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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Las Cruces Public Schools to host first-ever Special Olympics Project UNIFY Basketball Tournament**

Las Cruces, NM – On May 15, Special Olympics New Mexico athletes and their peers without disabilities from three Las Cruces middle schools will participate in the first-ever Project UNIFY Basketball Tournament at Mesa Middle School. This unique sporting event will give competitive opportunity to student athletes of all ability levels – offering inclusion and promoting respect.

Mesa Middle School, Zia Middle School and Vista Middle School have each recruited students with and without disabilities and created basketball teams that integrate the two groups of students, bringing a new and refreshing concept of community to Las Cruces Public Schools. Forty students from each of the three schools have been practicing since March – and their efforts will culminate on May 15 as a school assembly at Mesa Middle School.

"When we are able to provide inclusive sports opportunities through Project UNIFY, not only are our special education students impacted by the opportunity, but so are our regular education students," stated Special Olympics New Mexico Executive Director Randy Mascarella. "Through Project UNIFY events, like this basketball tournament, they learn about the challenges of having a disability and how to help meet those challenges. Most importantly, they learn that their peers who face these challenges are more similar than different. When barriers are eliminated and friendships are formed, the culture of our schools becomes more welcoming and respectful."

Those students who are not competing in the tournament will be supporting their teams as "Fans in the Stands," fostering school-wide support for the event. Each school is even inviting their cheerleading squads.

Project UNIFY is an education-based initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education that aims to incorporate Special Olympics Unified Sports programs into schools in order to create more inclusive school communities while empowering youth as agents of change. Special Olympics New Mexico has been working for the last five years implementing Project UNIFY in more New Mexico schools.

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