

Over the more than 200 hours that I've spent volunteering for the Special Olympics Washington Unified club and sports program, I've been witness to countless acts of service, inclusion, diversity and community for children with and without developmental and intellectual disabilities. The program celebrates students' similarities and differences and is a catalyst for equality for these students to be valued on and off the field. It has similarly been a catalyst in my decision to further my education toward becoming a teacher.

When I became a special education paraeducator at North Thurston High School, I knew I would be challenged to face the disparities and difficulties that students and families experience because of their ability level. I was prepared for the classroom participation my role would require and knew that it would demand all of my faculties in ensuring the best opportunities in education for my students. The coalescence of utilizing my voice and abilities to influence change through being a coach for Unified has demanded leadership skills that far surpass what I thought was possible. During my time volunteering, I've been reminded how invaluable educator support is. When I reflect on my favorite teachers, they made an impact on my life not just because they were excellent in their field, but because they instilled in me the courage to never give up. Those teachers taught me how to navigate my involvement with the Special Olympics Unified program.

Special Olympics calls all of their participants "champions," and the students involved in Unified at North Thurston High School are nothing short of that. The general education participants are asked to evaluate the privilege and advantage of being able bodied. Their involvement in a myriad of classes tasks them with the difficult question of why representation matters. For every voice at North Thurston High School that may not have the tools to articulate the accommodations they need, there are dozens of voices behind them championing the betterment of their opportunities. They call themselves the "inclusion revolution" and live up to that motto every chance they get. When I become a teacher, this will remain incredibly important to me. To be kind, to be accepting, and to be unified.

The Special Olympics motto never fails to affect me. It encompasses everything I believe to be true about education. It is at the heart of all the great teachers who have made a significant difference in my life. "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."