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## Special Olympics



by Suzanne Kelley, Grades 3-5 Teacher

In the winter of 2008 Francis Scott Key Elementary was approached by Paul Zager, the Special Olympics Coordinator for SFUSD and former F. S. Key Special Education teacher, about an exciting opportunity for our special education students. He was heading up The Special Olympics Schools Partnership Program, designed to give students with special needs an opportunity to participate in team sports. This program was different from other Special Olympics programs, which were outside of school. The program is available to all students in the district who qualify for special education services.

F. S. Key jumped at the opportunity to be a part of a new program from its inception. We began with two classes, rooms 1 and 23, paving the way with a handful of other schools from around the district. Our first sport was soccer, something neither Ms. Manzone nor I knew much about. Luckily, Paul and his team had us covered: We received a curriculum and basic soccer equipment to get us on our way. We began practicing three times a week. We had eight weeks to practice. We knew that this adventure was all about learning to work as a team and have fun, but still we wanted our students to feel confident and be at the same skill level as the other students. We figured we couldn't be over-prepared.

The excitement and confidence was welling up inside our students and we knew we had made the right choice in participating. I had a student who regularly had difficulty expressing emotion and feelings run toward me with a huge smile on his face, exclaiming that he was having fun after a practice. It's hard to describe what it's like to see a child who feels she can't be successful have that myth shattered as she makes her first goal.

When the tournament finally arrived, bad weather forced us to have an indoor soccer game on the basketball courts of Sunset Recreation Center. Every Special Olympics tour-

namment or event starts off with the national anthem and Special Olympics oath. Two of our students were selected to say the national anthem and oath. Then the tournament began. The students played soccer all day. I don't think they were prepared for how much soccer they were going to be playing. At the end of the day they were exhausted and in third place. They had so much fun! All of their faces beamed as they held their ribbons with pride. These 25 children had learned to work as a team and have fun. What more could we, their teachers and coaches, have asked for?

Since that first event we have participated in two more Special Olympics tournaments. We followed up soccer with track and field, adding two more classes, rooms 8 and 9, as well as inclusion students to the F. S. Key team. The track and field event was even more of a spectacle with helicopters, many more students, and Superintendent Carlos Garcia. We had a large presence at the Opening Ceremonies as all our students and teachers sported F. S. Key dolphin t-shirts, generously provided by the PTA. As with the soccer tournament our students worked hard, showed good sportsmanship, and had fun.

At the beginning of this year we started all over again as we prepared for a soccer tournament in November. Since most of my students participated in the Special Olympics last year we only needed to brush up on our soccer skills and the anticipation of something new was replaced with excitement of something they already knew would be fun. We had our soccer tournament at the Little Rec. field in Golden Gate Park. Working as a team, we accomplished our goals and walked away with 100 percent more self confidence. Currently, the F. S. Key team is learning how to play basketball for our Tournament on February 27, at Sunset Recreational Center.

The Special Olympics has been an invaluable program for our Special Education students at Francis Scott Key. I feel that for many of our students it is one of their most cherished memories and perhaps one of the first times they had ever been part of a team. As my 5th graders moved on to middle school at the end of last year, many of them told me they were going to try out for the soccer team and go out for track and field. Without this program, I think, they might never have dared to dream of such thing. The Special Olympics gives my students another opportunity to feel success, something that can be hard for students who have difficulties with the daily rigors of academics or who are physically unable to be successful in traditional sports programs. This success bolsters the confidence needed to persevere with any other task in which success does not come readily. In playing sports together, my students are learning to be resilient and joyful learners. We are so fortunate to have these programs available for our students. ■