

Scott Culver celebrates his goal against Centaurus in the Unified Soccer tournament, winning the game.



WHAT IS UNIFIED PE?

Unified PE brings students from the Interactive Learning Center (ILC) and general education to participate in physical activities together.

THE POWER OF INCLUSION

Unified PE and ILC work together to change students' lives

By Keira Hart, Catherine Mckenzie, Abby Prescott, and Mars Smith

They do it for the smile. Pure genuine happiness, something so alien in day-to-day high school life. It's what makes an educator's job so different from the others. Coach Devin "Gonzo" Gonzalez, a para-educator in the Intensive Learning Center (ILC) and special education classes, helps run Unified PE. It's a class built in the spirit of inclusion.

"The rewards that you get, they're not necessarily tangible, but I'd rather do this than make a million dollars doing anything else," Gonzalez said.

Each day is different and unexpected, and that's why Gonzalez loves it so much. He isn't alone. Jennifer Cohen, the chair of the special education department, helps run Unified PE.

"Unified PE is a class where students of all abilities are able to access PE," Cohen said. "But it's more of a social aspect of being able to interact and socialize with peers."

Cohen has been surrounded by educators her whole life. Her sisters? Special ed teachers. Her dad? A retired principal. Cohen swore she would stray from the family business.

"I went into graphic design," Cohen said. "I worked in Manhattan and I was there for 9/11, and after 9/11 it kind of just put things into perspective. I loved what I was doing, but it didn't do anything for me. I felt like there was more out there for me that I could do, and so I went right into teaching."

She needed to make a change.

In 2014, she joined Monarch's special ed department, 13 years after starting her new career as a special educator. Now, she's dedicated to giving everyone a voice and demonstrating that there's more to a person than their abilities. She strives to make every student feel included, not just students with disabilities.

"You are a person first and foremost," Cohen said. "Having a disability, having red hair, having glasses is a characteristic, but it's not your defining thing."

She knew she had to create classes where inclusion was at the forefront of everyone's minds. While she worked with other teachers along the way, she found her perfect teaching partner in 2015.

As soon as physical education teacher Jennifer Dixon joined Cohen, she found the work to be the highlight of her day.

"I started teaching Unified PE nine years ago when I came to Monarch from Louisville Middle School," Dixon said. "I had not had very much experience in teaching a PE class that was solely for students with special needs and student mentors."

The two formed an inclusive, life-changing class immediately. The life of every student who graduated from Unified PE would be transformed.

For Stuart Nock '24, it certainly has been. Nock bounced around from sport to sport throughout high school. Torn ligaments and muscles. Concussions. Broken arms. He never found his landing place.

Then, things changed. "The head ILC teacher Mrs. Cohen told me that I'd be good in Unified PE, and I didn't believe it," Nock said. "My buddy Clark, who graduated, said, 'I think you'd be good with them too.' He was also in Unified PE, and we started working with some of the kids, and we were just chilling and started shooting hoops with each other and just started bonding more and more with the teachers

Carly Puccio hugs her grandmother, who came to watch the Unified Soccer tournament.

Stuart Nock '24 holds the Unified Soccer tournament trophy after they won the tournament against three other schools' Unified programs.

and the kids.”

After a while, Unified PE became Nock’s favorite class.

“Whenever I hear people making fun of the ILC students, I’ll stick up for them. And I’ll be like, ‘Shut up. You don’t know them,’” Nock said. “If you knew them, you’d be sticking up for them. You wouldn’t be talking crap about them.’ I don’t know why I’m good at it. I don’t know. I guess it’s always been in my heart to be with ILC students.”

Nock knows no student deserves to be excluded just for their abilities. No student deserves to suffer through their high school years, to be ruthlessly bullied for something they can’t control.

Life lessons like that are what push his teacher to keep doing the work.

“You know there are mornings when I wake up, and I’m like, I can’t do this. Then I realize like, okay, I can, even though it’s going to be hard,” Cohen said. “There’s definitely going to be parts of my day that are hard, and then there’s going to be those rewarding pieces that you’re like, this is why we do what we do.”

For Cohen, it’s about community. It’s about inclusion. It’s about the smiles.

“I want the school to have a legacy,” Cohen said. “When somebody thinks of Monarch High School, they think of a place where everyone belongs.”

Ready and excited, Carly Puccio ‘26 prepares for her soccer tournament against Centaurus. Puccio shows her excitement while supporting her team during the competition.



Students from other schools attending to support their ILC program hold a sign that says, “Go Go Go Sebastian.”



Nearing the end of the tournament, Monarch ILC gathers for a group photo. The class bunches together in their Monarch jerseys in front of the soccer goal.

HOW TO JOIN

1 Talk to Mrs. Cohen

2 Talk to Coach Dixon

3 Talk to your counselor



Heading towards the goal, Scott Culver ‘27 tries to put one in the back of the net. Culver helps his team to a win, leaving the court with a smile spread across his face.

“ If you knew them, you’d be sticking up for them. You wouldn’t be talking crap about them. ”