

Should Schools Suspend Sports? The Debate Is Getting More Tense

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Debates are roiling across the country over the role that high school sports should play as schools reopen during the coronavirus pandemic. [Back to Story](#)

Decisions handed down from state capitals and state athletic associations on when and if students should play have created a fractured landscape for high school sports—and a debate over whether schools that opt for distance learning should be playing contact sports.

In states such as New Jersey and Oklahoma, high school sports will be allowed on campuses this fall, when in many cases, classes may not be.

Out West, states such as California and Oregon have postponed all high school sports until at least 2021.

And in Iowa, sports will proceed as usual, for some. Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds has mandated that students should return to the classroom at least part-time this fall; if school districts defy Reynolds' order and opt for all-remote learning, sports practices and games will not be allowed.

The **National Federation of State High School Associations** has encouraged state-level organizations to work alongside governors' offices and state health departments to guide decisions on when sports should return. However, that has not always worked out.

Tensions have boiled over in Pennsylvania, where Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf has recommended that schools suspend high school sports until January. For instruction, the state is allowing individual districts to decide whether to do it remotely, in-person, or a mixture of both.

Leaders of the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association, a governing body for high school and junior high school sports, are considering authorizing sports against Wolf's wishes—and the organization has the support of some Republican state lawmakers.

Republican State Rep. Jesse Topper introduced legislation that would allow students to repeat a year of school if they missed out on a year of sports or if their parents think they are dissatisfied with the education they are receiving. Companion legislation would allow local school boards and superintendents to decide whether their schools should play sports.

"There is no foolproof plan. There will be kids who get COVID. There'll be teachers who get COVID. There will be coaches," said Topper, an assistant high school coach in Bedford, a small town in southern Pennsylvania. "We understand that. Are we not as a society going to move on with our lives and say, 'Look, these are the people at risk, and this is how it spreads, but at a certain point, we're turning the lights on?'"

See Also: **[Which High School Sports Pose the Greatest Risk for Coronavirus Spread?](#)**

In Bedford County, where the state health department indicates that there is moderate risk of community coronavirus spread, classes will begin this fall with a hybrid schedule, with students splitting their time between in-person and online classes.

A report from the American Academy of Pediatrics released earlier this month indicates that severe illness due to COVID-19 is rare among children, but the relationship between children and the spread of the disease remains unclear.

Return-to-school guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued in early August recommends limiting or canceling participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities where social distancing is not feasible.

Playing it Safe?

At least 17 states and the District of Columbia have canceled the fall high school football season with hopes to resume practices and games in the winter or spring of 2021.

Twenty states have taken less drastic steps, pushing back the start of all fall sports even as COVID-19 cases surge in some communities.

In 14 states, spread across the Southeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions, high school sports will proceed as planned.

One of those states, Utah, hosted its first week of sanctioned high school football games with fans during the pandemic—with temperature checks at the gates and masks and social distancing in the stands. COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations continue to drop in the state, but some schools fared better than others as the season got underway.

Herriman High, a 3,200-student school in Salt Lake County—where the mayor instituted a public mask mandate—hosted the first football game without a hitch. The school used an online lottery to determine which students won the chance to buy tickets to the football games.

"We're trying to do what's best by the kids and for the kids," said Stewart Hudnall, an assistant principal at Herriman High. "There are only so many hours in the day that we can try to facilitate the unknown. In this new world we live in, are there going to be mistakes? Absolutely."

Six miles away in the same school district, Bingham High, was forced to cancel its first game after three players tested positive for COVID-19.

Both schools are in the 56,000-student Jordan School District, which will have in-person classes on campuses Mondays through Thursdays starting next week, with online instruction on Fridays. But about 1 in 5 families in the district have opted for all-online learning.

In Oregon, state department of education guidance urges schools to carefully weigh public health recommendations when deciding how to return to school. Ten percent of COVID-19 cases in the state are in children. The state has postponed sports until January, but guidelines allow for schools in communities with low transmission rates to host in-person practices and training sessions.

"If we can't invite these students into our schools for a full day of learning, maybe we should really think hard about whether it's safe for them to be out there, especially with those full-contact sports," said Peter Weber, the executive director of the Oregon School Activities Association.

"How do you balance those opportunities? In some of our districts, a family would be questioning 'Why am I not able to have my students come in for math class?' Yet, we're having practices and things like that. Those are difficult conversations."

'A Lot of Uncertainty'

The National Federation of State High School Associations' Sports Medicine Advisory Committee, a 15-member panel of medical doctors, certified athletic trainers, high school coaches, state athletic association executives, and officials, released guidelines that identify the potential infection risk by sports, labeling the most common high school sports as lower-, intermediate, or higher-risk. Football is considered a higher-risk sport, for example, while golf is deemed a lower-risk sport.

Two major college athletic conferences, the Big Ten and Pac 12, ruled out all fall sports because cardiologists are concerned that coronavirus infections could cause heart complications that lead to abnormal health rhythms or sudden cardiac death in athletes.

Over the summer, schools in dozens of states temporarily suspended sports activities after players or coaches tested positive for COVID-19 during training sessions, but the push to find ways to play did not let up.

"There's a lot of uncertainty," said Topper, the Pennsylvania state representative. "There's no magic pill out there that's going to be ready or a vaccine of some kind that's just on the horizon. If we're talking three years down the road, what happens to these kids if we don't come up with a way to make sure" they have the opportunity to play sports.

Texas is among the states pressing ahead with fall sports amid questions about safety and COVID-19's long-term health effects on youth athletes.

Bob Wager, the head football coach at Martin High School in Arlington, Texas, has hosted roughly 400 students each weekday for strength and conditioning camps since early June. Students worked out in 12-person pods with the same coach supervising them daily. Over the past two months, the school recorded two positive coronavirus cases—and Wager required the students and coaches in the same practice pod to quarantine for two weeks.

The Arlington school system began classes online this week. Health authorities in Tarrant County, where Arlington is located, announced this month that all public schools there must go to online-only classes for the first six weeks of the school year, until at least Sept. 28, because of a spike in coronavirus cases.

The state, which has about 170,000 students play football each fall, has pushed back the start of football for its largest schools until late September, the weekend before students are scheduled return for in-person classes.

"The risks and concern over COVID-19 and running a huge camp during a pandemic aren't lost on me," Wager said. "I don't claim to be an expert on viruses. What I do claim is to be an expert on high school kids and what I've seen is happy kids for two hours a day."

In Utah, where the first football game was held, sports such as cross country, golf, soccer, tennis, and volleyball started weeks ago. Under state guidelines, schools must notify their county health department when students test positive for COVID-19.

The state is also taking other precautions to prevent another widespread shutdown of sports: Schools in counties with the highest risk of coronavirus transmission will not host home football games. Officials in two neighboring states, Colorado and Nevada, have pushed football to the spring, with Nevada shutting down all sports until January.

"We still have contingency plans in place because things could change hour by hour," said Rob Cuff, the executive director of the Utah High School Activities Association. "Our message to schools is, 'Don't let down your guard. Stay attentive. Make sure that we're ensuring safety every way we can.' We definitely want the reward to outweigh the risk."

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