

## NEWS RELEASE

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# Covina-Valley Unified Middle School Promotes Inclusion Through Best Buddies Program

**COVINA, CA** – Las Palmas Middle School students are building lasting relationships and benefitting from a positive campus culture thanks to the Best Buddies program, which aims to foster connections between those with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Best Buddies, an international nonprofit that pairs students in one-on-one friendships, has had a home at Las Palmas for nearly five years. This school year, the program has grown to more than 50 general education students who work alongside the school's 16 Life-Skills Education Advancement Program (LEAP) students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.

"For our Las Palmas students, Best Buddies brings togetherness," said Jessica Marshall, a Las Palmas Counselor and Best Buddies Advisor. "We really pride ourselves on inclusion on this campus and not just segregating a group. We want them to be incorporated."

The Las Palmas Best Buddies program aims to positively impact the lives of its LEAP students by creating friendships with peers. Marshall credits the program for empowering general education students to develop leadership skills and enhance the school's culture.

"I enjoy being in Best Buddies because it brings me a happy feeling knowing I can have a deeper connection with our LEAP students and that I can impact their outlook on life," said AJ Sanchez, a Las Palmas eighth-grader and Best Buddies volunteer.

Las Palmas started Best Buddies as a club on campus during the 2018-19 school year. Marshall said that initially, a small group of students was involved, so they started introducing it to more of the student population by collaborating with different classes in 2020-21.

Today, Las Palmas students can sign up for the Best Buddies club or physical education class. At the same time, the school's Renaissance program collaborates with Best Buddies on in-class activities.

Two Best Buddies PE classes meet daily, and Renaissance students meet with their buddies every other week. Outside the classroom, the Best Buddies club meets monthly for lunch and a special activity geared to the month's holiday theme.

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“It is inspiring to see how our students at Las Palmas Middle School engage with each other through the Best Buddies program,” Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Eminhizer said. “One of our values in Covina-Valley Unified is inclusion; there is so much our students can learn from each other, and this program fosters those important connections.”

### **PHOTO CAPTIONS**

**C-VUSD\_BEST\_BUDDIES1:** Las Palmas Best Buddies students connect over lunch. The club, which meets monthly to foster friendships between general education students and students with disabilities, celebrated Halloween with lunch, festivities, arts and crafts, and outdoor games.

**C-VUSD\_BEST\_BUDDIES2:** Students in the Las Palmas Best Buddies club get to know each other during the club’s first meeting of the 2022-23 school year. More than 50 general education students participate in Best Buddies together with students with disabilities at Las Palmas.

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