

Unifying through Athletics

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High school is a tumultuous time for all young adults as they try to navigate through their teenage years. These times can be even more challenging for students who are impacted by various intellectual disabilities. Newington High School provides a variety of services during the school day that assist students with special needs within the school community and also offers opportunities for the integration of the entire student body to assist students in developing positive peer relationships. In order to extend the inclusion of all students at Newington High School after regular school hours, the school offers a dynamic Unified Sports program that pairs together student athletes with and without disabilities to develop skills in a variety of sports throughout the year.

In 1992 the Special Olympics joined forces with the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS) to expand inclusion offerings through sports for school aged students with intellectual disabilities (athletes) and without intellectual disabilities (partners) utilizing the Unified Sports platform. As stated on the Special Olympics of Connecticut website, the goals of the program are to provide quality instruction in particular sports to develop their skill and prepare them for participation in other community sport programs in the future. Through the practices and competitions, team members are able to develop friendships and understand the meaning of team unity and the spirit of equality.

The Newington High School Unified Sports program has adopted this model and has one of the more extensive programs throughout the state. The program competes in soccer in the fall,

basketball in the winter, and track and field in the spring. Having three different programs allows for a larger number of partners to participate in the program.

The Unified Sports program at Newington High School has had the opportunity to offer unique experiences to all athletes and partners. The program formed a relationship with students from Central Connecticut State University to have additional supporters during their practice time to enhance the individual attention. Through that relationship, the Newington High School Unified Sports Basketball team had the opportunity to play a game against South Windsor at halftime of a CCSU Men's Basketball game during the 2013 season. The Basketball team was also able to participate in between CIAC State Championship Basketball games at Mohegan Sun this past March. The athletes and partners received front row seats for the evening's contests and got a chance to play on a professional court. The high school also began hosting an annual statewide track meet for the CIAC at the Frank O'Rourke Track, which gives the program the opportunity to welcome in other schools. This year's meet was held on May 21st and was the largest statewide Unified event the CIAC has ever held. The event joined together over 250 athletes and partners along with nearly 100 student and community volunteers from Newington who managed the activities throughout the afternoon.

Unified Sports is a beneficial program for all students who have the ability to take part in the experience. The social inclusion of all students is what can take that roller coaster of a high school experience and turn it into a smooth ride to success. Schools that have integrated Unified Sports into their offerings continue to foster the development of a community that understands the true meaning of equality and unity. Newington High School is proud to be a leading supporter of that goal.