



Photo by Kendra Lolio

From left: Tyler Byrnes, BJ Begones, Nick Carpinello, Thomas Gaskin, Kristen Skwirz, Matthew Selley and Dennis McGovern.

# THEY'RE UNIFIED

## Coventry School Committee honors students, staff that led the creation of cross country running program for special needs youth

By KENDRA LOLIO

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COVENTRY — The school committee recognized students and staff that have been part of Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School's (ASFMS) Unified Cross Country program during a school committee meeting last week.

ASFMS Physical Education Teacher and Boys Basketball Coach Dennis McGovern has been leading the team along with several student facilitators. The idea of unified sports is to get students with intellectual disabilities active in sports. Each athlete is partnered up with a student facilitator who encourages and supports them while competing and training.

Players include Matthew Selley, Thomas Gaskins, Ashton Briggs, Kameron Hargis, Nick Carpinello, BJ Begones and Tyler Byrnes.

The team is the result of a partnership

between the Rhode Island Interscholastic League and the Special Olympics. Coventry also has a basketball program at the high school and another at the middle school, in addition to a volleyball team, so there are plenty of opportunities for athletes of all abilities to participate in school sports.

"For each athlete you have a facilitator working side-by-side," said McGovern. "During the competition they ran along them and encouraged them."

McGovern said the success of the middle school's unified basketball team fueled them to try cross country this year. He said his facilitators "are some of the finest young men you could possibly want on your team."

Parent Amy Briggs's said her eighth grade son is a member of the team and "loves being included."

"I would be the first to admit I had my doubts, however, I asked him if he wanted to participate and he said yes,"

she explained. "It gave my son a feeling of independence. The best part about unified sports is our children are given the chance to make new friends."

Superintendent Craig Levis said although he does not have a child with a disability, he did serve as a special education director in Smithfield before coming to Coventry, and he has seen first hand the effect it has on students and their families.

"A parent said to me 'I never thought in a million years my son would get to play basketball for his school,'" said Levis. "These guys are running for their school and to me this is a powerful thing. We are built on people."

"I'm glad we have so many coaches volunteering their time to work with these teams," said school committee member Ann Dickson.

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