

Quick-Start Kit



Spreading spirit to high schools
across America

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Congratulations! You are taking the first step toward starting your own cheerleading squad for students with special needs. Although we originally created our squad, the Spartan Sparkles (www.spartansparkles.com), so that we might play a part in enhancing social, communication, and physical skills in students with disabilities, we now see the tremendous positive effects that our Sparkles have had on us, our entire student body, and our community. It's exciting to know that cheerleaders like you will soon experience "The Sparkle Effect" as you seize this amazing, life-changing opportunity.

We are confident that this Quick-Start kit will give you all of the information and tools you will need to start your own squad. Rest assured, we stand ready to answer questions and provide guidance to you every step of the way. Our goal is to help to create one hundred new high-school based squads for students with special needs in the next two years. The outcome of the Sparkle Effect will be profound: One hundred new "Sparkles" programs (that's just two more in each state) will touch more than 1,000 special-needs students and their families. This will move the hearts and consciousness of 500,000 students and millions of neighbors – mainstreamed with love, all changed forever. That's the Sparkle Effect. Let's get started!

Sarah Cronk

Sarah Herr

Co-founders, The Sparkle Effect

What is the Sparkle Effect?

The Sparkle Effect is a revolutionary student-run organization that provides tools and support to high school cheerleaders to enable them to create cheerleading squads for students with special needs. The Sparkle Effect envisions that through the creation of these new squads, typically developing cheerleaders and their disabled peers will cheer side-by-side with one another at high school sporting events. Eventually, schools that sponsor cheerleading squads for students with disabilities will come to understand that true inclusion – giving disabled students opportunities to shine – is not about doing a favor for those who struggle. It is about opening our minds and our hearts to experiences which encourage, release, and recognize *everyone's* gifts.

What will I need to start my own program at my high school?

- an unwavering belief that you can make this happen!
- a core group of hard-working, motivated cheerleaders committed to the program
- interested participants in your area
- support from the school administration
- an adult (teacher, coach, or parent) advisor
- a place to practice safely

12 Steps to Creating Your New Squad

1. **Form your core group of cheerleaders:** It is not necessary to have your entire cheerleading squad join your program. Ideally, you will choose four to six cheerleaders to manage a squad that includes up to ten students with disabilities. Resist the temptation to choose your best friends on the squad. Instead, select only cheerleaders who are dependable, mature, responsible, comfortable working with those with differences, and willing to commit to the program for at least one school year. (*See sample Cheerleader Commitment Contract, page 10*) You will need one girl to serve as captain of the team. This girl will lead the practices, communicate information to everyone on the squad, and work with the school administration.
2. **Find an adult willing to chaperone, support, and counsel you through the program:** Approach an adult who might be interested in serving as your advisor and chaperone. Your cheer coach may be the obvious person to ask, although certainly not the only possibility. Parents, teachers, and school counselors might also be willing to serve in this role. Make sure that any adult you approach understands that, although the program is entirely student-run, he/she must commit to attend meetings and practices, supervise the group at games, and advise the cheerleaders who run the program.
3. **Hold a meeting to define the parameters of the new squad:** Once you have found your core group of cheerleaders and your adult advisor, meet to define the parameters of your squad. We strongly advise you to start small. It is much better to start out with just a few students with disabilities and then to grow the program after the program's success is evident. The administration at your school is also much more likely to endorse your program if you have clearly defined it and if it is clear that you haven't taken on more than you can reasonably handle.

You will need to determine: (1) the age-range for your participants; (2) the total number of students you are willing to have on the squad; (3) the number, length, and location of practices; (4) the games at which your new squad will cheer with you and how long they will cheer at each game.

We started out with just six girls, ages 8-15, and practiced two times per week in our school cafeteria. We promised only that the new squad would cheer with us for part of a few home football games. During the first two home football games, the Sparkles performed a dance routine with us for the crowd and cheered with us

on the sidelines for about ten minutes. The program was very successful from the beginning. Our squad grew to include ten girls with special needs and six Pleasant Valley varsity cheerleaders. The Sparkles ended up cheering at three out of four of our home football games and several home basketball games, where they cheered with us for one full quarter of each game. We now have a waiting list of students anxious to join the team.

4. **Draft a letter to your school administrators:** It is critical that you obtain the approval and support from your school administration before you approach potential participants. We have drafted a sample letter that you may use to approach your administration about starting your own cheerleading squad for students with special needs. (*See Sample Letter, page 11*) Before we started our squad, we contacted our high school principal as well as the principals at the junior high and elementary schools in our district.
5. **Meet with your school administrators to obtain approval:** Arrange for a face-to-face meeting with your school administrators. Plan ahead of time who will speak for your group and what you are going to say. Be sure that you can clearly articulate the purpose for starting a new squad as well as your short- and long-term goals. Explain how you will go about finding potential participants, where and when practices will take place, and what you envision the program will look like once it is up and running. Be sure to include your athletic director in this meeting, as you will most likely need to coordinate with him or her to decide when and where your new squad will cheer.

Most importantly, listen carefully with an open mind to any concerns the administration may have. You are proposing something revolutionary so you need to expect that the school administrators may have doubts about the advisability of supporting your program. Be willing to compromise and negotiate if necessary. For example, we promised our administration that our program would start as a small “pilot program.” We agreed that we would evaluate the success of the program at the end of football season to see if it made sense to continue it. Needless to say, our program has been hugely successful and we now enjoy the unqualified and enthusiastic support of our school administration.

6. **Develop Promotional Materials:** Once you have defined the contours of your program and obtained the support of your school administration, you will need to develop promotional materials that explain the basics about your new squad. We

have included a copy of the flyer that we created and distributed in order to find our first Sparkles. (*See Sample Promotional Flyer, page 12*)

It will be helpful to you if you include a date and time for your first informational meeting so that interested participants can meet you face to face and learn more about the program before agreeing to commit.

Always seek permission from parents before you include in promotional materials any cheerleader's name or photograph and make sure that you have designated a contact person in your group responsible for responding to inquires about the program.

7. **Locate participants:** There are several ways to spread the word about your new program. You can place brochures and flyers at schools and local businesses, like grocery stores. If your school has an electronic mail system, ask for permission to send a district-wide e-mail with details about the program and contact information. Oftentimes, local radio stations, televisions stations, and newspapers will make public service announcements free of charge. If you volunteer to work at local charity events for children with special needs, the organizers of the event may allow you to pass out flyers to folks who attend the event. Finally, never underestimate the power of word-of-mouth advertising. Start talking up the program to everyone you know. You never know when a friend or family member might be aware of someone who would be an excellent candidate for your program.
8. **Address the issue of uniforms:** As you know, a big part of being a cheerleader is wearing the uniform. Purchasing new uniforms, however, can be expensive. Before you hold your first informational meeting, you will need to decide what your new cheerleaders will wear and who will pay for the uniforms. You may ultimately decide to pass on the expense of the uniforms to your new participants. If so, you will need to provide potential participants with a price point for uniforms at your first informational meeting.

We wanted to provide our program to participants free of charge and we were confident that our school and community would financially support the program. We are proud to say that, through a combination of school and community support, we were able to provide our Sparkles' squad with new uniforms, custom warm-ups, hair ribbons, and pom-poms completely free of charge. We provide several suggestions for fundraising (*See Fundraising Tips and Ideas, page 15*)

Keep in mind when ordering uniforms that your new cheerleaders will undoubtedly come in all shapes and sizes. It is important to measure for new uniforms and to choose uniforms that will be comfortable and easy to get on and off. We modeled our Sparkles' uniforms after our own, but chose longer, pleated skirts and looser fitting shells. You can see several pictures of our Sparkles in their uniforms at www.spartansparkles.com.

- 9. Hold an informational meeting with potential participants and their parents:** The purpose of this meeting will be to familiarize interested participants and their parents about your program. Be specific, and provide – in writing – all of the information that potential participants will need to make an informed decision. Understand that the program will not be a good fit for everyone. Your job is to clearly and accurately articulate the program model, not to “recruit” participants.

At our first parent meeting, we demonstrated a few cheers and a simple dance that we created just for our Sparkles, so that potential participants and their parents could see what types of skills we would be teaching.

Pass out membership sign-up forms. (*See Sample Registration Form, page 13*) Be sure to inquire about any particular health or behavior issues and make sure that everyone working with your special needs team is fully aware of those issues.

- 10. Begin to Practice:** Now that you have your school's permission and your group of participants, it's time to start practicing. We recommend that you begin practices about six weeks before your squad is scheduled to cheer for the first time. Be sure to keep practices manageable; ours last for 45 minutes and we hold them two times per week. You will find that your new squad will take more time to master skills and remember routines.

Safety first! Be sure to always practice on mats and carefully spot all stunts and tumbling. It is critical that, as peer coaches, you remain vigilant and focused at all times. Always work within the skill range of the group and add new skills slowly.

Encourage the parents to attend each practice, especially at the beginning. Ideally, you and the parents will form a partnership to ensure that the new cheerleaders have the best possible experience. Don't hesitate to solicit advice from the parents – they know their children better than anyone.

First and foremost, it is important to remember why you created this squad in the first place. While skill-building is important, the greatest gifts you give to your

new squad are your time and friendship. Practices should include much repetition of cheers and stunts, simple team-building exercises, games, and --most importantly-- fun! Remain patient, positive, and enthusiastic throughout every practice. (See tips for successful practices, page 14)

- 11. Cheer, cheer, cheer!:** You've done the work. You've found creative ways to address the challenges that presented themselves at practices. You've bonded with your new team and they have bonded with one another. Now it's time to introduce your new unified squad to your student body and community. It is time for you to shine.

Before each game at which your new squad will cheer, be sure to allow time for your cheerleaders to adjust to the crowd and environment. We arrange for our Sparkles to arrive at the game about thirty minutes before start time.

Game day carries with it many distractions. Your primary focus must be on your new teammates. It is helpful to assign "buddies" on the squad so the cheerleader coaches on your team are responsible for ensuring that their buddies are safe and accounted for at all times.

- 12. Promote your Program:** Your program is now a huge success. Make sure that people learn about it! Ask your athletic director to include a picture of the new squad in the formal sports program. Contact local newspapers and television stations and tell them about your program's successes. We created a web page that includes information about our squad, pictures, an inspirational video and testimonials. See www.spartansparkles.com. Finally, tell other schools in your area about the Sparkle Effect and direct them to our website at www.TheSparkleEffect.org, so that they too will have the tools to create their own squad!

Cheerleader Commitment Contract

By signing this contract, I fully commit to participating on our new squad for students with special needs for this school year.

I understand that consistency and continuity on the new squad is critically important.

I understand that this is a volunteer activity and that participation on the squad is an honor and a privilege.

I understand that this squad exists to promote good sportsmanship, good citizenship, and enthusiastic, inclusive school spirit.

I pledge to be punctual and fully prepared for all practices and games.

I promise to maintain an attitude of enthusiasm, patience, respect, kindness, and cooperation with all members of my squad at all times.

Signature



Dear [insert name of school administrator]:

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read this proposal. I am a student interested in starting a cheerleading squad for students with special needs here at our school. While I am aware of the numerous clubs and activities that our school offers, I feel that we are lacking in one specific area. I believe that the time has come for our high school to make more room at the table for students with special needs – to include those students in mainstream sports programming wherever and whenever possible. The obvious and ideal first step: include students with disabilities on our high school cheerleading squad. Cheerleading can be easily adapted to varying skill levels, can include both boys and girls, and is centered on raising spirit. What better way to raise everyone’s spirits than to include children with special needs on the cheer team?

Cheerleading has experienced a recent resurgence of popularity across the United States and, although cheerleading squads exist for students with special needs, they are few and far between. More significantly, virtually all of the teams in existence are affiliated with All-Star gyms, which are adult-led, segregated, and operated outside of the high school community. These programs provide a step in the right direction, but they offer no opportunities for high-school aged students with special needs to cheer for and with their peers at school sporting events. Students with disabilities don’t just want to cheer. They want to fit in. They want to stand of the football field and on the basketball court side by side with their peers and show their school spirit.

This idea is not unprecedented. The cheerleaders at Pleasant Valley High School in Bettendorf, Iowa, started their own squad for students with special needs in July of 2008. You can learn all about it at www.spartansparkles.com. Their program has been tremendously successful and now two of the Pleasant Valley cheerleaders have created an online Quick-Start kit to enable other high school cheerleaders to create their own squads. See www.TheSparkleEffect.org.

Judging from the reaction I have already received from friends, family, my teammates, and school staff, I believe that we could and should create a squad for students with disabilities this year. [] has already agreed to serve as an advisor for such a program should you grant agree. Let’s meet sometime in the next week to discuss the proposal in detail.

Sincerely,

The Pleasant Valley High School Cheerleaders are starting a new Cheer Squad for students with Special Needs, Ages 8 to 16!

The new **Spartan Sparkles** will begin practicing in August two days per week.



The Sparkles will cheer with the Pleasant Valley Varsity Cheerleaders for a portion of up to four home football games this fall!

For more information, call Sally Smith at 555-5555 and attend our informational meeting at 6:00 p.m. at Pleasant Valley High School on July 15, 2008

**Special Needs Cheer Squad
Registration Form**

Personal Information

Name: _____ Birth date: _____

Parents'/Guardians' Names: _____

Home Phone: _____ Cell: _____

Email Address: _____

Permanent Address: _____ City _____ State/Zip _____

School currently attending: _____

Medical Information

Emergency Contact: _____ Phone: _____

Relationship to Student: _____

Insurance Provider: _____ Policy Number: _____

Family Physician: _____ Phone Number: _____

Allergies: _____

We understand that personal insurance must cover our son/daughter. We give permission for our child to receive medical attention in the event that we cannot be present or reached.

Parent/Guardian's signature: _____ Date: _____

We **give / do not give** our permission for photographs of our son/daughter to be reproduced and used in promotional materials.

Tips for a Successful Practice

- Assign one high school cheerleader to be in charge of practice every day. Make sure that it is the same girl every practice. She will run warm-ups and stretching, teach any cheers or dances, and keep practice organized.
- Always start and end your practices the same way. Our practices always start with a quick warm-up routine and stretching and end with a game.
- If you decide to stunt with your new cheerleaders, keep the stunts very basic. Start with simple thigh-stands, and slowly work your way up to preps with at least two spotters, depending on the size of your flyer and the skill of your base.
- Make a game out of things like restroom and drink breaks. Our squad created a “Drink Train.” We form a chain to go to the drinking fountain and chant “Chugga Chugga Chugga Chugga Chooo! Chooo!” all the way there and back.
- NEVER say “retard” or “retarded” during practices in any context. It is rude, demeaning, and can upset your new teammates and anger their parents. Also refrain from using any profanity at practice. You may be used to hearing profanity at school, but your new teammates are not and can find profanity very upsetting.
- After learning a new cheer, make sure you go over it at every practice for at least two weeks. Even if you only run through it once or twice, reviewing it will help your new cheerleaders remember it before games.
- Feel free to give prompts if someone is having trouble remembering what to do. Just whisper the words and model the actions. You will be able to fade the prompts over time.
- If a new teammate is having behavioral problems at practice, LET his/her PARENTS KNOW! Remember, they know their children better than anyone and can talk to their child about the problem outside of practice. For example, we had a Sparkle who scratched her team mates when she got frustrated. We let her mother know right away and she quickly put a stop to the behavior.
- Encourage parents to attend practice! They will love watching you work with their students and will be able to offer great tips on how to better interact with their child.

Fundraising Tips and Ideas

Because your new squad will be created, led, and staffed by cheerleader volunteers, your costs should be relatively low. You will, however, need funding for uniforms and basic equipment, like a banner or pom-poms. You may decide to pass on this expense to the parents of your participants. If, however, like us, you want to offer the program free of charge, you will find that most people are eager to help fund your program. Here are some ideas for funding sources:

School Administration: Schools usually have discretionary funds – money that has not been specifically designated for any particular purpose. Ask whether your school has money available that could be used to help fund your program.

Athletic Boosters: Meet with your school’s athletic boosters to see if they are willing to purchase the uniforms or equipment for your new squad. The boosters may also allow you to participate in pre-existing fundraising opportunities to earn money for your squad’s expenses.

PTAs: Find out whether the PTAs across your school district might be willing to share the cost of uniforms. After all, the program will likely include students from the elementary schools and junior high as well as your high school.

Local Rotary or Optimist Club: Do you have a local Rotary or Optimist Club in your community? If so, inquire about funds they may have available in the form of grants. Be sure to meet all grant application deadlines and enlist the help of a parent or teacher at your school to help you prepare the grant application.

Dosomething: This is a national organization that funds youth-led and youth-driven projects. They give out \$500 “Plum Grants” every week to help start projects or to fund existing projects! See www.dosomething.org.

Checklist

- Form your core group of cheerleaders**
- Find an adult willing to chaperone, support, and counsel you through the program**
- Hold a meeting to define the parameters of the new squad**
- Draft a letter to your school administrators**
- Convince school administrators to green light your proposal**
- Develop Promotional Materials**
- Locate and enroll participants**
- Address the issue of uniforms**
- Meet with the participants and their parents**
- Begin Practice**
- Cheer, cheer, cheer!**
- Promote your program**