



The NFHS Voice



## **Additional Year of Competition Not Best Option for High School Activities**

**Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Executive Director**

 @KarissaNFHS

Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that proposals are being considered to provide high school student-athletes an additional year of athletic competition.

In some parts of the country, the COVID-19 pandemic eliminated chances for high school students to compete in their favorite sports or activity such as music or speech – at least for a full season in the normal setting. Things certainly didn't seem “fair” to say the least.

State high school associations have gone to great lengths – working with state government, education and health leaders – to provide opportunity for competition, and in the end, every state was finally able to return to some level of play in most sports.

The NCAA has offered all 2020-21 fall and winter sports athletes an additional year of eligibility. The additional year has been granted due to the chaotic year when numerous games were cancelled.

So, why not have the same opportunity at the high school level?

There are many reasons why an additional year of athletic eligibility is not an option for high school student-athletes, including the maximum age rule and the eight-semester rules that exist in all states. Students who become 19 years of age before September 1 are ineligible for athletic competition.

Participation in sports and performing arts activities runs concurrently with the four consecutive years in high school (grades 9-12). The maximum participation of eight semesters promotes timely progress toward graduation by discouraging students from delaying their high school education. Participation in sports and other activities is a privilege granted to students during their four years in high school, and that time is finite.

In addition, adding a fifth year of eligibility, while it might seem “fair” for this year’s seniors, could negatively impact a younger member of the team by taking away a roster spot.

Currently, legislation to allow additional participation is being considered in at least two states – Kentucky and Maryland – and the proposals differ on many fronts.

The Kentucky Senate bill, which has now moved to the House for consideration, is an education measure that provides a student enrolled this year to use the 2021-22 school year as a supplemental year to retake or supplement courses already taken. However, it does provide students a fifth year of athletic eligibility if they, in essence, take classes from the current year.

The focus of this proposal seems to be educational in nature and would not attempt to waive the age rule. While there are always attempts to take advantage of any rule, the Kentucky proposal appears primarily to offer students disadvantaged from an educational perspective an additional year to recover before heading to college or beginning a career.

Julian Tackett, commissioner of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, said while the KHSAA does not have a position on the bill other than to ensure it doesn't alter the age rule, sports do not appear to be the priority. He said the reason the fifth year was added was a concern that students would turn down a good academic option if they were not allowed to continue playing sports.

In contrast, the Maryland legislation, with House and Senate bills, would permit athletes to play sports the year after they graduate – a measure clearly not focused on academics.

Because of interrupted sport schedules due to the pandemic, this legislation seeks to provide an option to continue and finish seasons next year.

This bill would require the State Department of Education to waive academic progress requirements and age restrictions. The focus is on providing students more chances to be recruited and ignores the fact that high school sports only exist if they are a part of an educational curriculum.

The Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association and the Maryland Association of Board of Education also noted that this proposal raises liability issues with non-enrolled students participating in sports on school grounds.

The NFHS and its member state associations have led the push for high school students to be able to participate in activity programs – whenever possible

from a health standpoint – throughout the pandemic. Unfortunately, despite everyone’s best efforts, some participation opportunities were lost.

However, such has been the case for millions of people in all walks of life this past year. The pandemic had disrupted lives and challenged everyone to find inner strength to keep going.

Rather than trying to change the educational and athletic infrastructure of schools nationwide, we urge leaders to help our nation’s students move on to the future. The values learned through the three to four years of competition in high school activity programs will enable students to start down the road of becoming successful and contributing members of society.

*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.*