

FCPS Athletics Become “Unified”

New Corollary Athletic Program that Combines Students With and Without Disabilities is Changing School Culture

It's a typical Friday at one of Frederick County Public Schools' ten high schools as students are traveling from class to class through loud, crowded hallways. Students are wearing multi-colored t-shirts, sweatshirts, and uniform tops proudly touting titles such as football, basketball, band, cheerleading, and bocce. Bocce? Yes-- to be more precise-- Unified Bocce! On this particular day, two students are wearing their Unified Bocce sweatshirts as they slap high fives to each other before sprinting to class in to beat the bell. One student is the captain of the football team and the other student is a young man with Down Syndrome. They are now teammates and have become close friends because of a new corollary athletic program called Unified Sports®, which is a program that is gaining immense popularity among the Frederick County students. Both of these students are experiencing first the benefits of this new all inclusive program. Would this friendship have ever happened before? Perhaps, but now this is a natural, every day occurrence throughout Frederick County Public Schools.

Last year, our state passed the “Maryland Fitness and Athletic Equity for Students with Disabilities Law.” FCPS has partnered with Special Olympics Maryland to develop an attractive program that complies with the spirit and intent of this new landmark law. All ten high schools in Frederick County are participating in a new athletic program known as Unified Sports®. Unified Sports is a branch of Special Olympics, with teams comprised of a proportional number of students with and without disabilities who train and compete together on the same team. Unified Tennis is classified as the fall sport; Unified Bocce is the chosen winter sport; and Unified Track and Field is the preferred spring sport. One of the primary goals of this program is to create each Unified team to resemble a typical interscholastic team. Therefore, they compete in multiple competitions, including one highly anticipated game each season versus their rival school! All Unified Sports® teams also get to compete in county and state tournaments. The following day in school, the winning Unified Athletes (students with disabilities) and their teammate Partners (students without disabilities) typically display the shiny medals they earned at these championship events.

Although the students with disabilities are technically classified as *athletes* and the students without disabilities are classified as *partners*, any member of a Unified Team will tell you that they are all teammates. More importantly, they will tell you they are all friends. This sentiment is reflected in the Special Olympics Unified Sports® motto: “On the field we're teammates...off the field were friends.” Unified Sports® has led to friendships, both on and off the field, that may have never happened in the past. Numerous parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators have shared great stories. For example, a young girl with autism had always eaten lunch by herself, but because of her participation on the Unified Tennis team, now eats with her “teammates” (as she proudly explained). Another great example is a young man with Down Syndrome who was voted Homecoming King by his peers because he showed the most school spirit as a three-season Unified Sports® star! What about the student section that left the gymnasium during a varsity basketball game to go outside and greet their state championship Bocce Team as they got off the bus? And finally there is another example of a student without any type of disability who was always in trouble, but since joining his school's Unified Tennis Team, his discipline problems no longer exist because he feels a part of the school community and feels proud of his accomplishment.

On a personal note, I grew up in Frederick County, attended FCPS schools, interned in the county and taught at four different schools including three high schools. I have had many great experiences as an FCPS student-athlete, teacher, coach, and athletic director. However, I would have never imagined that one of my most

rewarding experiences would be to serve as an assistant to Lynn Carr and Perry Baker (former and current FCPS Supervisors of Athletics) as the Coordinator of Unified Sports® for our county. I now get the opportunity to work with an amazing group of Unified coaches and student-athletes throughout our school system. Seeing first hand the coaches' love, passion and commitment to working with students with and without disabilities, makes me extremely proud. Just like any other FCPS coach, this group who serves as Unified coaches does so because they love working with our young people. Our coaches receive focused training on Unified Tennis, Bocce, and Track and Field, and also take part in a detailed seminar on how to appropriately modify these sports so all students can have a meaningful experience while participating.

Parents, guardians, students, or anyone else interested in learning more about FCPS Unified Sports® may contact the high school's Athletic Director or Special Education department. Also, feel free to also ask a random student about the program. Chances are, they will be able to explain this special program. FCPS Unified Sports® and Special Olympics Maryland are also always looking for volunteers to help out at county and state events as well.

Unified Sports® is changing our school system's culture for the better. Friendships are developing that may have never happened in the past. Our students with disabilities and our students without disabilities are learning more every day that the word "disability" is just that-- a word and not a negative label. Frederick County Public Schools has received many well-deserved accolades over the years, however, one of the best things that our school system has ever done is bring this program to our ten high schools. FCPS has become truly Unified!

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