



The NFHS Voice



Performing Arts Programs – Springboard to Successful Lives for Millions of Students

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The NFHS and its member state high school associations are in the third week of celebrating National High School Activities Month – a time set aside to promote the values and benefits of high school activity programs.

The annual focus on the values of high school sports, performing arts and other activity programs began in 1980 when the U. S. Congress approved the third week of October as National High School Activities Week, which, in 2012, was expanded to National High School Activities Month.

In 1981, as the honorary chairman of National High School Activities Week, former President Gerald Ford had the following to say about the values of activity programs in our nation's schools:

“Can you guess what our nation’s most valuable resource is? After 28 years of service in government, I have determined that it’s not oil, gold or even government . . . but our youth.

“A handful of state high school associations realized that 60 years ago and banded together to create the National Federation of State High School Associations. Its purpose then, and now, is to encourage high schools around the nation to develop extracurricular activities, which are paramount to youths’ total education.

“I ask you to join me in support of National High School Activities Week. Please consider your participation as an investment in today’s youth, and ultimately . . . our nation’s future.”

We would say wholeheartedly some 41 years later that our nation’s youth remain our most valuable resource. And the importance of sports, performing arts and other activities in our nation’s schools – high schools, middle schools, junior high schools – was never more apparent than two years ago when these programs were shut down because of the pandemic. Suddenly, students, parents and fans of sports and performing arts realized the significance of these activities in their lives.

Sports, performing arts and other afterschool activity programs have been the springboard to successful lives for millions of students for decades. In the case of many students, it is through these programs – more than the classroom and at home – that they have learned important life lessons such as self-discipline, self-confidence, teamwork and handling competitive situations.

Recently, the NFHS released its first Athletics Participation Survey since the pandemic shutdown. While the reported 7.6 million participants in high school sports was down four percent from the last pre-pandemic survey, there are

indications that students are returning to these programs. However, sports represent only a portion of the students involved in high school activities. The hidden gem? Performing arts in the form of music, band, theatre, speech and debate.

According to Dr. James Weaver, director of the NFHS performing arts department, about 92 percent of students who were involved in performing arts programs prior to the spring 2020 shutdown have since returned to playing instruments, delivering speeches, producing theatre shows and creating art in their disciplines of choice. This is great news as these activities are just as important, life-changing and career-impacting as sports.

These programs – speech, debate, music, band, theatre – are, in fact, “cocurricular” in that they combine and complete the work done in the classroom. Performing arts programs have both an in-school component and an afterschool component.

During the day, students attend band, orchestra, theatre and debate classes, while all competitions, festivals and contests are held after school or on weekends. With the connection between the classroom and afterschool events, the numbers of students involved in these programs could surpass those in high school sports. And, thankfully, students virtually anywhere in the country can participate, as about 98 percent of our nation’s schools offer some form of speech and debate, theatre, and/or music.

One of those schools that offers about everything imaginable was honored by the NFHS recently. To highlight National Performing Arts Activities Week, the NFHS honored West Anchorage (Alaska) High School as the 2022 NFHS Performing Arts School of Excellence.

West Anchorage boasts a diverse range of performing arts, including band, choir, dance, drama, orchestra, visual arts and a hybrid activity called “Debate, Drama and Forensics.” Last year, the West Anchorage bands – pep bands, jazz band, symphonic band, wind ensemble and musical theater pit orchestra – staged an amazing 28 performances.

This is the seventh school nationally to receive the NFHS award, which is designed not only to honor schools but to encourage others to become more involved in the arts.

The NFHS also continued efforts to enhance statewide performing arts programs last month with its 23rd annual NFHS Performing Arts Conference in Denver, Colorado. A record 96 representatives from 23 states and 15 national organizations attended the three-day conference.

One of the many speakers at this year’s conference was Jon Oglesby, assistant director of the Utah High School Activities Association, who had some suggestions on ways to keep performing arts programs moving forward.

"The education community is going through a period of profound change, and educators need to be ready to 'shake up' the status quo to better reach our students and communities," Oglesby said. "However, even in the process of making those professional changes, educators need to also be aware of the small changes that can be made in both our relationships and personal lives to revitalize and reinvigorate our dedication to this noble calling. It's amazing what people are capable of when they look at shaking up the habits, hurts and mindsets that have bogged us all down at times, whether personally or professionally."

Sports, performing arts and other afterschool activities are the greatest education-based programs in the country, and they are perhaps more important than ever before in our challenging times today. The NFHS encourages your

support for these vital programs – not only in our nation’s high schools but for the continuance of these activities in our country’s middle schools and junior high schools as well.”

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fifth year as chief executive officer 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.