




The NFHS Voice



Efforts Continue in All States to Offer High School Sports, Performing Arts

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While the normal fall, winter and spring seasons have looked a little different this year amid the pandemic, the 51 state high school associations continue with their determined efforts to provide high school students the opportunity to compete in sports and performing arts.

Many of these state association leaders must adhere to state government and health mandates, but the goal is the same in every state: to play, perform and compete – together.

As the [NFHS Fall Sports Championships Guide](#) indicates, 35 states were able to participate in football this fall. At the school level, the efforts of coaches, administrators, students and parents to follow protocols and “finish the race” has

been amazing. The oft-delayed 2020 fall football season concludes over the next two weekends as Texas (January 14-16) and Michigan (January 22-23) crown state champions.

Most of the other 16 states have starting dates for football in February or March, although a few are still awaiting clearance to play from state government and health officials. Seven of these 16 states have yet to play any sports this year, so while physical health concerns related to COVID-19 continue to impact decisions to play, so must the mental health of students who have been inactive since the shutdown in March.

The movement indoors for basketball, wrestling and ice hockey, along with ever-spiraling cases of the coronavirus, have intensified challenges for schools and state associations. As the [NFHS Winter Sports Seasons Guide](#) indicates, 21 states have yet to start regular-season basketball games, and 38 states have made modifications to their wrestling seasons.

And in the 30 states that have started basketball, it has been a case of two steps forward, one step back with virus protocols that have shut down individuals and/or teams. In addition, local health restrictions have limited fan attendance to family/friends only, or just 25 percent capacity in some areas.

With the ultimate goal to **play, perform, compete – together** in high school activities, state associations continue to look for new ways to make that happen. In the case of the more than four million students involved in performing arts, the opportunity to continue events virtually has been a tremendous alternative.

As Nate Perry's article in the January issue of *High School Today* indicated, Illinois and Wisconsin, among others, have turned negatives into positives. The Illinois High School Association (IHSA) plans to conduct state culminating events in

speech, music, debate and drama from early February to the end of March – all virtually.

Susie Knoblauch, IHSA assistant executive director in charge of these programs, said it was difficult to see the disappointment of students who lost opportunities in the spring and those experiences “led us to believe that setting goals to conduct virtual events can energize these student populations.”

The Wisconsin High School Forensic Association (WHSFA) moved its events online in July to keep students and coaches engaged. The WHSFA successfully completed its one-act theatre season online in the fall and will begin its speech contest season next month, with state culminating rounds in April.

Adam Jacobi, WHSFA executive director, said the association actually added schools with the move online – some that had not participated in the past 20 years. He said the virtual experience also provided new options for busy students who could not participate otherwise, and it was beneficial for schools in sparsely populated and rural areas.

Other states are providing new opportunities through esports and flag football for girls. Eighteen state associations are now offering esports programs through the NFHS Network and PlayVS, and interest has been building due to the addition of FIFA 21 and Madden NFL 21 as game titles for the 2021 esports season – the first sports titles to be offered through the NFHS Network-PlayVS partnership.

In addition, interest in flag football for girls continues to gain momentum. Along with state associations in Florida, Georgia, Alaska and Nevada that have implemented programs, Alabama is involved in discussions to add the sport this year. The Georgia High School Association conducted its first GHSA Flag Football

Championship last month with Calvary Day School winning the A-5A title and West Forsyth claiming the 6A-7A crown. About 90 schools were involved in the first year of sanctioned competition.

The new year is off to a rocky start with the horrific events in our nation's Capital last week, along with the surging number of post-holiday COVID-19 infections. We hope and trust that 2021 is a year of healing – in many forms – in our country, and we believe that communities engaging in education-based high school sports and performing arts can play a significant role in that process.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her third year as executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS, which celebrated its 100th year of service during the 2018-19 school year. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.