

After lengthy career in high school athletics, Karissa Niehoff takes a breather

Karissa Niehoff, the former executive director of the [Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference](#) who became the first woman to head the Indianapolis-based [National Federation of State High School Associations \(NFHS\)](#), has stepped down as the CEO of the national organization.

Niehoff, who coached and taught and lived in Connecticut for 30 years, left the NFHS in mid-April. She was the [head of the CIAC from 2010-2018](#), when she joined NFHS, which advocates for high school athletics and fine and performing arts.

The NFHS' role includes making rules for high school sports and giving guidance on national issues impacting high school sports, coaches and athletes.

Niehoff, 60, said long work weeks and wanting to spend more time with her family were some of the reasons why she decided to leave.

"I did the job for eight years and I turned 60," she said. "I was working 80-hour weeks. We got a new strategic plan in place, had a really healthy financial situation going on. I still have both my parents, 83 and 84, they're in Florida and I thought, you know what, maybe now's the time to look to kind of relax a little bit. I'm going to look for something else to do. When you work 80 hour weeks, it's very hard to stay healthy. When you're on airplanes all the time, it's tough to have a work-life balance."

Niehoff, who is from Marblehead, Mass., started coaching and teaching at Greenwich High School in 1989. She also coached and taught at Joel Barlow High School before going to Litchfield High, where she coached field hockey, girls basketball and track, and worked as a physical education and health teacher. She was an athletic director at Litchfield High and served as the principal at Lewis Mills High School from 2004-2010. Her field hockey team at Litchfield won a state title in 1996.

She said her biggest accomplishment with the NFHS was raising awareness about the organization.

"We established relationships with professional sports organizations like the NFL, strengthened relationships with the (US Olympic and Paralympic Committee) and built relationships with the AAU and other sports organizations," she said. "What that does is it builds resources that support the state associations and then they can support schools and they can work with legislatures. I think relationship building is the biggest thing."

“The outcome of that effort is that ultimately more awareness lands at the grassroots level and it generates support for education-based programming.”

Davis Whitfield, who was the chief operating officer of the NFHS, succeeded Niehoff as the CEO.

Niehoff, who lives in the Indianapolis area, is hoping to be able to work as a consultant in the future and promote opportunities for girls and women in sports.

“NFHS is in a great position and I’m proud of the work that we did,” she said. “It was just time to dial it down a little bit in terms of how much I’m working but there are so many opportunities to serve and that’s what I’m going to do. I have a number of things I’m thinking about, they’re all service oriented, involving education and youth sports.”