

SPORTING A SMILE

Unified sports encourages teamwork, fun

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As the bell rings, students with big smiles fill the gym to watch, play, and help with the Unified athletics program.

"When the kids show up to the class, they seem genuinely happy and have smiles, this is really the only place they get to express themselves and really show their personalities," junior Koral Atkinson said.

Atkinson is one of the growing number of students involved in Unified athletics as a Unified Pal.

The mission of Unified is inclusion and getting as many peers, friends, parents, and staff involved as possible. Unified athletics connects Pals with special needs students to create a positive environment inside the world of high school sports. FCHS currently offers a unified PE class in addition to team sports options including soccer, football, basketball and cheerleading.

"Bridging that gap between special needs kids and regular education kids through sports has helped bring the students together," integrated services teacher John Maguire said.

About a third of the participants in Unified sports are special needs and the others are peers. The Pals who help with Unified athletics connect to their special-needs classmates through coaching, encouraging, and aiding them with physical tasks.

According to Atkinson, serving as a Unified Pal is rewarding.

"I feel like people get an image of how the special needs kids are, and you never really know until you meet them and then it just broadens your mind," she said. "They make me really happy when I walk in the doors of the gym."

Those interested in becoming Pals can talk to a counselor to register for available classes. Unified athletics is treated as a varsity sport in regulation with CHSAA, so students who do help will need

to pay a fee and get a physical.

"Students of all ages and grades can help with Unified athletics. All you need to have is a willingness to help," Maguire said.

On the field, the goal is to get Unified student athletes as much playing time as possible.

"The number of players all depend on the sport," Maguire explained. "In football we have around 5 kids playing on each team, so ten on the field at a time. It's nice to keep the teams small so everyone gets a chance to play."

Teams play against every high school in Fort Collins and Loveland.

"We used to play teams in Denver, but they got too competitive for the students and it wasn't fun anymore," Maguire said. "The teams lost the message of the game which isn't who can score the most points; it's to get the kids involved and for the success of the students."

The Unified teams play multiple games a year around Fort Collins and have many kids including varsity athletes come out to the games.

"For the football games we have around 50-60 people show up, sometimes we get the band to show up and the cheerleaders are always there encouraging the teams," Maguire said. "Depending on who the basketball team is playing, we could have anywhere from a hundred people to a few hundred people."

The goal of the games and helpers is to show pride in the school and activity, but it's also to show that the peer isn't the star and the focus is on the special needs students.

"The games bring a special sort of achievement to the students, whether it's scoring a touchdown or just running the ball, the students are always proud of themselves," Maguire said. "Last year at one of the football games we had a smoke machine for the players which was really awesome to see the smiles on their faces."

The next Unified basketball game to go see is at Loveland High on Feb. 7 at 6 p.m.



Unified students and Pals exercise during a Unified athletics class on Jan. 16. FCHS now offers a variety of Unified classes and sports. Photos by Alex Ellmer