



## The NFHS Voice



# High School Coaches to Play Key Roles in Connecting Students This Year

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The jigsaw puzzle of education-based high school athletics and performing arts programs in our nation's schools is nearing completion for the 2020-21 school year. Although there are no two plans alike from Alaska to Wyoming, sports in every state are still on the calendar at some point during the coming year.

The latest [return-to-play map](#) indicates that 37 states have modified their sports seasons for 2020-21, although individual school districts in some of the other 14 associations have delayed or postponed certain activities. In addition, 16 states have moved football to their winter or spring seasons, and eight associations will not permit any sports until at least November.

While 2020 has been one of the most stressful years in our nation's history with the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of high school sports and other

activity programs to millions of our nation's young people has been revealed to a larger national audience.

More than ever before, there is a recognition of the value of these education-based programs – athletics, speech, debate, music, theatre and others – in our nation's schools. Many parents and students have voiced the need for a return to activities. Leaders in communities across the country who previously played high school sports or were a part of the debate team know the value of participating in these activities.

Although decisions on reopening sports and other activities have been shared by government and education leaders in many states, our member state associations have done everything possible to retain high school activities this year, and we applaud their efforts.

As the 2020-21 activities calendar begins – although the landscape is different from state to state – there is an **opportunity** for everyone to engage in high school activities in some way. While football may be delayed in some states, there may be an **opportunity** to compete in another sport or activity this fall.

In those virtual learning settings where all sports have been delayed due to higher spread of COVID-19, it is essential that a virtual connection to students in sports and performing arts continues. Virtual belonging is so important, and there is no better **opportunity** than the education-based environment.

The NFHS and state associations are exploring the possibility of hosting virtual competition through the NFHS Network in some sports as another avenue to participate in high school activities. This would be another unique **opportunity** for students to experience the positive spirit and creative energy of participation until in-person competition returns.

The pandemic has revealed many heroes during the past five months – most notably those frontline health-care workers and emergency first responders – but we believe the heroes of the 2020-21 school year will be the thousands of education-based teacher-coaches in our nation’s schools.

Re-connecting high school athletes with their coaches, whether that connection is virtually or in-person, is crucial for so many students. In some situations, a coach may be the most significant mentor in a student-athlete’s life, so keeping that relationship intact is paramount.

Some coaches will be on the field or court, or in the rehearsal hall or stage, others may have to address their teams virtually until the “all-clear” is received later this year, but these men and women will be vital to the success of high school activity programs this year.

Their tasks almost seem larger than life this year and they deserve our utmost respect and appreciation. In addition to teaching skills and strategy, they will be faced with additional daily tasks related to COVID-19, or keeping their team members connected and motivated in a virtual setting. But these heroes will undoubtedly rise to the occasion and seize the **opportunity**.

In an education-based setting, the focus is on coaching the whole person. Especially given the challenges this year presents, school administration and school boards should continue to fund and empower coaches regardless of whether they are coaching virtually or in-person.

The look of high school sports and performing arts will be different in 2020-21, but there is one constant available to everyone – **opportunity**.

*Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is starting 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 100<sup>th</sup> 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.*