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Special Olympics Expands Free Program to 300-plus Students in San Francisco Public Schools

SAN FRANCISCO, April 1, 2008 – Because of the enthusiastic response from families and teachers, Special Olympics will expand an innovative program with the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) that offers special education students the opportunity to train and compete in team sports during the school day.

The Schools Partnership Program is funded by Special Olympics and free to participating schools. Already more than 300 special education students from 26 San Francisco schools have received track equipment and curriculum for their 10-week training that will culminate in a large track meet at Kezar Stadium on May 23.

“In the Bay Area, the Schools Partnership Program is the fastest growing segment of the Special Olympics program, said Special Olympics Chairman Timothy Shriver. “It reaches out to an athlete base that just needed the chance to participate. Nationwide it is the model program for growth.”

“In times of economic instability for schools here in California, Special Olympics is providing funding to ensure a physical education curriculum exists for individuals with intellectual disabilities,” Shriver added.

Teachers agree. “With California public schools under such financial duress, it’s nice to know something like this can be done with very little resources from the school,” said Paul Zager, a special education teacher currently on assignment to coordinate the Special Olympics program for SFUSD.

More than 1,000 students participated in the program in 2007, and that number is expected to grow substantially over the next few years. Special Olympics also offers the program in San Mateo County, and Contra Costa County.

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The Schools Partnership Program differs from Special Olympics' more familiar community-based program in that it takes place entirely within the school day instead of after school or on the weekends. It also is focused on school-age children.

"For many years, people with intellectual disabilities have been kept in the shadows, Shriver said. "But Special Olympics is helping to open the doors of opportunity for our athletes to be true leaders, not only on the sports team, but throughout their school."

Zager added, "It's exciting to see our students have an opportunity to compete and be recognized."
"We're always amazed at their abilities, and they take great pride in their accomplishments."

Last fall, 108 special education students from 10 San Francisco schools participated in a pilot program where they trained and competed in soccer. Special education teachers created training schedules, and coached practice sessions for students to learn soccer skills and prepare to compete.

The pilot program was divided into two groups: one group of special day classes was comprised of higher functioning students who trained as a team; the second group of classes was comprised of students with more severe impairments who learned basic soccer skills, like kicking a ball. All students learned rules and concepts of the game, including teamwork, sportsmanship, following directions and the importance of stretching.

Zager said that there may be a way to include traditional education students as well. "We think we can grow this program to provide volunteer opportunities for other students, too. It would be a really great way for kids to be involved in community service."

The San Francisco Unified School District serves about 55,000 students – approximately 6,200 of those students receive special education services through the district. For more information, visit www.sfusd.edu

About Special Olympics Northern California

Special Olympics Northern California is a free year-round sports training and competition program for children and adults with developmental disabilities. More than 13,000 athletes compete in 178 competitions throughout the region in 19 sports. This requires the extraordinary support and time of 12,700 volunteers and more than 4,600 volunteer coaches. Programs are free to all eligible athletes. Financial support comes almost exclusively from individuals, organizations, corporations, and foundations. The Schools Partnership Program is partially funded by AT&T, MedeFinance and AT&T, CBS Outdoor and Symantec. For more information on Special Olympics Northern California, visit www.SONC.org