




The NFHS Voice



High School-Based Sports Competition Has Continued Successfully with Proper Mitigation Strategies

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It has been a year unlike any other in our nation's high schools – particularly in the lives of the more than 12 million participants in high school sports and performing arts.

In the early part of the 2020-21 school year, our member state associations worked with their government, health and education leaders to develop plans for a cautious return to activities, with numerous risk mitigation strategies remaining in place in order to sustain those activities.

Incredibly, throughout this school year, states have been able to provide students opportunities to participate in these programs – some states earlier in the year than others – without large-scale spread of COVID-19 due to

engagement in an actual activity or competition. As occasional cases have been identified, schools have cancelled games and activities for appropriate periods of time, implemented facility remediation strategies as appropriate, and brought kids back to activity in a ready environment.

Unfortunately, there continues to be negative attention directed at high school sports due to assumption that they are a significant cause of contagion. Actually, most of the publicized large-scale spread of COVID-19 that is often cited involves non-school youth tournaments – events not associated with organized high school sports. A wrestling tournament – not affiliated with NFHS member state associations – held last summer in Florida continues to be cited – almost a year later – as “evidence” that school sports are spreading the virus, which is definitely not the case.

In reality, as we reported last week, 37 states have been able to conduct school-based wrestling programs this year without any large-scale spread of the virus. NFHS member state associations and high schools that are a part of these associations would be not conducting competition if widespread cases of coronavirus were occurring.

And in basketball – another indoor sport linked in recent reports as the source of virus spread – 43 state associations have conducted (or will be conducting) state basketball championships.

Throughout the winter sports season, some teams had to cancel games on occasion; but with many states requiring masks and with other mitigation strategies in place during the year, the NFHS and its member associations – 51 organizations involving 19,500 high schools – have received no reports of large-scale outbreaks of COVID-19 spread from actual competition.

Many of the eight million participants in high school sports and the more than four million students in performing arts, were unable to finish winter sports last year and were grounded altogether from spring sports.

With about 20 percent of the adult population in the United States fully vaccinated at this point, now is the time for guarded optimism – not doom and gloom. The well-known mitigation steps of wearing masks, social distancing and proper hygiene must continue, but so must the energy around return to play for high school student participants.

Education-based sports and performing arts conducted through our member state associations have endured an amazing year to reach this point. Now is the time to support our schools, our student participants and parents, our coaches and administrators, and our communities across the country.

The health and safety of student participants has been and always will be the No. 1 priority in conducting school-based programs. Our state associations and their member schools have worked tirelessly for more than a year to conduct programs during the pandemic with risk minimization plans and proper mitigation steps.

In fact, it has been shown that with these mitigation strategies – many states require masks during actual competition – students are in a more protected environment during competition than when they return to other areas of life where controls are not enforced as vigorously.

We salute everyone connected with athletics and other activities in our nation's 19,500 high schools for providing students opportunities for participation in these vital, life-changing programs.

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. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.