



The NFHS Voice



## **Participation, Attendance Rises in High School Performing Arts Programs**

**Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Chief Executive Officer**

 @KarissaNFHS

As the national leader and advocate for high school athletics as well as fine arts and performing arts programs, the goal of the NFHS is to help students have an opportunity to enjoy healthy participation, achievement and good sportsmanship in education-based activities.

And, inasmuch as the focus is on education-based “activities,” the work of the NFHS reaches beyond athletics to encourage student participation in speech, debate, music, theatre and other afterschool activity programs.

These activities are just as important and significant as their counterparts on the athletics side and help to promote a “something for all” philosophy. And they are growing, too. “The numbers of students involved in fine arts, performing

arts and other non-athletics programs may approach the almost eight million participants in high school sports.

The benefits students receive by being involved in speech, debate, music and theatre are the same as being on an athletic team – hard work, determination, time management, teamwork, leadership and skill development, among others. And after losing out on these benefits for a period of time during the pandemic, fine arts and performing arts programs, like their athletic counterparts, are on the road to normalcy.

After leading a national aerosol study involving more than 125 organizations in 2020-21 to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on performing arts activities, Dr. James Weaver, NFHS director of performing arts and sports, reports that theatre participation and attendance is beginning to approach pre-pandemic levels and music is on the comeback trail as well.

“Iowa had 35,000 students participate in theatre programs this year,” Weaver said. “People are hungry for in-person theatrical experiences right now. Iowa had its third-highest attendance for spectators in history. The only thing that stopped it from being the highest was in the fall Iowa had socially distanced audiences. I don’t think we’re at pre-pandemic levels, but we’re getting close to those levels in theatre.

“In music, we saw a 40 percent decline in music participation coming out of the 2020-21 school year, which was very worrying. Through a survey of state administrators last month though, we’re down 15 percent nationally today. The recovery isn’t even and there is still a lot of work to do, but compared to where we could be this is a huge recovery. If we can continue those gains, we should be able to get back to pre-pandemic levels much quicker than the seven years we anticipated.”

Like those programs on the athletics side, thousands of spectators attend high school performing arts events on an annual basis. After attendance was halted toward the end of the 2019-20 school year and not re-opened – in many cases – until sometime during the 2021-22 school year, the return of fans to encourage students in their performances has been tremendous.

“I’ve been hearing from many states that attendance has been near record-breaking levels,” Weaver said. “Typically, you would have parents and grandparents attending; but now with live performances for the first time in two years, friends and community members are coming as well. It’s the highest quality at the lowest cost entertainment ticket in town. And I think that’s true no matter what high school program you’re attending, whether it’s a football game, a track meet, a band concert or a theater performance. It’s the best entertainment for the money in the community.”

The NFHS has been touting the benefits of athletics and performing arts programs for most of its 100-plus years of existence, but the value of sports, speech, debate, music and theatre became very real to everyone when they were suddenly gone in the spring of 2020. So, reports of packed football stadiums and overflowing auditoriums are great news.

There is still much work to do, however, and as schools continue to encourage students to become involved in some afterschool activity, it is important to know there is **something for all**. Whether students participate in sports or in speech, debate, theatre or music, the takeaways and life lessons are the same.

“By playing a sport like basketball in the winter, you’re learning how to really coordinate with those people on the court,” Weaver said. “By being on a theater stage, you’re learning how to communicate what has been happening in

this medium to an audience and getting their reactions to the storytelling while working with those on the stage, behind the scenes and the techies.”

Like athletics, performing arts programs are making a difference in the lives of high school students. We encourage athletic directors, principals and superintendents to continue to find ways to engage students in some afterschool activity program.

We must continue to present opportunities for every young person to be a part of – and engaged in – their school through education-based high school activity programs.

*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.*