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Weymouth High students foster inclusion on basketball court

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WEYMOUTH — The scene in the Weymouth High School gym on a Wednesday afternoon was the same as it would be for any basketball team's season-opener.

Students, led by members of the cheerleading squad, filled the stands. Players shot hoops and dribbled the ball to warm up for the game.

But this was no ordinary high school basketball game; it was the first game played for the Weymouth High School Wildcats Unified Sports Program. And for many of the athletes, it was their first time playing a team sport.

Unified Sports, part of Special Olympics, is bringing together student athletes who have intellectual disabilities with partner students who do not. The program is in place in Weymouth and several other communities, including Brockton, Plymouth, Canton and Hingham. The program has been available

through the Special Olympics since 1989, and it has increased in popularity in the region in recent years. Last year, there were 25 Unified Basketball teams in Massachusetts, and this fall, there are 56 recognized and supported by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association.

The Special Olympics estimate that 1.4 million people around the world participate in Unified Sports.

Kathleen Lutz, manager of schools and Unified Sports for Special Olympics Massachusetts, said one of the goals of the program is to promote tolerance in schools. The program was created to give those with intellectual disabilities the chance to participate in sports on the same team as their peers who do not have intellectual disabilities.

“The activities and opportunities provided through the program help to reduce bullying and exclusion, promote healthy activity and interactions, combat stereotypes and stigma, eliminate hurtful language in schools and engage people in social activities that lead to personal growth,” Lutz said.

In addition to basketball, the program supports bocce and track and field teams in Massachusetts. Last spring, there were 67 Unified Track and Field teams in the state. Soccer is offered through the Special Olympics community programs, rather than school teams.

Weymouth High School’s special education teacher Stephen Clements worked for the better part of a year to bring the program to the school. He said he had seen the program in action, including through a family member who has participated in Unified Sports.

“I’ve seen it at the youth level, and I’ve seen how much the kids love it,” Clements, who is also an assistant coach for the team, said. “It really brings the kids and the community a sense of pride, and I love it. I absolutely love it, and I’ve seen it firsthand over at Canton High School, too.”

Clements said he plans to organize a Unified Track and Field team in the spring.

“My favorite part is seeing every kid smile,” said Lisa Stoke, the school’s gym teacher and team head coach. “Every day they’re like, ‘Ms. Stokes! We have practice!’ And they’re high five-ing and they’re so excited, and I think it brings a

sense of inclusion to our school, and pride.”

Some team members became involved through a new gym class at the school, called Partners in Physical Education. It pairs students in the special education program with students in “mainstream” classes, said senior Carolyn Byrne, who plays as a partner on the Unified Basketball team.

“That’s what got me involved and made me want to be on the team,” she said. “I like teaching and learning teamwork.”

While the team lost its first game to opponent Westwood High, every member of the Wildcats Unified team left the court with a smile.

“The kids get school pride,” Stokes said. “They feel included, they get to be with their peers... Everybody’s accepted and welcomed, and hopefully it will just grow from here.”

Weymouth team member Kylie Peterson said one of her favorite parts of the game was getting to hang out with friends.

“I love basketball,” Neil Baker, another team member, said at the end of the game.

The team will play five games this season and participate in a jamboree, Stokes said.

The gym was packed during the first game until the last buzzer sounded and every Wildcats score bought fans to their feet.

When Alex Dewolfe-Martin scored the first basket for the Wildcats, he ran back up the court with a smile on his face, and he kept smiling until the end of the game.

“For some of these guys, this is the first time that they’ve actually been part of a real team,” Clements said.