



## The NFHS Voice



# After Long Wait, All States Expected to Have Opportunities for Sports, Performing Arts

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Since the shutdown of high school sports and performing arts last March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each state has been looking for that proverbial light at the end of tunnel as a sign for restarting its programs. In some states, the light appeared quickly last fall; in others, it has taken many more miles to reach that light.

In the past couple of weeks, several states that have not been able to **Play.Perform.Compete.Together** since last spring, along with a few states that had been on pause due to government mandates, received the green light to proceed. The lights are no longer from an oncoming train in the tunnel; the lights are being turned on in gymnasiums, in auditoriums and on stages.

Illinois and New York were two of the states that had been on pause. While some lower-risk sports were contested earlier this year, a few areas in each state have been approved by state government and health officials to participate in basketball.

Tuscola High School was one of the first schools in Illinois to play basketball last week. In a first-hand account in the *News-Gazette*, Tuscola boys basketball coach Justin Bozarth said, “As Mr. Fiscus (the school’s principal) and I sit at the entrance doors Friday morning checking our students in, you can feel a different energy. It’s been over 10 months since our kids have had an opportunity to represent their school through competition. Five seniors can’t wait to step on the court after questioning two weeks ago if it would ever happen again.

“After the game . . . social media is lighting up with articles, news clips and proud parents once again celebrating their kids. High school sports fans, trust me when I say the return to competition is as enjoyable as you’ve dreamed about.”

In New York, there was equal excitement in late January when the Governor’s office and the New York State Department of Public Health gave the go-ahead for participation in higher-risk sports, although approval from local health departments is still required.

Robert Zayas, executive director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, said, “I am thrilled our association’s member schools will be able to provide over 200,000 students with valuable and beneficial participation experiences. Today is certainly a great day for the students of New York State.”

The [NFHS Winter Sports Season Guide](#) indicates that, through incredible hard work and perseverance, ALL states will be offering competition in some sports by early March.

After being on the sidelines since last March, students in New Mexico will be returning to competition in volleyball and cross country on February 27, football on March 4 and soccer on March 5, with requirements set forth by the Public Education Department and the Governor's Office.

In an article in the February issue of *High School Today*, Sally Marquez, executive director of the New Mexico Activities Association, was anxiously anticipating the return of high school activities.

"The day that we play our first game or even the day that we assign an official to a ballgame, I don't even have words as to how I'm going to feel. You think about the things in your life that are most important – the birth of your children, weddings, and those other types of things that happen in your personal life – but I would say returning to play will bring me more joy in my professional life than I've ever had in my 37 years of being an educator."

While some sports are still on the sidelines, the ending of a stay-at-home order in California on January 25 has allowed a few sports to begin in some areas of the state. Cross country is among those sports, and two schools in Riverside – Arlington High School and Ramona High School – were among the first to compete in sports since the shutdown.

In an article in the *Riverside Press-Enterprise*, Arlington cross country coach Gabi Jimenez said, "Today was just a big gift for everyone involved. We have been waiting for this for almost a whole year, so it is kind of like waking up on Christmas morning. These kids were so excited to have a chance to race again."

Opportunities have returned in Washington for the first time this year as well. Last week, the governor moved two regions into Phase 2 of the state's re-

opening plan, which will permit sports to commence, beginning with traditional fall sports such as football.

In an article in the *Seattle Times*, Dan Pudwill, athletic director of Redmond High School, offered the following with the impending return of high school sports.

“Just having kids on our campus outside even if it’s in the wind or the rain and they’re working on their physical conditioning and they’re seeing friends they haven’t seen in almost a year and the positive emails we get from parents about allowing these kids to have this activity in their lives, that’s been worth it – in and of itself.”

In addition to these return-to-sports success stories, many high school music programs have been able to continue this year as a result of mitigation strategies uncovered through the unprecedented aerosol study commissioned by the NFHS, the College Band Directors National Association and a coalition of 125 performing arts organizations.

In response to our recent messaging on “Name, Image and Likeness,” some have asserted that state associations are exploiting student-athletes for their own benefit. Hardly. The truth is that every leader in every state has been working non-stop since last March to ensure that high school students have the opportunity to simply get on the practice field or in the rehearsal hall. The perseverance that some of these associations have demonstrated in working with state government and health leaders – all with the intent of providing the opportunity for kids to participate in these vital high school programs – has been remarkable. This is education-based high school activity programs at its best.

*Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in 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. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.*