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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Las Cruces Public Schools brings Autism Awareness to Elementary School students at Project UNIFY event**

Las Cruces, NM - On March 19, Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) hosted the first-ever Autism Awareness Team Building Competition at Central Elementary School. This event is part of LCPS's work with the Special Olympics Project UNIFY program that provides students with and without disabilities opportunities to participate in sports activities alongside one another.

Within LCPS, there are four school sites that have autism specific classes of no more than seven students. Each school site formed a team with their general education peers to practice team-building skills like a 3-legged race, team poles, summer skis, and tug-of-war. The regular education partners worked with their classmates with autism to develop the skills to complete these activities over several weeks before the event. The results of their preparation were staggering – not only did the students with autism excel at the team-building skills; they also developed a visible personal connection with their regular education partners. Of equal importance, regular education students gained awareness of the abilities and challenges of their autistic peers.

“Las Cruces Public Schools has taken huge steps to create opportunities to celebrate the abilities of all their students,” stated Victoria Gonzales, Project UNIFY and Community Outreach Specialist for Special Olympics New Mexico. “The Autism Awareness Team Competition engages students to work through their different challenges and compete as partners and friends.”

In addition to the Autism Awareness Team Building Competition, students of LCPS schools have been partaking in Youth Leadership initiatives which provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to take on leadership roles in promoting Project UNIFY activities in the school and community.

The Autism Awareness Team Building Competition was made possible by Special Olympics New Mexico's partnership with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico through its Healthy Kids, Healthy Families® grant.

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.

***About Special Olympics New Mexico:***

SONM provides year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. Today, Special Olympics New Mexico serves over 3,100 athletes, offering training and competition in 13 sports. SONM is sponsored year-round and statewide by New Mexico Knights of Columbus, New Mexico Law Enforcement Torch Run, French Funerals Cremations, Wells Fargo, Mark's Casa, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Comcast, New Mexico Chevy Dealers, 7-Eleven and ConocoPhillips.

***About Healthy Kids, Healthy Families:***

Healthy Kids, Healthy Families (HKHF) began as a three-year initiative designed to improve the health and wellness of at least one million children through community investments by Health Care Service Corporation and its Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans in Illinois, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Reaching nearly three million children within the first two years, HKHF is now a signature program of the organization and part of an ongoing commitment to invest in and partner with nonprofit organizations that offer sustainable, measurable programs to reach children and their families in areas of nutrition, physical activity, disease prevention and management, and supporting safe environments. To learn more about Health Kids, Healthy Families, please visit [www.healthykidshealthyfamilies.org](http://www.healthykidshealthyfamilies.org).

***About Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico:***

With almost 600,000 members, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico is the largest commercial health insurer in New Mexico. Since 1940, BCBSNM has been committed to promoting the health and wellness of its members and communities through accessible, cost-effective, quality health care. BCBSNM is a Division of Health Care Service Corporation, the country's largest customer-owned health insurer and fourth largest health insurer. Health Care Service Corporation is a Mutual Legal Reserve Company and an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

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