months, snowshoeing. The students will lead the planning, marketing and execution of this initiative in conjunction with the local Special Olympics Committee and Anglophone North

School District Officials. This initiative also provides students with additional skills including leadership and volunteerism.

### Impact

Miramichi and the greater community look to the students as inclusion ambassadors. Getting out into nature through snowshoeing and hiking will positively impact the athletes' mental and physical wellness and also provide the students with the personal satisfactions that are associated with volunteering and promoting mental and physical well-being. The skills learned in this program help to create leaders within the community.



### Sustainability

The sustained partnership between the school and the local Special Olympics organization has led to an increased enrollment of Special Olympic athletes in Miramichi and an increased enrollment of student volunteers. This initiative will lead to the establishment of Special Olympics Snowshoeing program in Miramichi and can

be easily sustained after purchasing the snowshoes. This partnership has inspired others from the community and beyond to get involved and adapt this type of programming into their schools and communities.

### Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- If a partnership with your local Special Olympics organization is not feasible, research other organizations in your area that could benefit from forming a relationship with students (i.e., [L'Arche](#), or [another local organization](#))
- If access to outdoor activities is a barrier, consider other wellness activities, such as arts and crafts, music, or other forms of indoor wellness activities would work
- Consider how your school could create a similar mentorship program with younger and older students through weekly discussions or weekly physical activity participation

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