



## **Project UNIFY: Volunteer to Cheer**

If you've ever played sports, you know what it's like to be cheered on by a crowd. The applause, the shouts of encouragement, the adrenaline rush. Now imagine that same swim meet, that same soccer tournament, that same football game – but without the fans. We believe it's truly not as special without the fans – and that goes for any competition, including Special Olympics.

Thanks to the Department of Education's Project UNIFY grant, Special Olympics Virginia again is taking the "Volunteer to Cheer" project to schools in three regions of the state – Virginia Beach, Stafford and Richmond – during our three largest competitions – Fall Championships, Basketball Championships and Summer Games. We'll also be encouraging people to be fans during several Young Athletes "Little Feet Meets" and Urban Programs events this spring – stay tuned!

The "Volunteer to Cheer" concept was piloted during the 2008 Summer Games. It featured a drive-to-Web campaign, which included the design of a new Web site, [volunteer2cheer.com](http://volunteer2cheer.com), where volunteers could sign up to spend two hours – or all day – cheering on Special Olympics athletes. The campaign's tagline, "It's Not as Special Without Fans," captures the importance of having a "fans" at our competitions and also provides a terrific way to involve all members of the community in our program. It was tested during the Summer Games with more than 1,000 people signing up to be "fans" in just 30 days; since then, thanks to Project UNIFY, more than 4,000 people have cheered on our athletes, making for some of our most enthusiastic competitions on record!

Using the 2009-2010 Project UNIFY grant funds, we again plan to partner with various schools in each region and spread the "Volunteer to Cheer" message. Specifically, we would like to set up opportunities for Special Olympics Virginia Global Messengers to speak to large groups of students about the project and Special Olympics; and also share posters and materials with each school, meet with school clubs and organizations, and work with schools' athletic teams – all to entice as many students as possible to "Volunteer to Cheer."

It is the hope then that these competitions will provide a venue for genuine interaction between the disabled and non-disabled student populations in each school, so they will begin to change their perceptions about people with intellectual disabilities, which is the ultimate goal of Project UNIFY. From there, students can begin to break down stereotypes and build a more inclusive community both at home and at school.