



The NFHS Voice



## High School Debate Provides Springboard to Success for Many Individuals

**Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Executive Director**

 @KarissaNFHS

Interested in watching a real debate – where participants follow the rules, listen to their opponents and design arguments to support their cases? It would be a good idea to turn off the television and head to your local high school.

This fall, hundreds of thousands of high school students are involved in various forms of debate – Policy, Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum, Big Ideas, among others – and are learning key skills through these education-based activity programs.

In addition to the almost eight million participants in high school sports, more than four million students are involved in speech, debate, music, theatre and other education-based activities.

Although some schools have been forced to conduct debate competition virtually due to the pandemic, leaders at the school, state and national levels have worked hard to keep these programs alive because they complement classroom work in helping students achieve success.

Nationally, the NFHS has been the leader with a one-of-a-kind [aerosol study](#) which has demonstrated that with proper mitigation efforts, schools can continue to offer these vital programs.

Unlike so-called debates happening at this time of year, through high school debate programs, students learn to work in a team structure, make decisions, solve problems and communicate effectively with other people. They learn that argumentation is not opinion and involves understanding of real issues.

Many individuals have taken advantage of skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity learned through speech and debate and forged successful careers, including some who have become familiar names in business, education, entertainment and politics.

For starters, **Oprah Winfrey**, **Hillary Clinton** and **Jane Pauley** all kick-started their future success by participation in high school speech and debate.

Winfrey, television talk show host, actress, author and philanthropist, competed in Lincoln-Douglas debate as a member of the speech team at East Nashville (Tennessee) High School. She placed second nationally in dramatic interpretation and earned a scholarship to Tennessee State University by winning an oratory contest.

At Maine South High School in Park Ridge, Illinois, Clinton participated in speech and debate, student council, the school newspaper and was chosen vice-president of her class.

Pauley, who hosted *The Today Show* on NBC for 13 years and is the current host of *CBS Sunday Morning*, was a speech and debate champion at Warren Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. Pauley was first in Girls Extemporaneous Speaking in National Forensic League competition in the late 1960s.

High school speech and debate has played a key role in the lives of many others as well. **Jack Dorsey**, co-founder and CEO of Twitter, overcame a stuttering problem, in part, through participation in speech and debate at Bishop DuBourg High School in St. Louis, Missouri. The late **Lee Iacocca**, CEO of both Ford and Chrysler during his life, was involved in extemporaneous speaking at Allentown (Pennsylvania) High School. **Shelley Long**, who gained acclaim on the sitcom *Cheers*, was on the debate team at South Side High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana and was National Forensic League champion in oratory in 1967.

The late film critic **Roger Ebert** was an Illinois state champion in the forensic division of radio speaking, and **Marcia Clark**, lead prosecutor in the O. J. Simpson case, competed in mock trial at Susan Wagner High School in Staten Island, New York.

While these individuals were involved in speech and debate, many high school students used participation in music activities as a springboard to future success. And there is no better example than the late **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**, the associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States who passed away last month.

Ginsburg, a member of the 1950 class at James Madison High School in Brooklyn, New York, played the cello in the school orchestra and was the features editor of the school's newspaper.

Ginsburg would overcome many obstacles, challenges and medical issues throughout her career to become the architect of the legal fight for women's rights and the most prominent member of the nation's highest court during her 27 years.

High school performing arts – speech, debate, music, theatre – are a tremendous complement to athletics for high school students and must be promoted even more so during these challenging times.

And next week provides a tremendous opportunity as National High School Activities Month continues. Join the NFHS October 11-17 in celebrating **National Performing Arts Activities and Local State High School Associations Week**.

More information on National High School Activities Month is available on the NFHS website at [www.NFHS.org/hsactivitiesmonth](http://www.NFHS.org/hsactivitiesmonth).

*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.*