



OUR Promise FEATURES

Integrity - Perseverance - Inclusivity - Innovation - Excellence



Supporting Every Learner: PJUSD Special Education Department

For this month's Promise Feature, learn how our very own Special Education Department, and the programs, services, and events they provide, like the Special Olympics, help ensure every student in our District has the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed.

With our District's Special Olympics and Junior Special Olympics events just around the corner, many of our students are gearing up for one of the most exciting days of the year. But behind these events is a dedicated team that works year-round to support our students and families. That team is our District's very own Special Education Department.

The Special Education Department at PJUSD is made up of a small, dedicated team that works across all of our schools to support students and families. Leading the team is Director John Saylor, along with Program Specialists Lee Canady, Lisa Kainoa, and Kari Townsend. Supporting their work is Administrative Assistant Jennifer Lemus, who helps keep the department running smoothly. Together, this team works closely with teachers, families, and school staff to make sure our students receive the services and support they need to learn, grow and succeed.

"At its core, special education isn't about 'separate' education, it's about equity," said Saylor. "Its purpose is to ensure that students with disabilities have the same access to the curriculum as students without disabilities."

To make this possible, our District offers a variety of programs and services designed to support students based on their individual needs. These supports include specialized academic instruction in general and special education classrooms, speech therapy, occupation therapy, adaptive physical education, counseling, behavior intervention services, and other specialized supports that help students succeed both inside and outside the classroom.



“Beyond academics, we support students’ learning in daily living activities, such as cooking simple meals, grocery shopping, and developing vocational skills for potential future employment post-graduation.”

Additionally, students at our District’s Rising Sun Farm & Garden program enter crafts in the Stanislaus County Fair, host an annual community Easter Egg Hunt, and hold community plant sales that they themselves help to grow and nurture, twice a year.

One of the most anticipated events supported by the department each year is the Special Olympics Track & Field event. The event gives students with moderate to severe disabilities the opportunity to take part in school athletic competitions. Students compete in events such as the 50 or 100 meter dash, the long jump, the long throw, and relay race between secondary school programs. Every student receives a medal to celebrate their participation and accomplishments. This year will mark the fourth annual Special Olympics event at Patterson High School, scheduled for March 27th, 2026.

The department has also expanded the celebration to include a Junior Special Olympics event at West Valley for students in preschool and TK special education programs. Similar activities are adapted for younger participants so they can experience the joy of participating in a school sporting event and celebrate their achievements alongside their families and classmates. The second annual Junior Special Olympics will take place on April 2nd, 2026, continuing a tradition that highlights the dedication of the Special Education team and the incredible accomplishments of our students.