

Dakota hosts Special Olympics basketball tournament

By Thomas Franz✉
C AND G NEWSPAPERS

🕒 Posted January 26, 2016



Sam Ross, 18, prepares to take a shot during a Special Olympics basketball tournament held on Jan. 22 at Dakota High School. (Photo by Deb Jacques)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — There were no district or league titles on the line for a basketball tournament held at Dakota High School Jan. 22, but the impact it made was just as significant.

For the eighth year, Dakota played host to a Special Olympics basketball tournament that featured 16 teams and approximately 200 students ranging from 10 to 26 years old.

Retiring Chippewa Valley Schools teacher Jim Murphy began the program, and Dakota teacher Paul Sassin has led it for the past five years leading up to last week's event.

"Each year, the tournament has grown," Sassin said. "The goal is to have fun, be competitive, and do the best you can out there."

This year's tournament featured students from Oakland and Macomb counties. Each student was able to play in three games and was awarded with a trophy at the end.

The tournament is part of Chippewa Valley Schools' Creative Learning Program, which helps special-needs students with intervention programs. In addition to basketball, the program also holds a scuba diving day in the winter, and a track and field event in the spring.

"Over the years, we've tried to find more and more activities for our students outside of academics," Sassin said. "The goal is to get them out of their comfort zone and push them to be better at all different types of activities. A lot of our students don't have the opportunity to play in after-school sports, so this is their opportunity."

Helping students practice for the basketball tournament led to the creation of a physical education class, Sassin said.

"We plan on practicing a few times during the year, so they get into the gym, and we actually started a gym class this year so they can play more sports and be more active. A lot of our kids don't have driver's licenses, and it's hard for them to find programs that are accepting of their ability levels. This is just one of those events where it's special because all of the kids are having fun, and they get to do what everyone else gets to do on a daily basis," Sassin said.

Three years ago, Sassin began bringing in the Dakota varsity basketball team to officiate the Special Olympic games. The presence of those players has added a new dimension to the tournament.

"It's really cool to see the varsity players give back to the school and just have fun with the kids," Sassin said. "The kids, you can tell they get really excited when the varsity guys show up. They look up to them as mentors, and the players do a great job of teaching them the game and showing them how to have fun out there."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Writer Thomas Franz covers Macomb Township, Chippewa Valley Schools and the Macomb County Board of Commissioners for the Macomb Township Chronicle. He also covers sports primarily for the Shelby-Utica News. He has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2013 and attended Michigan State University.
