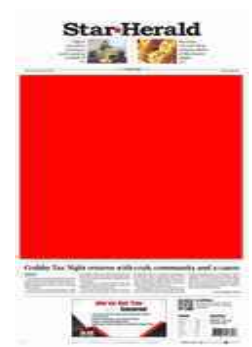


## SPEECH WITH PURPOSE

Scottsbluff Star-Herald  
Scottsbluff, Nebraska, US

Tuesday, March 31, 2026  
Page 1,2, Section: NEWS  
851 words, 169in<sup>2</sup> in size  
2,104 circulation



# SPEECH WITH PURPOSE



MEGAN KELLEY, STAR-HERALD

Scottsbluff High School's Tristan Jones (TJ) and Susan Anderson practice their duet script of "Finding Nemo" for Unified Speech.

## Scottsbluff Unified Speech program builds inclusion

MEGAN KELLEY  
Star-Herald

At Scottsbluff High School, Unified Speech is opening the door for students of all abilities to perform.

Among the students competing this year in Unified Speech are Tristan Jones (TJ) and Susan Anderson, who team up in a duet performance of "Finding Nemo."

Unified Speech in Nebraska is an NSAA-sanctioned program in partnership with Special Olympics Nebraska that pairs students with and without intellectual disabilities to compete together in speech competitions. It features events like unified duet acting at the state championships, promoting inclusivity and teamwork.

According to Staysha Adams, coach and Jones' middle school special education teacher, Anderson is TJ's "bestie" so the pairing fits perfectly. She said Jones would not have done the duet unless he was with Anderson.

Adams said Jones' mother has said he will watch the movie "Finding Nemo" at home and follow along in his script.

"It's fun," Jones said of competing with Anderson. He also competes in Unified Bowling in the winter and has just started competing in Unified Track, where he runs and throws the shot put.

There's one other Unified Speech student on Adams' team, Nathaniel Cuzares, who competes in entertainment.

Adams said Cuzares' speech features the three teachers he sees most throughout the day.

"He talks about Mrs. Anderson's big classes and how she loves reading, and how Mr. Ozuna loves jokes, and then how Mrs. O'Boyle is a strict teacher," Adams said.

She added that Cuzares wrote his speech himself, with Anderson only helping him put pen to paper.

"Mrs. Anderson has been a really big help for the team," she said.

"She has both TJ and Nathaniel in her reading class throughout the day, so she lets them practice their speeches and helps them write."

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## Speech

From AI:

The rest of Adams' team, though they may not have a unified partner, have come and watched Anderson's and Jones' practices and Cuzares' as well.

They've also come to their rounds during the meets to cheer them on.

"They're excited to travel with them," Adams said of the unified students. "(Everyone) has been a really supportive group."

But it's not just the rest of Adams' team who support each other, but the entire school.

Before districts, several teachers in the building came to watch the district team practice and offer critiques.

"Mr. Gipe, Mr. Ronne, Mrs. Muhr, Mr. Shank, they all came down, gave the kids critiques to help them get ready for districts," Adams said. "So yeah, the school is really supportive."

Unified Speech students are guaranteed a bid to state as long as they compete in two regular meets in the season and apply with the NSAA assistant director who is in charge of speech, Taryn Retzlaff. If there are too many entries, Retzlaff would have to turn some away.

"But there aren't enough of them in our class," Adams said. "There are only three speakers in our class that



MEGAN KELLEY, STAR-HERALD

Scottsbluff High School Unified Speech Team's coach Staysha Adams looks over scripts with duet team Tristan Jones (TJ) and Susan Anderson.

are unified, so they're going straight to finals."

Students in Scottsbluff speech have been welcoming of the Unified Speech program, she said.

"I actually had more kids, more regular education students, who were interested in doing unified than I did students with disabilities. ... Which I feel like is a good problem to have," Adams said. "I'm hoping that we get a little bit more unified students next year. I know a few from the middle school who are coming up who will probably do it."

Jones was a student of Adams' in middle school, having been with her since seventh grade. Once the special education students arrive

at the high school, Adams hands them off to her sister, Maggie Anderson.

When Adams took over as head speech coach last year, she wanted to do Unified Speech, but she decided that doing Unified during her first year was a bit much all at once.

"We are the only ones on this side of the state that do it," she said. "But there's Bennington, Millard West, Lincoln and Omaha schools, then it's us and Platteview in Class B.

Adams is hoping more schools in western Nebraska will join, so there could be an option for a Unified competition at tournaments, similar to a novice division.

"(Jones and Anderson)

held their own really well, competing in a regular tournament," she said, "but it would be nice to kind of give them a level playing field to see what they can really do."

Jones, Anderson and Cuzares competed at the NSAA State Speech Championships in Kearney on Saturday, March 28. Cuzares placed first in Unified Entertainment, while Jones and Anderson placed second in Unified Duet.

Sophie Bracken, a fellow Bearcat non-Unified speech member, also competed at the state meet and placed sixth in extemporaneous.

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