

# Program celebrates people's differences

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## Plan for schools also to help fund special athletes

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Fareed Champsî knows what it means to be a winner.

The 16-year-old athlete hasn't let mental disabilities stand in the way of his dreams to compete in the Special Olympics.

But the Thornhill Secondary School student is doing more than reaching for gold. Last week, he helped launch a program that aims to give elementary school students a better understanding of the diverse communities in which they live and of the obstacles faced by people with disabilities.

Champsî's message to youngsters at Ramer Wood Public School in Markham was simple.

"Celebrating diversity, it's what life is all about," the enthusiastic young swimmer said.

Called Celebrating Diversity, the program for students in Grades 4 to 8 is a partnership

between Classroom Connections, which is a non-profit group providing a variety of resources to schools, the Ontario Special Olympics and corporate sponsor Subway Sandwiches.

"It's a valuable learning tool, an investment in education and the community," said Glenn MacDonell, executive director of the Ontario Special Olympics, a charity offering training and competition for 11,000 athletes with mental disabilities in Olympic-sanctioned sports and demonstration events.

Subway is underwriting the cost of classroom materials, which include a teacher's guide and video to stimulate discussions about issues such as stereotyping and other obstacles facing the disabled.

The program is free to schools across Ontario.

Subway is also participating in student lunch programs, with part of the proceeds from each meal purchased to be donated to the school and the Ontario Special Olympics, to support athletes like Champsî, who's training hard to make his Olympic dreams a reality.

Heather MacTaggart, execu-

tive director of Classroom Connections, said plans are in the works to introduce the program to elementary and high schools across the country.

York Region police Chief Julian Fantino threw his support behind the program, which he said will help clear up misconceptions about the disabled and break down the barriers they face in society.

"If you can get the seeds planted at an early stage (with young people), there's going to be a tremendous benefit to our society," he said.

The York Region force will host the 2000 Special Olympics spring games from May 11 to 14.

More than 900 athletes and coaches are to participate in events including floor hockey, swimming, power lifting, and 5- and 10-pin bowling.

Champsî, who has won scores of ribbons, medals and trophies for swimming since he joined the Ontario Special Olympics three years ago, credits the organization, his brother Aly, who is his swimming coach, and his mom Nermin for giving him the confidence he needed to "try new things."

