

**National Federation of State High School Associations
2016 Winter Meeting**

Report on Facilitated Planning Dialogues

January 3 – 4, 2016

I. OVERVIEW AND PROCESS

Members of the National Federation of State High School Associations met for two three-hour sessions as part of their 2016 Winter Meeting to engage in facilitated dialogue on the future direction of the NFHS. The discussion and conclusions were not circumscribed by current limitations on the jurisdiction and authority of the NFHS and its members. Rather, the process was open and aspirational. The overarching Focus Question to be answered through this dialogue process was

What is the story we want to tell about school-based sports and activities in the United States?

In the three months prior to the Winter Meeting, members from each section met to identify the major issues, challenges, and assets facing the federation. Findings from these conversations were provided to the facilitator. These findings served as triggers for facilitated dialogue at the Winter Meeting. Participants engaged in eight separate preliminary dialogues prior to the final dialogue to answer the Focus Question above.

The preliminary dialogues addressed the following topics:

1. Trends and Challenges to Schools
 - Attendance
 - Administrators
 - Officials
 - College Recruitment
2. Competing Sports Options
 - Non-school programs
 - Private Schools
 - Specialization
 - Co-ops
3. State Legislatures
4. Safety / Concussions
5. Inclusion / Transgender
6. Transfers / School Choice
7. Cheer / Stunt
8. Promotion Pathways, Strategies, Themes, and Targets

This report includes findings or discussion points from each of the above dialogues, as well as findings from the final dialogue to answer the overarching Focus Question. The findings from the final dialogue begin on page 10.

II. FINDINGS FROM THE PRELIMINARY DIALOGUES

Eight preliminary dialogues preceded the final dialogue. Each dialogue had a unique question to be answered, through a combination of small group and plenary discussion. The question and the findings for each of these dialogues are presented below, in the order that they occurred.

Dialogue 1 TRENDS AND CHALLENGES TO SCHOOLS (Attendance, Administrators, Officials, College Recruitment)

Question: **Considering trends and challenges that you have raised concerning attendance, administrators, officials, and college recruitment, what do you want the story of school-based sports and activities to convey?**

Participants generated answers to this question in small groups. These answers were sorted into six clusters on an adhesive board. Two findings were generated from these clusters:

1. *Our story gets lost in the larger national narrative about sports and “winning.” How we tell our story is as important as the story itself.*

The story of education-based athletics is one that people are less and less aware of, as the culture focuses more and more on celebrity, scholarships, and the importance of winning. Education-based athletics provide deep value to communities, students, families, business and industry, higher education, and the nation as a whole. Much of this value is tied to the benefits of *participation* itself—providing opportunities for all students to work and play cohesively and cooperatively, and to communicate and lead effectively. Our story needs to connect the benefits of participation to our academic mission, and the value to society of an investment in school-based activities.

Our story is about saving kids’ lives. For many students, school-based sports and activities offer a pathway from social disadvantage, an opportunity to imagine and realize a future that life circumstances otherwise wouldn’t provide. In telling this story, it is important to partner with other organizations and disciplines who can attest to the role that school-based sports and activities played in the lives of former students. We need to mobilize people and organizations who have benefited from school-based sports and activities to deliver a clear and consistent message nationwide.

2. *Relationships to individual administrators and officials, and to our organizational allies, are crucial to telling our story.*

Educational leaders must be equipped to teach and promote the values of school-based sports and activities. This requires state association leaders to maintain strong and communicative relationships with school administrators and others who have influence on the way in which school-based sports and activities are perceived. It also requires an effective means of training

school administrators and officials on the values of teaching life skills through school-based activity.

NFHS should develop required trainings for school administrators and officials that advance these values and promotes the educational core of school-based activity. It should become a hub a hub for delivering resources that strengthen relationships to individual administrators and officials at the community level, and to alliances with other organizations at the national level.

Dialogue 2
TRENDS AND CHALLENGES: COMPETING SPORTS OPTIONS
(Non-school programs, private schools, specialization, co-ops)

Question: Considering trends and challenges that you have raised concerning competing sports options, what do you want the story of school-based sports and activities to convey?

Participants generated answers to this question in small groups. These answers were sorted into eight clusters on an adhesive board. Four findings were generated from these clusters:

1. *Our story should celebrate the uniqueness of school-based sports and activities: the value of giving all students the opportunity to participate.*

Contrasted with other sports options (private schools, club sports, co-ops, etc.), school-based sports and activities uniquely represent the national ideal of opportunity for all. Robert Putnam, in his book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, describes the “opportunity gap” that has emerged over the past quarter-century between education for wealthy and poor children in America, and how differences in politics, class, and race are undermining the opportunities to excel. Rather than focus on non-school programs, we should advance school-based sports and activities through the ways they strengthen communities and provide avenues of opportunity for the 98% of American children who might otherwise not be able to participate. The values of diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to the mission of our federation.

2. *We must help athletic directors and administrators talk about cooperative learning through school-based sports and activities.*

The federation should develop communication strategies to counter the imperative of “winning” as the purpose of school-based sports and activities. Winning may be the goal of competition, but it is not its purpose. Its purpose is to teach values like cooperation and respect for the rules of the game. We need to tell the story of the ninety percent of students who do not go on to play sports beyond high school, but who do great things in other areas of endeavor because of what they learned through education-based athletics and fine arts activities.

Many athletic directors and administrators are starving for a way to talk to parents about this. The federation should explore ways to convey the ideas advanced in Joe Ehrmann’s book, *InsideOut Coaching*, which contrasts a transactional approach to athletics—one focused

primarily on winning—with a transformational approach, one that focuses on teaching and preparing students for success in life.

3. ***Promote student choice while advancing the value of education-based athletics and multiple sports participation.***

We need to position school-based sports and activities to co-exist with alternative options such as community and club teams. Students must be given the opportunity to make their own decisions about how to pursue their interests, which will inevitably include, at times, specialization in one sport, or participating in teams outside the public school system. We have many allies in promoting the value of quality school-based programs and a multiple-sport approach, as evidenced by Project Play report, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, which has been endorsed by 28 national sport governing bodies, five professional leagues, and other organizations. We should promote these values without directly opposing alternative avenues to participation or diminishing each student’s right to pursue his or her personal path.

4. ***Support research that makes the case for school-based sports and activities.***

To tell the story of school-based sports compellingly, we need current data on such things as return on investment, the actual percentages of academic vs. sports scholarship dollars awarded, etc. Our current data is outdated. NFHS should consider sponsoring a research project to compile current data to make the case for our programs, and promote it broadly.

Dialogue 3 STATE LEGISLATURES

Question: What can we do to lessen the negative impact of State Legislatures on school-based sports—or make their impact positive?

Participants discussed this question in plenary format, while the facilitator tracked discussion points on an adhesive board. The main points are listed below as bullets.

- About two thirds of state associations employ lobbyists. It is important to use this resource proactively and strategically. Associations should invite legislators to meet and discuss prevalent issues when we are not in crisis mode so that a mutually beneficial relationship is formed. When a crisis does emerge, the pre-existing relationship will position the state association to assist in handling it.
- If we fail to nurture an ongoing relationship, legislators are likely to hear only one side: that of aggrieved parents. Association staff should become the legislative aide’s best friend, speaking authentically and building trust as an authority on issues of concern to the legislator. It is important to reach out early in a legislative session to learn what issues are on the legislator’s agenda, i.e. mental health concerns, concussions, etc. In many states, the public attention to concussions has brought state associations into a

deeper, more positive relationship with legislators. Where this is true, we need to build on this relationship and trust.

Dialogue 4 SAFETY / CONCUSSIONS

Question: What should be our strategy for handling concerns about safety and concussions as we promote the value of school-based sports?

Participants discussed this question in plenary format, while the facilitator tracked discussion points on an adhesive board. The main points are listed below as bullets.

- NFHS can legitimately claim to have been ahead of the curve in working to minimize the risk to student athletes. When we are told that “you’re not doing enough,” the truth is that we are, and we have. It is important to claim and hold this narrative. Because of our actions, games such as football are much safer than they would otherwise be.
- Professional sports are much riskier than high school athletics, and that risk is driving the media story. We need to get our message out about the reduction of risk at the high school level, and we need to do this collectively. We should also promote parent education as a requirement in state legislation.
- At the same time, the question “Are high school athletics safe enough?” is a legitimate one, and one that needs to be the focus of a national conversation. One thing that NFHS may want to do is set baseline national standards—a minimum level of safety that all states would adopt, although some may choose to adopt more rigorous measures. NFHS needs to speak with one voice, and consistently advance the themes of sportsmanship and safety. One way to do this is would be to agree that the Executive Director should always serve as the voice of the Federation.

Dialogue 5 INCLUSION

Question: As we craft the story we want to tell about school-based sports in the U.S., what message about inclusion do we want to convey?

Participants discussed this question in plenary format, while the facilitator tracked discussion points on an adhesive board. On the second day of the meeting, the issue was reopened for further discussion, specifically to focus on transgender athletes. The main points raised in both dialogues are listed below as bullets.

- The NFHS stands for full and fair participation of all constituencies at all levels of activity (governance, staff, students). The board has supported efforts to increase diversity at the governance and staff levels, with varying success.

- In some areas, F1 visas have become a strategy for responding to declining enrollment. They have also become a subject of intense competition between schools. Many students with F1 visas come to the U.S. purely for athletic participation.
- Some members argue that fairness must take precedence when weighing the impact of F1 visas, i.e. that inclusion should not outweigh being fair in the ways we determine students' eligibility. But there are difficult ethical and relational questions to be resolved. Students from the Sudan come here in part to escape a horrible political reality; but their extreme height advantage can disrupt the norms of a school's athletic program.
- Controversies over the inclusion of transgender students have occurred in several states, sometimes involving heated debates and proposals for legislative action. Other states have had had policies on transgender athletes in place for many years without controversy.
- The experience of some states has been that once you get past the initial public uproar over the issue, schools are not having much of a problem in accepting transgender athletes. By working with the student and his or her parents, most situational problems can be easily and fairly resolved.
- Some states have successfully resolved controversy over the inclusion of transgender athletes by changing the focus from *policy* to *procedure*. Rather than a hard rule about inclusion, what is needed is a process for resolving concerns and ensuring fairness to all involved.
- Politically, at the local and state level, everyone is afraid of the issue of transgender inclusion, and no one appears ready to move toward regulatory or legislative action. For the NFHS, the story should always be about inclusion. A primary value of our organization is that all students have the right to participate, and this should always guide our response to controversies at the local and state level.

Dialogue 6 **TRANSFER / SCHOOL CHOICE**

Question: As we craft the story we want to tell about school-based sports in the U.S., what message about transfers and school choice do we want to convey?

Participants discussed this question in plenary format, while the facilitator tracked discussion points on an adhesive board. The main points are listed below as bullets.

- In some states, open eligibility rules have enabled schools to team up and thereby bring the best athletes in a particular sport to one school, compromising "competitive equity." NFHS has promoted school loyalty, but with schools wanting open enrollment and school choice, it must be clarified whether we mean *school* loyalty or *community* loyalty.

- Currently about 1.8% of our students are transferring; 98% are in their home community's school. If we let the data drive policy, perhaps this shouldn't be a big concern.
- The problem is that many policy-makers look at education through the lens of a business model. What matters is winning over the competition, and what can be negotiated with competing schools. As a federation of state associations, we have to ask, do transfer rules serve our interest and our values?
- In promoting school or community loyalty, the message of NFHS must acknowledge how schools are changing. What does school and community loyalty mean when schools are becoming increasingly virtual in nature? First and foremost we must advocate for a level playing field for student athletes, one that allows students of any socio-economic circumstance the opportunity to participate.

Dialogue 7 CHEER / STUNT

Question: How do our ideas about Cheer and Stunt competitions inform the story we want to tell about school-based sports?

Participants discussed this question in plenary format, while the facilitator tracked discussion points on an adhesive board. The main points are listed below as bullets.

- Our primary goal is to provide something that all students can participate in, so Cheer and Stunt should be part of our universe. Cheerleading continues to have gender implications as a primarily female activity, and to occupy a more supportive than active role. Stunt is more obviously competitive, but its definition and status is still vague.
- Whether Cheer and Stunt are regarded as athletic competition or not, it is important to keep these activities as part of our story. How we do that may need to remain a decision for individual states to make at this time.
- Some Offices of Civil Rights have begun defining the elements that constitute a sport, and this may eventually lead to NFHS sanctioning Cheer and/or Stunt as a sport. Some argue that, with a quarter to a third of all states recognizing Cheer now, the NFHS should do so, too.

Dialogue 8 PROMOTION

(Pathways, Strategies and Themes, Targets, National Events)

The dialogue on Promotion had four parts, each with its own question. The questions and the discussion points they generated follow.

Promotion Pathways

Question: What promotion pathways will be most effective in telling the story of school-based sports and activities?

- Have students and former students tell their own story in PSAs.
- We can't have 51 different messages. Engage a communications firm and empower a committee to figure out how to tell our collective story. In order to do this, we will need to have the discipline to give away individual control over what the message is. There are themes and values that we all agree on—e.g., safety, inclusion, participation—*that* should be the message that comes from all of us.
- We need to acknowledge that refining our message is an expensive proposition, and that it is not a one-time expense. We will need to budget for this every year, in order to keep up with the changing culture and environment.
- Social media needs to be an important part of our messaging strategy, but we also need to recognize that some social media just doesn't work. Our communications firm should be charged with monitoring results and telling us what works for various constituencies. Reaching out to a diverse audience should be a priority.

Promotion Strategies and Themes

Question: What strategies and themes will be most effective in telling the story of school-based sports and activities?

- The message must strive to achieve diversity in participation.
- The message must promote these themes:
 - We serve the 99% of students, not the privileged
 - We promote sportsmanship
 - We develop leaders
 - We strengthen communities
 - We strive for equitable opportunity for student participation
- Promote education-based athletics; coaches as teachers.

- Kids have a tremendous need to *belong* to something bigger than themselves. We provide that, and we make it FUN.
- Elevate the statistic that only 2% of kids play organized sports beyond high school, and that most athletes in the NCAA don't go on to play professionally. Show the great achievements made by those who did not continue their athletic career, and how participation in high school athletics helped them in their careers.

Promotion Targets

Question: What are the most important targets of NFHS's promotion in telling the story of school-based sports and activities?

- We need to shift the focus from major league sports to other areas of success in life. Portray the value of participation in high school athletics and activities through its impact on Fortune 500 companies, civic leadership, or accomplishments in other fields.

National Events

Question: What if any role should national events play in NFHS's promotion efforts?

- This is a longstanding issue that NFHS has discussed many times over the last ten years, and there is still no consensus on whether it is a good idea. Some states feel that a national championship might be beneficial in some sports, or that it might be a benefit if applied to individual athletes but not to teams. Others feel that while national championships are not a good idea, national events shouldn't be a problem if a state wants to participate in them. Where does this leave NFHS as a national organization? It is important to stay at the table and be mindful of the national conversation. There doesn't appear to be a consensus about the value of national events at this time.
- This is not the only issue that divides the membership of NFHS. We need to become more comfortable engaging and working through challenging issues like this.

III. FINDINGS FROM THE FINAL DIALOGUE

In the final dialogue, small groups attempted to answer this Focus Question, based on all that had been stated earlier:

*What is the story we want to tell about
school-based sports and activities in the United States?*

The small groups generated 34 answers to this question, which were organized into seven clusters with the following headings:

1. Life Lessons
2. Benefits of Participation
3. Inclusion and Equity
4. Education-Based Activity
5. Building the Future
6. Strengthening Communities
7. Promoting Wellness

On the following pages, the seven clusters have been summarized as findings from the facilitated dialogue.

1. LIFE LESSONS: High school athletics and activities build a foundation for lifelong success.

In addition to building important skills like communication, cooperation, and concentration, high school athletics and activities give students the invaluable experience of learning to deal with both success and failure. For students who have grown up in adversity, this can be life-changing, and offer a path into the future that they might otherwise never imagine. NFHS is fundamentally about preparing kids for life by teaching them how to be inclusive, how to treat people equitably, and how to build community.

2. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: Participation in high school athletics and activities shows students that they belong to something bigger than themselves, and reinforces values that are important to lifelong civic involvement.

The current slogan of the NFHS emphasizes participation, but it needs refreshing. It needs to reflect the benefits of participation in the context of today's world. It also needs to reflect both the values that our programs instill in students, and the financial value of the programs themselves.

Participation in education-based athletics promotes scholarship, sportsmanship, leadership, safety, wellness, and fun. They are also a bargain, reinforcing these values to all students in the community, including many who could never afford to participate in private or club sports.

3. INCLUSION AND EQUITY: The NFHS has always been a model for inclusion, and for providing all students equitable opportunities.

The growing cultural awareness of economic and social inequity in the United States over the past decade offers NFHS an opportunity to play a catalytic role in advancing equity and inclusion. School-based athletics and activities provide opportunities for all students, and explicitly seek to level the playing field for those who would otherwise be denied a chance to participate. In telling the story of the NFHS, it is important to emphasize that our programs intentionally seek to engage students of lower socio-economic status, students of color, students with all levels of ability, and students expressing any sexual orientation or gender identity.

4. EDUCATION-BASED ACTIVITY: From its inception, the core of the NFHS's mission is *education* through school-based athletics and activities.

Education is the point of origin of everything that the NFHS does. This has been evident throughout the federation's history, and should be emphasized in telling our story today. This can be done by showing the rigor of academic training that coaches and teachers of athletics undergo, and programs that reinforce this emphasis throughout their careers. Moreover, this is the factor that distinguishes the NFHS from other sports-oriented national organizations, and what distinguishes school-based athletics and activities from other athletic programs offered at the community level.

5. BUILDING THE FUTURE: School-based athletics and activities offer unified, collective pathway to a brighter future.

NFHS programs not only improve the futures of individual students—they collectively represent a brighter future for the country as a whole. This is an especially important message to deliver when the United States appears to be fractured in so many ways, i.e. economically, politically, and racially. The NFHS should be portrayed as positively building a more promising future that everyone can participate in.

6. STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES: School-based athletics and activities can unite and heal fractured communities.

In addition to improving the future of the nation as a whole, NFHS programs can be authentically portrayed as a unifying force for communities, bringing all parts of a community together to foster a positive culture. This part of the NFHS story is probably most effectively illustrated by showing the positive influence of our programs on a community that would otherwise be divided by circumstance or inequity. School-based athletics and activities can be shown to empower and unify individuals, schools, and communities as a whole.

7. PROMOTING WELLNESS: School-based athletics and activities promote both physical and emotional wellness.

The positive impact of NFHS programs on the physical health of individuals is self-evident, but in telling our story we also need to show the positive impact on emotional health, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles in communities as a whole. Safety is another important part of this message, given the current widespread concern about injuries resulting from participation in certain sports. The high priority that the NFHS places on risk minimization—again, both physical and emotional—should be emphasized as part of its wellness message.