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## NEWS RELEASE

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# Las Palmas Middle School Builds Culture of Inclusion through Best Buddies Program

**COVINA, CA** – Las Palmas Middle School students are creating a culture of inclusion and friendship through the school’s Best Buddies program, creating meaningful connections that have earned the campus the distinction of Best Buddies California Outstanding Middle School Chapter of the Year.

The Best Buddies program pairs students with disabilities with peers, creating opportunities to build friendships, a sense of belonging, and inclusion across campus. What began nearly a decade ago as a small club has grown into a campuswide effort involving leadership students, physical education (PE) classes, and a dedicated Best Buddies Club, with 71 students currently participating.

“It can sometimes be difficult for our students with disabilities to get involved, but they want to socialize and make friends as much as any other student,” Best Buddies advisor and Las Palmas teacher Joy Gaspy said. “When students build those relationships and see beyond differences, it impacts not only the students involved, but the entire school community.”

Students participate in activities throughout the year, including holiday-themed events, games, picnics, and campus gatherings. Through the school’s inclusive PE program, students also assist their buddies during class, helping them navigate the locker room, guiding them through activities, and ensuring they feel supported.

“Our students with disabilities are primarily self-contained throughout the day, so having the opportunity to participate in general education PE classes alongside their classmates is incredibly meaningful,” Gaspy said. “It helps create real connections and gives students a true sense of belonging.”

Best Buddies students also participate in Districtwide and regional events, including the annual Special Education Sports Festival and Special Education Local Plan Area Arts Festival, where students cheer one another on and celebrate each other’s achievements.

Each year, schools across California are nominated for the Chapter of the Year distinction. Las Palmas was chosen for this honor out of 24 other middle schools for its commitment to promoting inclusion and building a welcoming campus culture for all students.

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“At Covina-Valley Unified, every student deserves to feel seen, supported, and empowered,” Superintendent Dr. Jonathan Blackmore said. “The compassion and leadership demonstrated by Las Palmas students and staff is truly inspirational. This recognition reflects the incredible culture of inclusion they have created on campus – congratulations, Lancers!”

**PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

**CVUSD\_BESTBUDDIES1:** Las Palmas Middle School students are creating a culture of inclusion and friendship, earning the distinction of Best Buddies California Outstanding Middle School Chapter of the Year.

**CVUSD\_BESTBUDDIES2:** Best Buddies students participate in Districtwide and regional events, including the annual Special Education Sports Festival, where students cheer one another on and celebrate each other’s achievements.

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