



The NFHS Voice



Thanks to Mitigation Strategies, Performing Arts Events Return to High Schools Nationwide

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While the nearly eight million participants in high school sports are excited about a full return to competition in the 2021-22 school year, an equal number of students involved in performing arts activities have even more reason to rejoice.

After a year of unprecedented struggles to participate in music, speech, debate and theatre programs, high school performing arts participants are back – on the field, on the stage and in the classroom.

Thanks in large part to a one-of-a-kind aerosol study led by the NFHS, the College Band Directors National Association and more than 125 performing arts organizations, these vital, year-round cocurricular activities are back in most of the nation's schools. And the key step for a successful return in the majority of

schools has been the implementation of five essential mitigation strategies from the aerosol study – masking, distance, reduction of time, hygiene and air quality.

While high school sports were adversely affected by the pandemic last year, performing arts programs were devastated. Only six states were able to offer in-person music contests and festivals last year, and only a couple of states were able to conduct in-person speech and debate. However, the remainder continued to compete virtually and were able to conduct season-ending state events in that way.

However, there is nothing like face-to-face, in-person activities, and the mitigation essentials from the aerosol study – and the vigilance of teachers in implementing them – have been the determining factor in many cases. And the NFHS, led by Dr. James Weaver, NFHS director of performing arts and sports, has been the national leader throughout this past year.

In order to approve a return to music, speech, debate and theatre programs nationwide, many departments of health have relied on the mitigation steps from the aerosol study for re-opening music and theatre activities.

While football, volleyball, soccer, field hockey and other high school sports are being played across the country this fall, about an equal number of students are involved in marching band and pep band, and others are in choir and orchestra rehearsals. Speech and debate programs are up and going as well, along with fall plays on the theatre side.

These programs – speech, debate music, theatre – are, in fact, “cocurricular” in that they combine and complete the work done in the classroom – the other half of education. Unlike sports, performing arts programs have both an in-school component and an after-school component. During the school day,

students attend band, orchestra, theatre and debate classes. All competitions, festivals and contests then are held after school. And after a year on the sideline or held virtually, most are back in-person with the appropriate mitigation strategies.

In the performing arts world, one activity leads to another throughout the school year. In the band world, students progress from marching band and pep band in the fall, to concert band in the winter months, to contest festival season in the spring. In the choir world, concert choir kicks off activities in the fall, followed by show choir in the winter and festivals in the spring.

Similar to sports, competing on the debate team or playing in the marching band or acting on stage as a part of the theatre team helps students develop critical-thinking skills. They also learn to be better communicators and tend to be good listeners – qualities that are essential for success in life and in their chosen careers.

Involvement in these education-based activities helps students develop self-discipline and self-confidence, and they learn how to handle competitive situations. Teamwork is a part of these activities as well. Everyone must know their part in order for the team to succeed. In a band and orchestra performance, all team members have to work together in order to achieve success.

We salute all performing arts educators for their tireless efforts last year in keeping students connected. Music, speech, debate and theatre activities are just as important to students involved in these activities as football, volleyball, soccer and basketball are to students involved in high school sports.

The anticipation of competing in an all-state music competition or a state championship in debate or theatre is just as important to performing arts

participants as making it to a state football or basketball championship for a student involved in high school sports.

While last year was a year like none other in a challenging way, we believe this year will be a year to be thankful that performing arts programs are alive and well in our nation's schools.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is beginning her fourth 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.