



The NFHS Voice



Never Say Never for Conducting Fall High School Sports, Performing Arts

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The strangest beginning to a high school sports season in recent memory continues across the country. In some states, sports and other activity programs have been underway for several weeks. In other states, discussions continue on a fall starting date for some higher-risk sports. And in seven states plus the District of Columbia, the starting date for all sports has been pushed farther into the school year.

The swing of emotions continued last week as state associations, in concert with state government, health and education leaders, continued to reassess the need for students' involvement in school activities and adjust their plans to the ever-changing situations related to the coronavirus.

On the positive side, cheers and high-fives (among family members) were in order in Michigan, where football, soccer and volleyball were reinstated for the 2020 fall season after initially being moved to spring. Details of the Michigan High School Athletic Association's latest changes, along with return-to-play plans for all states, are available on the [Sports Seasons Modifications Map](#) on the NFHS website.

And on Tuesday, Colorado Governor Jared Polis said the state is giving the green light to reconsider moving high school football back to the fall after it was pushed to the spring in early August. The Colorado High School Activities Association will be making a decision tomorrow on the possible return of football to the fall season.

The news was not as positive in Connecticut and Rhode Island, however. In Connecticut, the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference cancelled football for the fall season on the recommendation of the Connecticut Department of Public Health. With no plans for playing football in the spring, the CIAC is developing some lower-risk options for players this fall. Volleyball will be allowed in Connecticut this fall, although in New Jersey, opposite plans have been developed – football will be played this fall while girls volleyball has been moved to the spring.

In response to the governor's orders, the Rhode Island Interscholastic League is moving football and girls volleyball to the spring season. In two other Northeast states – Maine and New York – discussions about playing higher-risk sports this fall continue.

At the local level in the Olathe (Kansas) School District, there was an interesting twist to the subject of allowing sports to be played if students are

learning virtually. In that suburban Kansas City school district, football will be allowed this fall ONLY if students are learning virtually throughout the season. Borrowed from the Wichita (Kansas) School District, this plan mimics the bubble concept of professional basketball and hockey.

Many states, many plans and approaches. There are no single right or wrong decision made by school districts, state associations and state government, health and education leaders. However, with some of the recent developments, perhaps the new motto should be “never say never.” While decisions to delay fall sports until later in the year were made in some states many weeks ago, changes in COVID-19 positivity rates may allow for reconsideration of decisions.

Because of the value of these programs – sports, speech, music, theatre – to the more than 12 million high school participants, we must continue to remain hopeful and look for new opportunities for students to connect through high school activity programs.

While these programs may have to be conducted differently in the COVID-19 time with social distancing, masks and enhanced hygiene precautions, they are just as important as the classroom work. Sports and other activity programs bring people together. Everyone on the team is accepted. Everyone on the team is integral to its success.

In high school sports, no team member is less significant than another. All members of the team work together. They shed tears together, they heal together, and they laugh and celebrate together.

We understand and support that health concerns related to COVID-19 must come first, but every opportunity possible for high school students to engage in sports and performing arts should remain on the table.

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 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.