



The NFHS Voice



High School Speech, Debate Students Gain Lifetime Benefits from Participating in Programs

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The National Federation of State High School Associations has been leading high school sports for more than 100 years – writing playing rules, providing services for high school coaches and officials, and promoting lifelong health and safety values through participation.

These services – and many others – provide opportunities for about eight million participants on an annual basis. From the crosstown rivalry to the state championship game, memories – and relationships – from high school sports last a lifetime.

Although unknown to many individuals, there are millions more high school students – perhaps even more than those involved in sports – who participate in other education-based activity programs. And the NFHS and many of its member

state associations have been meeting the needs of these students since the 1970s.

While they might not make the headlines of some sports participants, students in after-school activities such as music, speech, debate, theatre and others are as passionate and engaged in these programs as those students in athletics. In fact, there are many individuals who participate in both athletics and performing arts programs, and the lifelong values of these programs as an additional component to academics are priceless.

On Monday, the NFHS announced the 2022-23 National High School Debate Topic – a task fulfilled by the NFHS every year since 1979. Next year, the millions of students involved in speech and debate will be debating the topic of “Emerging Technologies,” which was selected in the final balloting over “Global Climate Changes.”

“Emerging Technologies” is a relevant and exciting topic for students to debate and will involve discussion of areas such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and cybersecurity.

In addition to the camaraderie with peers, students involved in these programs gain many long-term benefits. In a *High School Today* article in 2016, Treva Dayton noted that “in creating a persuasive argument, debaters are pushed to set a goal and steps to reach the goal. They must think critically about how an opponent might respond and prepare for that as well.

“It is not surprising, of course, that students in performing arts become better communicators. But this comes not just from the self-confidence and fluency they gain through performance or public speaking. Successful performers are good listeners. They don’t just hear, but learn to listen to nuances, to silence,

and to choice of words as part of the message. Effective communication is a two-way process, and learning to truly listen is essential.”

Currently, students are debating “Water Resources” as the 2021-22 debate topic. Although schools are facing increasing challenges with the spread of the latest variant of COVID-19, there are established mitigation practices that should keep performing arts programs running in those cases where schools are in-person. And in those cases where schools have moved to virtual learning on a temporary basis, these vital activity programs have proved to be successful in that setting as well.

The NFHS, under the direction of Dr. James Weaver, led an unprecedented aerosol study last year to determine mitigation strategies that would allow performing arts activities to continue during the pandemic.

While the study was more focused on music programs, the basics apply to speech and debate as well. We know the values of wearing masks, physical distancing and proper hygiene, along with proper ventilation in classrooms and reducing the length of practices in some cases.

Along with mitigation strategies developed last year, students also have availability of vaccines, which have added an additional layer of protection. Certainly, the health of students remains the top priority, but there is evidence that these vital activity programs can **and should** continue if the proper precautionary steps are enacted.

We salute the millions of high school students, teachers and administrators involved in the life-changing activities of speech and debate in our nation’s schools.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fourth 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.