

Community Connections

Within our growing, diverse community, we sow the seeds of opportunities to raise prepared, resilient students.



Unified Sports unifies high school

The Gervais varsity girls and boys basketball teams have had an impressive season, but there's another team in town getting a lot of buzz.

Gervais High School recently debuted its first Unified Sports basketball team, which features predominantly special education students. An official arm of Special Olympics Oregon, Unified Sports unites athletes with disabilities and those without disabilities to play together on a team.

The program was brought to Gervais by Dr. Creighton Helms, the district's director of special services. When he was a teacher in the Silver Falls School District a few years ago, he first witnessed the magic of a Unified Sports program.

"They would host Unified games before varsity games, and I would go with my wife and family," he said. "I remember leaving speechless, just thinking about how incredible it was to see the stands filled with students and community members, and then contemplating the significance of students with disabilities playing a sport in front of their peers and being celebrated. It may be something they've never experienced before, to have people cheering their name. ... Unified has been on my heart for a long time. It's very special."

Before launching the program, he needed buy-in from district leaders — especially the high school athletic director, Tucker Brack, who would be helping with scheduling and logistics — and parents of the potential special education athletes.

"We wanted to give them the space to ask questions," Helms

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT: Aloha Yoshinaga

Middle school counselor brings breadth of experience

Gervais Middle School's newest guidance counselor knows a little something about helping students succeed.

Aloha Yoshinaga has well over a decade of experience as a teacher, graduation specialist, and early college advisor, but this is her first time in a counselor role.

"My mom kept telling me, you're a good teacher, but you're really a counselor," Yoshinaga said. "Having all these different experiences has definitely shaped me to be

where I'm at as a counselor. While it's not the way I wanted it, to start as a counselor this late in my career, it's nice to have had many jobs to see what is the need for these kids."

And after working with older students for a while, she's excited to be back with a younger age group — her first teaching job was in middle school too.

"I love being able to see them grow," she said. "They're still shaping into who



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Moda Center hosts Gervais basketball teams



The Moda Center is home of the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers, but for one night in early February, it was home to Gervais basketball.

Both the Gervais High School girls and boys basketball teams had an opportunity to play Kennedy High School at the enormous stadium on Feb. 3.

Playbook Sports, which organizes these types of opportunities for small schools, called up Tucker Brack, Gervais High School's athletic director, and asked if the school was interested in playing a couple regular season games at the Moda Center on a certain night. On "dark days" — days when a stadium doesn't have a scheduled event — they try to schedule local schools to use it and then donate a percentage of ticket sales back to the school.

"You're not doing it for the fans, but for the opportunity for kids to go play on the exact same floor as the Blazers," Brack said. "To go somewhere they've only seen on YouTube or on TV, to have an opportunity to play on that floor, to use those locker rooms and come out of that tunnel — that's pretty special."

The only thing Brack needed to do was make sure that Kennedy was on board — and they were.

"They gave up their home game to go up there and play," he pointed out. "I thought that was a cool thing."

It wasn't exactly like an NBA game, of course. The big scoreboards weren't running and guests had to sit in

one designated area, but the experience was definitely memorable.

Gervais was able to get two rooter buses full of students and staff (the district helped pay for 60 student tickets) so there was a good-sized turnout.

"It was pretty cool to see all the Gervais people," Brack said. "Playbook said schools our size usually only bring 40 people and, including community members, we had 300."

Some of the boys basketball team members were visibly emotional, but not because they lost their game that night.

"With every event that's new, there are always headaches in getting everything together, but you forget that when you see a couple guys have tears in their eyes because they're so moved to be playing on that court," Brack said. "That made me step back and realize how special it was for them. I've been pretty blessed to have been in pretty cool sports venues, but to see the excitement and smiles on their faces as they were warming up in that huge arena, it just makes you feel good."

Principal Andrew Aman appreciated the significance of the event for students as well.

"For us in Gervais, our students haven't really been to the Moda Center, or even Portland, for some," he said.

"We hope this inspires them to have bigger dreams for themselves."

Gervais takes one small step toward space with science project

Gervais has its final team selected to send a science experiment into outer space.

Gervais is the only school in Oregon to be part of Mission 17, which is scheduled to travel to the International Space Station in June as part of the Student Space Flights Program.

The winning team of Lauren Ferschweiler, Diana Garcia, Sinai Reyes and Miguel Orozco will be invited to watch the launch of the mission and to attend a conference post-launch.



"I'm pretty excited about it, which sounds pretty nerdy for a mold-growing experiment,"

Ferschweiler said.

The Gervais team had originally proposed studying patulin growth in space (patulin is a toxin that is generally found in rotten apples). But advisor April Joy-Koer said the team ran into challenges obtaining the mold that produces patulin in a freeze-dried dormant state, which is needed so it can be reactivated in space. So the team is now working with penicillin instead, testing for a

Elementary school keeps students active

The year 2023 is shaping up to be a busy one at Gervais Elementary School, if the first two months are any indication, anyway.

After-school clubs

As of February, the school has 70% of its students participating in after school clubs. Students have joined a variety of clubs throughout four different sessions, including art, basketball, board games, chess, Cool2BeKind, drama, gardening, hockey, Legos, photography, robotics, sewing, soccer, Spanish, STEAM, student council, and violins.

"These experiences have been an amazing opportunity for our students to be excited about learning something new, develop more social skills as they work together in small teams, and create an even stronger sense of belonging at school," said Principal Dusty Price.



Safety presentation

That sense of belonging is key to a feeling of safety, so the school held a safety assembly for fourth- and fifth-graders on Jan. 26. Gervais Police Lt. Tim West (who is also the school community officer) and Officer Zane Rise participated in a presentation with the message, "If you see something, say something."

Family game night

Both students and parents had a lot to say about Family Game Night on Jan. 17.

Around 40 families brought their kids to play tables full of games (from Monopoly to Candyland to card games). The school provided popcorn with unlimited refills — a hit with the students — and many parents commented how the event made them wish they played board games together as a family more often.

Special assembly

Something else the school is hoping to do more often is value-based and attendance-based recognition.

The GES Student Recognition Committee asked teachers to nominate two students who have demonstrated responsibility — the chosen monthly value — both in and out of the classroom. Families were invited to the Feb. 2 assembly where the nominations were read aloud and students were presented with awards.

An additional six students were recognized for perfect attendance during the entire semester.

The assembly finished with a live action version of Hungry Hungry Hippos.



Field trip

Third-graders had the opportunity to go watch a production of the children's play "Dragons Love Tacos" at the Brunish Theatre in downtown Portland. The students were able to interact with the cast and they learned from the show that with drive and determination, amazing things happen (they also learned that dragons love tacos, but spicy salsa gives them tummy troubles!).

After the performance, the well-behaved and enthusiastic group of students visited the Clackamas Community College campus in Wilsonville for lunch.

This isn't the first trip that exposed students to higher education opportunities. Earlier this year, second-graders visited Oregon State University to participate in engaging activities with the mechanical engineering department and take in a women's basketball game.

"Though a much quicker trip (for the third-graders), it helped our students get onto a college campus and get excited about how nice the school was," Price said. "It is so important to help students develop academic self-confidence and a real sense that they belong on a college campus."

"I'm pretty excited about it, which sounds pretty nerdy for a mold-growing experiment."

— Lauren Ferschweiler, student

similar chemical that it makes.

"They are currently testing out their experiment in the classroom to work out any kinks before trying it for real in space," Joy-Koer said. "It is going very well."

The proposed experiment will travel, along with 36 other student proposals from around the country, 250 miles above Earth to the ISS, where astronauts will conduct the

experiments as directed by the student teams.

In the fall, many Gervais teams representing grades 8-12 submitted proposals for science experiments for this project. The school selected three that would be judged by SSEP, which selected the winning team made up of two juniors and two seniors.

In addition to the Flight Experiment Design Competition, there has been a district-wide art competition for the Mission Patch, a paper 4-by-4 square emblem designed by students that will accompany the winning experiment representing Gervais into space. The winner for that will be selected in March.

Unified Sports

continued

said. "They want their children to experience what other kids experience. So they were overwhelmingly positive."

The district's response was also encouraging.

"I can't speak highly enough of what (Helms) did to get that going here at the district," Brack said. "To see the excitement on those kids' faces and their parents' faces, it just gets you pretty emotional. What an outstanding opportunity." Using grant money from Oregon Department of Education as well as SELCO Credit Union, the district was able to provide brand new jerseys for the team as well as a stipend for coaches Rafael Ruiz Fuente, the high school gym teacher, and Mayra Vazquez, an instructional assistant at the elementary school.

In addition to the special education students, there are general education students who are helper teammates. When on the court, there are usually three student athletes with disabilities and two helper athletes.

"Their role is to rebound and pass, or to help direct and encourage the (students with disabilities) to shoot," Helms said. "We had over a dozen students sign up to be helper players."

Gervais High School Principal Andrew Aman said that senior Noelia Elizarraras has been excited about the program.

"She's been really passionate about it that she's actually recruited other students," he noted. "In general, our students have always been really good about including all students, especially SPED, so this is a really fun and exciting opportunity to bring the whole student body together."

Rojas said she got involved because her cousin is on a Unified team in Salem.

"I want to be able to include students like him," she said. "We would go watch him play, and he just loved it and got excited asking, 'Did you see me play?' It's just an amazing experience."

Juan Arellano, a freshman, said he has a little basketball experience, which isn't required to be on the team.

"I signed up because I'm a big helper," he said. "It's great to see these students play for fun."

The team fits in practices, but it also has had a rigorous schedule since the season opened Jan. 26. The schedule even included a Saturday tournament in Forest Grove. On game days, the student athletes wear their jerseys to school, and other students are encouraged to give them a high five when they see them in the hall.

"It's been pretty awesome, especially for the first time doing it," Brack said. "I think it's only going to grow and get better as we work out the logistics of it all."

Goals for the future include allowing special education athletes to compete in track and field this spring, and to schedule the basketball team to play between junior varsity and varsity games next year.

"It's really intended to feel as much like a Gervais High School sports team as much as possible," Helms said. "They deserve every bit of an opportunity to be on a team."

Staff spotlight: Aloha Yoshinaga

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they are and what they want to be. This is a hard part of life so I'm thrilled to be part of that journey. To know you're part of that direction for them to think more positively, to have more self confidence and know their worth – that's important to me."

Self-confidence and socialization in general for this age group have taken a hit in recent years with the pandemic forcing long-term virtual classrooms.

"The biggest need is figuring out socializing because we're no longer online, we're all together," Yoshinaga said. "We're reteaching that constantly. And that's OK because it's part of learning and developing."

The school district has just started a partnership with OYEN Emotional Wellness Center in Woodburn. Twice a week, a social worker comes to the district to help students who need more in-depth support.

The middle school's small counseling team also supports the students by facilitating resources like clothing or food boxes when there's a need. It also supports families by hosting three parent nights throughout the year. This year's workshops have focused on suicide prevention, social media and digital citizenship, and stress management.

This is in addition to ongoing initiatives such as bullying prevention as well as the regular one-on-one work with students who have individualized education plans (IEPs), anxiety, and low confidence.

"Students are seeking counseling support," Yoshinaga said. "Just having an adult to express their feelings is helpful in getting them in a better place."

Yoshinaga is also passionate about focusing on something she did a lot of in previous jobs: college and career readiness.

Not only is the counseling team working on a career day in April, but Yoshinaga is planning field trips on early release days to local places that could inspire students to think about their future, like Chemeketa Community College and Willamette Career Academy, which houses career technical education programs for juniors and seniors. These trips will also incorporate fun destinations, like the bowling alley and a trampoline park.

"It's about exposing them and letting them know that there's so much out there beyond Gervais," Yoshinaga said. "Hopefully it will open their minds and they grow from it."

While she wants students to get out and see the world beyond Gervais, she admits that there's something special about this place.

"Gervais staff are amazing," she said. "They make an extra effort to do things like stand outside the classroom and give high fives and connect with kids (between classes). I can't tell you how many people have been working here for 20 years. That's a good sign that this is a good environment. It's really special and it feels good here."

And Gervais is glad to have Yoshinaga.

"We are so lucky to have Ms. Aloha as part of our GMS family!" Principal Toni Johnson said. "Her kindness, caring, and laughter is contagious. She very quickly became a valuable member of GMS for both the students and staff."



School Board UPDATE

March 2023

District moves forward with bond measure on May ballot

The Gervais School Board has voted to put a \$24.49 million bond on the May ballot.

The proposed 25-year bond, which would go toward improving and updating school facilities, would cost taxpayers an estimated \$1.97 per \$1,000 of assessed value, if passed by voters. In other words, the average assessed value of a home in Gervais city limits is \$145,188 and the new bond proposal would cost this owner just under \$24 per month.

Additionally, the district would receive a \$4 million grant from the state, which is contingent on the passage of a bond.

Items that are being targeted with this bond measure include:

- Safety, security and technology additions and upgrades, furnishings and equipment for all buildings
- A new multipurpose building at the middle school, which will house a cafeteria, kitchen, performing arts activities, a library, and classroom and office space
- Improvements to the middle school, including its gym and entry, and an expansion of the drop-off area, parking zones and walkways



- At the high school, seismic upgrades and improvements to the roof, classrooms, front entrance, restrooms, locker rooms, and ADA accessibility
- Improvements to the elementary school, including the heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system, entryway, ADA accessibility, and roof.

Money from the bond would also go toward refinancing the district's existing loan. If budgeted items end up costing less than the bond amount, the district will direct that money toward additional HVAC at the high school and outdoor student gathering

structures.

Voters rejected a \$31 million bond in May 2022. Since then, the district has conducted surveys, sent out FAQs, and held informational meetings with the community. It also slightly lowered the amount it's asking of taxpayers.

To see a more detailed project list, frequently asked questions and more, visit www.gervais.k12.or.us and click the "Gervais Bond Measure" tab in the main menu.

Scan the QR code to learn more about the proposed bond

Get to Know Your School Board: Angie Toran

How long have you been on the board?

About 18 months

Occupation

State Farm Insurance rep

Other public service and/or volunteer activity?

I keep busy with family and church activities.

Why did you decide to join the board?

I wanted to have a voice in my children's education.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the district?

- Money! Our children in the community are so amazing and I want them to have the same opportunities and facilities to learn in as children in other districts have. We absolutely need to secure our school buildings for the safety of the students.
- The workload for our teachers and staff. They need more time to attend development and training sessions — this all

benefits the students. They are overworked and I can't imagine how exhausted they must be having to take on so many duties aside from what they were hired to do.

- Continuing to meet the social and emotional needs of our students and their families.



What solutions do you think the board can take to help solve these issues?

We as a district could join together to pass a bond that will fix our school buildings, update classrooms and address the safety measures. I believe it is the entire community's obligation to make sure the students are in a safe environment when they are at school. They are our future and we need to give them all the opportunities we can.

We need to hire additional employees for positions that fill basic programs, such as custodial, food service and daycare workers.

GHS Boasts State Champions in Two Sports

It was an extraordinarily successful winter sports season for Gervais High School. First, Junior Sariah Zepeda won a state wrestling title Feb. 25, and the following weekend the Gervais girls basketball team took home the state title.

The district planned a 5:30 p.m. parade Friday, March 10 in honor of both teams' winners.



Basketball winners

The Gervais girls basketball team saw its fourth state win in school history at the state championships March 4 in Pendleton.

The team rose to number one in the 2A division after defeating Stanfield 37-21, despite Stanfield going into the tournament ranked 3 ahead of Gervais' number 4 ranking.

"The girls need to be celebrated because what they did was nothing short of amazing," said Coach Enrique Sandoval. "This is a really strong group — all of them. I was just really blessed with a great group to coach."

Sandoval also gives a lot of credit to Kyle Buse, who coached the girls basketball team for many years before Sandoval took the reins this year.

I give a lot of credit to Kyle — the girls were good when I got them," he said. "From day one, I knew the chemistry was naturally there, I didn't want to change offense, so I told them that where they can really excel is on defense. And they embraced that."

In the championship game, Sofia Contreras and Ava Sellers each scored nine points each, and Sellers was named player of the game by OSAA. Olivia Boyd, who had four points and nine rebounds, was named to the All-Tournament First Team.

The championship game followed two other wins at the tournament for Gervais: 29-20 over Western Christian in the quarterfinals, followed by a blowout 46-17 win against Monroe/Alsea in the semifinals.

Gervais girls went into the championship tournament with an undefeated 14-0 record in league and only four losses all

year. While one game was a 10-point loss due to the absence of a couple key players, the combined number of points they lost by in each of the other three games totals only to seven.

"That just shows that we were in every game," Sandoval said. "Each of those games could have gone either way."

On top of their stellar record, Sandoval said a handful of his players have been facing incredibly difficult challenges off the court, yet that hasn't been reflected in their game play.

"To see them show up and perform the way they did was incredible," he said. "To overcome a brand new coach and get through all the things they had to go through in their personal lives and to still be state champions, that's phenomenal."

In 2021, the Gervais girls basketball team, which included six current players, won the state championship in a shortened pandemic-impacted year that wasn't recognized by OSAA. The last OSAA-recognized state championship was in 1994, when the team went 24-0. Their first championship win was in 1988.



Wrestling champ

Sariah Zepeda placed first in the 135-pound bracket of the 4A/3A/2A/1A division at the state championships held at Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Portland.

Though the championship event was delayed a day due to inclement weather, Zepeda still entered the tournament in good form, ultimately clinching an unbeaten season by winning against Ontario junior Hannah Hernandez.

"Sariah put on an outstanding performance, as she usually does," said Coach Iban Gomez. "She was very technical in all her matches. One thing that makes her stand out among other great wrestlers is her ability to control the tempo of the matches. Forcing her opponent to wrestle at her pace and be on the defensive during the matches. We are all proud of her and happy that her performance will inspire many other future female and male wrestlers."

The last wrestler to take a state title home to Gervais was her older sister, Alexys, in 2019.