



The NFHS Voice



## **Athletics/Activities Directors Key Leaders of High School Sports, Performing Arts**

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In various columns this year we have stressed the importance of high school sports and performing arts in the lives of high school students – particularly since the return of these programs after the pandemic shutdown.

Certainly, coaches play crucial roles in the success of these programs. In addition to preparing for the daily “Xs and Os,” interscholastic coaches spend countless hours in mentorship capacities with student-athletes off the field and court, answer tough questions from parents, teach classes during the school day and handle many never-ending, always-changing daily tasks.

Perhaps equally as significant to the success of high school sports and other activity programs are the thousands of men and women who serve as athletics and activities directors – the “coaches of coaches.”

During the past five days, almost 2,000 high school directors of athletics gathered in Denver, Colorado, at the National Athletic Directors Conference co-sponsored by the NFHS and the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA).

Unlike national conferences for some groups, professional development is among the main reasons that athletic directors attend this annual conference. They know that they are entrusted with key leadership roles, and continuing their education helps to provide a safe and fun experience for student-athletes in their schools.

This year, 40 workshops were held covering topics such as mentoring; facilities improvement; “Name, Image and Likeness” issues; fan behavior; student leadership; working with budget constraints; and student-athlete anxiety and mental health.

In addition, the NIAAA offered 54 Leadership Training classes, on topics from legal issues, to marketing and promotions, to managing fields and equipment, to working with students with disabilities.

Athletic directors are the leaders of education-based athletics in our nation’s high schools. They have an endless list of responsibilities and set the tone for the overall success of a school’s athletics and/or activities program.

Due to the pandemic, the NFHS and NIAAA were not able to gather for the 2020 conference, so the return to an in-person setting was particularly fulfilling. The NFHS started the conference in 1971, and 355 athletic directors attended the first national meeting in St. Louis.

Including the virtual meeting last year, the conference has been held every year since with more than 2,000 athletic administrators attending annually in recent years.

The growth of the high school athletic administration profession as well as the NADC was additionally fueled in 1977 when the NFHS formed the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), a national professional organization for high school athletic directors. Membership in the NIAAA expanded rapidly and, in 2006, it became its own organization. Since that time, the NFHS – the national leader and advocate for high school athletics and performing arts – and the NIAAA have worked together annually to sponsor the NADC.

Throughout the past five days, it has been gratifying to hear attendees talk about what they consider their top accomplishments. Perhaps to the surprise of some, it is not primarily about victories or state championships. More often the responses were about winning the state sportsmanship award, or having students return after starting their careers and thank them for their leadership in high school, or starting programs for students with disabilities.

The shutdown of high school sports last year during the pandemic, and the loss of the in-person National Athletic Directors Conference, have been two wake-up calls about the necessity and importance of these programs.

At another session this past week, Rob Cuff, executive director of the Utah High School Activities Association and 2021-22 president of the NFHS Board of Directors, asked the following questions: “What would the school day look like if high school activity programs were not in place” and “What would happen to performance in the classroom if high school activity programs were not available”?

Certainly, the impact of not having sports and performing arts in our nation’s schools would be devastating. We must keep these programs alive and moving forward for high school students, and the National Athletic Directors

Conference was confirmation that our schools are in good hands with our nation's athletic directors.

High school athletic directors are the key leaders in our nation's education-based athletic programs. Local schools depend on these individuals to lead their athletics programs, our member state high school associations depend on these men and women to help lead state events and initiatives, and the NFHS and NIAAA look to athletic administrators for leadership at the national level. We appreciate the tremendous service they provide our nation's young people!

*Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in 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.*