2026 NATIONAL REPORT

THE STATE OF COACHING AND EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS

Measuring the influence of leadership in high school athletics



EverRise FAIR

EverRise in partnership with the FAIR Foundation

Foreword *by Dr. Jason Ronai*

When I heard Nelson Mandela's speech, "Sport has the power to change the world," I believed him. I've spent my entire career trying to dissect the power of sport.

How can sport change one team, one school, one community, or one city? And if we can figure that out, perhaps the world follows.

Through two decades of coaching, teaching, school leadership, research, and advocacy, I've concluded that sport is drenched with endless teachable moments.

Every practice, competition, relationship, success, and failure presents an opportunity for young people to learn about themselves and the world around them.

But those moments do not automatically become lessons. Coaches are the key to helping young people recognize, understand, and apply them. But coaches must be equipped.

Some of us have known a transformational coach, an extraordinary educator who understands the power of the holistic athletic experience and the lasting influence on young people.

But structurally, our educational systems have lacked the ability to consistently develop more of them. The system struggles to replicate transformational coaches.

Why are certain coaches transformational? What makes their impact so enduring? Why do their athletes leave them knowing they experienced something far more meaningful than a season of competition?

These questions have driven my life's work. *How do we raise the standard of coaching for everyone? How do we create research-driven systems that increase transformational coaches and decrease transactional ones? And how do we make those systems accessible and scalable?*

Most young people have a short window to participate in organized athletics, and only a select few compete beyond high school. The research is clear:

1. the positive effects of quality sport experiences can last a lifetime,
2. young people should play sports as long as possible,
3. we need more transformational coaches creating better experiences.

Coaches can become the reason young people stay in the game.

For ten years, I had the privilege of serving as Director of Athletics and Student Experience for a Chicago high school district serving 12,000 students. Working alongside more than 400 coaches, we implemented the Coaching Effect Assessment built around six themes: connection, psychological safety, structure, communication, challenge, and skill development.

Our goals were simple: give every student-athlete a voice, provide every coach with a framework and accountability for personal growth, and use the Coaching Effect Assessment data to create targeted professional development.

We wanted a clear and effective pathway for collective growth. We wanted our athletes to be in transformational programs. But how could we create buy-in among hundreds of coaches across dozens of sports? We connected coaching effectiveness to our district's mission of preparing students for college and life.

I often began our coaching seminars with a simple message:

“Look around, my friends. Some of you already know that, based on talent alone, you may be competing for ninth or tenth place in your conference. Others know you've been blessed with the talent to compete for a championship. But regardless of your team's competitive potential, every ounce of effort you invest in improving your student-athletes' experience matters.

“When young people are empowered by their team experience, they want to be at school. When they attend school more consistently, they have greater opportunities to succeed academically. Higher attendance is often followed by higher GPAs. Your impact matters, regardless of your record. And we have the data to support it. Your growth as a coach matters.”

That was the breakthrough. We weren't asking coaches to abandon competition or diminish winning. We were helping them understand how their influence could impact the lives of young people, anecdotally and statistically.

This data also allowed me to connect with educational leaders, those who were making budgetary decisions on sport. My message was simple: educational leaders won't debate the values kids learn through sport, but do they know the value of sport to their bottom line? Better-equipped coaches create better experiences, which can positively impact attendance, academics, enrollment, and ultimately, funding.

My personal coaching philosophy has always been simple in words and complex in execution: “There is winning and losing, and we must overcome both.”

When coaches intentionally build the six themes, they create environments young people don't want to miss. Athletes learn to trust, take risks, make mistakes, accept challenges, and recognize their growth.

Coaches are now equipped to capitalize on the endless teachable moments of sport, and athletes are in an environment where they learn to overcome failure and success. I think we can agree that most great leaders have a central quality: they choose to overcome, over and over again.

This is where narrative and numbers must come together. Stories of transformational coaches who inspire us, but stories alone cannot create systems of improvement. Data helps us understand why those experiences work, identify where improvement is needed, and provide actionable feedback.

My hope is that every coach, athletic administrator, and educational leader reading this report sees an invitation to learn, innovate, and experiment. Imagine what becomes possible when an entire community of coaches shares a common language, embraces meaningful feedback, and commits to continuous growth.

We know sport has the power to change lives. Our responsibility is to build systems that help more coaches realize that promise, for more young people, for longer. One coach. One team. One school. One community at a time.

Perhaps that's how we change the world.

Dr. Jason Ronai
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Foundation for the Advancement of Interscholastic Resources (FAIR) Foundation
A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to equip those who support students and student-athletes with the resources, training, and strategic support they need to make a lasting impact—on and off the field.

Preface:

This report marks the second national report produced by EverRise and its partners. You can access prior research papers by visiting everrise.ai.

While this report is designed to inform a broad audience interested in education-based athletics, its primary focus is on those who shape and guide the field: ***athletic administrators, state-level leaders, national governing bodies, and—at its core—the coaches themselves.***

Our purpose is both to equip decision-makers with actionable insight and to elevate the voices of coaches, whose work forms the foundation of interscholastic athletics.



Introduction

Over the past year, youth sports in America have grown rapidly. More young people are signing up, more families are investing their time and money, and more schools are adding teams, building facilities, and expanding opportunities for students to compete. New and emerging sports have driven some of that growth. Girls flag football has grown from a handful of pilot programs to one of the fastest-expanding high school sports in the country.[1]

The 2026 FIFA World Cup added momentum to youth sports. Hosted across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, the tournament brought the world's biggest sporting event to American cities and into American homes. During and since the tournament, youth soccer programs have reported a noticeable rise in interest, registrations, and visibility. This builds on growth that was already underway within youth soccer programs nationwide. School districts have invested heavily in education-based athletics, using a variety of funding sources to support coaches and student-athletes, signaling that communities still see education-based athletics as a worthy investment.

With the ongoing exposure of youth sports, it would be easy to assume that the spotlight has moved away from the value of the school team and education-based athletics.

Most headlines today focus on the elite showcase tournaments, year-round club teams, private training that now starts as early as elementary school, recruiting rankings that have begun the evaluation process of young athletes at an earlier age, and name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals that change how families think about the path from youth sports to college and beyond.

Simultaneously, education-based athletics must deal with current realities, questions, and challenges. Educational leaders debate whether tighter budgets, caused by cuts in federal and state funding, should continue to support athletics and its expansion.

Parents and caregivers worry about injuries, burnout, and the pressure that comes with competing, especially as the stakes have increased due to a changing landscape spurred by college recruitment changes, NIL, and the transfer portal.

Education-based Athletics, also referred to as *interscholastic athletics* in this report, is defined as **school-sponsored athletic programs where coaches are also seen as educators, and athletic participation is seen as a co-curricular activity with academics.**

Negative press coverage surrounding player eligibility violations and cheating would have us believe that education-based athletics has lost sight of its fundamental purpose: developing young people through the lessons, relationships, and experiences that extend far beyond the playing field.

However, we know that education-based athletics is fundamental to a school's culture, students' well-being, and facilitating learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Today's coaches are asked to do more with less, often while balancing full-time teaching jobs, supporting their own families, or responding to community needs. Therefore, it is imperative that we have the data to understand how important coaches are within education-based athletics and to student-athletes. Why?

[1] *https://nfhs.org/stories/led-by-girls-flag-football-and-girls-wrestling-high-school-sports-participation-increases-for-fifth-consecutive-year*



Because education-based athletics continues to play an important part in the American high school experience. According to a 2026 National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) report, a record 8,415,684 students took part in high school sports during the 2025-2026 school year, an increase of nearly 150,000 over the previous year.[2]

Across the country, schools are offering a variety of competition options in 70 different sports, along with Unified and adapted programs that bring students with and without disabilities together on the same teams. Each of these sports, from varsity football to girls' wrestling to Unified bowling, depends on a coach willing to lead and serve.[3]

Record participation has created increased demand for effective coaches, who can not only produce wins but also build character and academic excellence within their student-athletes.

Whether the 8.4 million student-athletes playing in the United States today have a meaningful athletic experience depends largely on the coach who supports and leads them.

A record 8,415,684

students took part in high school sports during the 2025-2026 school year.

Last year's State of Coaching report made the case that coaching should be measured by more than wins and losses.[4] Drawing on assessments from more than 34,000 student-athletes, it introduced the *Six Pillars of Effective Interscholastic Coaching*, which included the themes of *Connection, Psychological Safety, Structure, Communication, Challenge,* and *Skill Development*.

These themes represent important components that show that when coaches perform well in these areas, their student-athletes tend to enjoy their sport more, feel more confident, attend school more often, and do better in the classroom.



[2] *https://nfhs.org/stories/led-by-girls-flag-football-and-girls-wrestling-high-school-sports-participation-increases-for-fifth-consecutive-year*
[3] *https://nfhs.org/stories/unified-adapted-programs-broaden-participation-opportunities*
[4] *https://everrise.ai/research/#download-report*

This year, the data from over 33,000 student-athletes support last year's findings that coaching matters. Not only that, but as youth sports have become a more expensive and more specialized endeavor, education-based athletics remains one of the few spaces where the majority of students can have the experience of being part of a team.

Education-based athletics are designed to be open to all students regardless of income, tied to the local community, and foster opportunities that help students excel in the classroom.

Education-based athletics is connected with the school day, academic expectations, and the social and cultural fabric of the community.
Coaches within education-based athletics are seen as part of the school community, and in many states serve as educators who teach and engage with students within various academic settings during a school day.

For many student-athletes, the coach represents an adult outside of their family who knows and supports them. Coaches know how their student-athletes handle pressure, practice habits, and notice when something is wrong.

A coach can be the reason a student shows up to school, keeps their grades up, or asks for help when they are struggling. Since COVID, the coaching profession has become harder and more demanding.

Coaches are expected to manage injuries, support mental health, communicate with parents, handle social media, monitor eligibility, and build team culture, often with limited training and support.

If schools want to keep up with growing demand, they will need to do more than fill coaching positions. They will need to prepare and support the coaches who directly impact student-athletes.



What's New in This Year's Report

This year's report builds on last year's foundation and provides some new findings related to education-based athletics and coaching:

Data based on the Six Pillars of Effective Interscholastic Coaching. This year's findings draw on assessments from students across twelve states. With a second year of data, we can begin to see where coaching is improving, where it is holding steady, and where opportunities exist for coaching to positively impact student-athletes.

A deep dive on select states. Coaching does not happen in a vacuum. Coaches are shaped by the communities, policies, and resources around them. This year's report includes selected state spotlights that look at specific issues facing student-athletes and coaches. Each spotlight connects a state-level data point to the broader ecosystem of student-athletes and coaches. The states included are:

- **Alaska**: data on student-athletes and vaping usage
- **Georgia**: data that supports the benefits of playing multiple sports
- **Illinois**: data on the impact of a coach's investment on academic success
- **Louisiana**: data on student-athletes' access to athletic trainers
- **Michigan**: data on the value of education-based athletics
- **Nebraska**: data on the importance of female sports
- **Tennessee**: data on the impact of athletics on student academic outcomes
- **Texas**: data on the role of community support for education-based athletics

A shift from awareness to action. Last year's report featured recommendations focused on helping coaches, schools, and policymakers understand what high-quality coaching looks like. This year's recommendations focus on ways to institute practices that support coaching and the investment in student-athletes. toward putting that understanding into practice.



How to Read This Report

The report is organized into three main parts. The first part represents this year's national findings on each of the Six Pillars of Effective Interscholastic Coaching. The second part includes the state spotlights, each focused on a single issue and what it means for that state's student-athletes, coaches, and schools. The third part offers recommendations for three groups: coaches, administrators (including athletic directors), and policymakers. Each group plays a different role, but all three are needed to make lasting progress within interscholastic athletics.

Throughout the report, the voices of student-athletes remain at the center. They are the ones who experience coaching every day, and their feedback is the most direct measure of whether coaches are getting the support they need.

The Six Pillars of Effective Coaching

CONNECTION
Building Trust-based Relationships

STRUCTURE
Establishing Consistency

CHALLENGE
Fostering Growth Opportunities

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
Encouraging Risk-Taking

COMMUNICATION
Effective Information Sharing

SKILL DEVELOPMENT
Advancing Competence

The Six Pillars of Effective Interscholastic Coaching

Effective interscholastic coaching goes beyond simply teaching sport-specific skills. Oftentimes, the success of an interscholastic coach is measured in wins and losses, but this metric fails to capture the full impact a coach has on their student-athletes. Successful coaching is rooted in building relationships, fostering a positive environment, and nurturing the complete student-athletes—mind, body, and spirit. EverRise has created a structural foundation to guide this holistic approach to coaching: **The Six Pillars of Effective Interscholastic Coaching. These pillars—*Connection, Psychological Safety, Structure, Communication, Challenge,* and *Skill Development***—are not independent elements but a deeply interdependent framework that forms the basis for a positive, supportive, and growth-oriented athletic environment. Each pillar supports and strengthens the others, creating a cohesive and powerful system for fostering positive student-athlete experiences and optimal development.

A coach who excels in one area while neglecting another will find their efforts undermined. When these pillars are built together, they create a supportive environment where student-athletes can thrive in their sport and beyond.

The data presented across the subsequent Pillars were gathered by EverRise during the 2025-2026 school year and consist of over 33,000 high school student-athlete assessments over the fall, winter, and spring sports seasons. Student- athletes provided answers about their perceived relationship with their coach on a 1-5 Likert scale survey (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree) that were then analyzed across each of the Pillars. Recommendations for coaches, athletic administrators, and stakeholders were produced based on the assessment data into actionable items that can influence how coaches support student-athletes both on and off the field.

"As a current athlete, I have personally experienced the tangible difference that coaches make in my life. Their support, mentorship, and teaching, both on and off the court, have shaped me in ways that are difficult to fully express. That is why I deeply value the work EverRise and the FAIR Foundation are doing."

Steven Ashworth
Professional Basketball Player,
Former Creighton Basketball Player

Pillar 1: Connection

Coaching is, above all, about relationships. ***Connection*** serves as the foundation for understanding whether student-athletes trust their coach and feel the coach cares about them as people, not just as players. When that trust is in place, athletes are more open to coaching and are more invested in their team.

88% of
Student-Athletes
agreed or strongly agreed that they have a strong relationship with their coach.

This year, student-athletes gave their coaches an average *Connection* score of 4.14 out of 5, with 88% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they have a strong relationship with their coach. These results show that most coaches are building genuine rapport with their student-athletes and helping to foster a positive team atmosphere. In addition, a sense of being valued and seen was common across different team types based on gender.

88% of athletes affiliated with male teams, 84% of student-athletes on female teams, and 90% on co-ed teams said their coach makes them feel like they matter and are important members of their team.

Coaches are pivotal adults for student-athletes as they find their place and purpose on teams and within their broader school communities.



There still exists an opportunity for coaches to improve how they connect with their student-athletes outside of athletics. Only 63% of student-athletes reported that their coach shows interest in their life outside of sports.

Athletes notice when a coach takes time to ask about school, family, or goals beyond the season, and these small but powerful gestures can have a substantial impact on student/coach relationships.

Pillar 2: Psychological Safety



Psychological Safety reflects whether student-athletes feel they can make mistakes, ask questions, and speak up without fear of being embarrassed or punished.

Without it, athletes tend to play it safe, stay quiet, and avoid trying new things. This year, 83% of student-athletes agreed or strongly agreed that they feel comfortable learning from mistakes, asking questions, and raising concerns with their coach.

The average score was 4.2 out of 5. These results suggest that most athletes view their team as a place where it is okay to get things wrong while they continue to learn from their mistakes.

83% of
Student-Athletes
agreed or strongly agreed that they feel comfortable making mistakes, asking questions, and raising concerns with their coach.

Also, almost 89% of student-athletes reported that they felt that their coach believed in them. So, in addition to feeling comfortable making mistakes, student-athletes expressed the importance of having coaches that believe in them helps them to feel appreciated, valued, and important members on their team.

Student-athletes who are **less afraid** of failing and feel supported by their coach are more likely to **try the harder skill, take the open shot, or attempt the new technique.**





Pillar 3: Structure

For consistency and support, coaches rely on ***Structure*** that helps to create clear expectations, consistent routines, and appropriate boundaries. *Structure* means athletes know what is expected of them. Clear expectations reduce stress and allow athletes to put their energy and focus into getting better.

This year, student-athletes rated their coaches an average of 4.2 out of 5 on setting clear expectations and running organized practices. 87% of student-athletes reported that their coach holds them and their teammates accountable for their actions. Student-athletes participating in education-based athletics felt that their coaches created an environment of consistency.

Following through scored similarly, with 86% of student-athletes agreeing or strongly agreeing that their coach keeps their word and commitments.



Consistency is essential for student-athlete development, especially at the high school level, because when rules apply equally to everyone, student-athletes are more likely to trust the system and their coach.

The benefits of *Structure* also extended outside of sports. Athletes who played for coaches that were rated highly in both Structure and Connection were more likely to carry team habits into other areas of their lives, including academics.

Pillar 4: Communication

87% of Student-Athletes agreed or strongly agreed that their coach communicates well.

Communication represents the effectiveness of a coach to share information, give feedback, and listen to their student-athletes. **Strong communication runs in both directions**, as athletes need to understand what the coach wants, and coaches need to hear what athletes are thinking and feeling.

This year, student-athletes rated the clarity of their coach's instruction and feedback at an average of 4.3 out of 5, with 87% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their coach communicates well. These results indicate that most athletes say they understand what they are being asked to do and find their coach's feedback useful.

When athletes understand the plan and their role in it, the team is better positioned to work toward the same goal.

Athletes also rated how much their coach invites and values their input, with an average score of 4.7, indicating that many coaches are not only giving direction but also seeking out and listening to athletes' perspectives.

The highest rating in this pillar of *Communication* was for keeping the team informed. 91% of student-athletes said their coach shares important information with them and their team. When athletes understand the plan and their role in it, the team is better positioned to work toward the same goal.



Pillar 5: Challenge

Challenge reflects whether coaches set high expectations that push athletes to do more than they think they can, while giving them the support to get there. The goal is growth, not pressure for its own sake.

Student-athletes gave an average score of 4.2 out of 5 as it relates to being pushed to improve and work through difficulty. 90% of student-athletes felt their coach sets high standards that promote growth rather than overwhelm them.

However, only 67% of athletes said their coach recognizes when they are feeling overwhelmed. High expectations work best when coaches can also tell when an athlete is struggling physically or mentally.





Pillar 6: Skill Development

Skill Development focuses on how effective coaches teach technique, build game understanding, and help student-athletes improve at their sport. It depends on good teaching, including breaking skills into manageable steps and giving specific, immediate feedback student-athletes can act on.

90% of student-athletes stated that their coach helped to improve their skills, game knowledge, and overall ability. These results showcase that most athletes believe they are getting better because of the coaching they receive.

Skill Development can be seen as a result of the five pillars. Athletes learn faster when they trust their coach, feel safe making mistakes, know what's expected, get clear feedback, and are pushed at the right level. In that sense, *Skill Development* is the result that the other pillars make possible.

Individual State Deep Dives

Education-based athletics provides a structure for student-athletes to grow within the classroom, as teammates, and as leaders.

In addition, education-based athletics shapes the habits students form, how they approach their day-to-day responsibilities, and the connections they build with their teams, schools, and communities.

These outcomes mainly depend on coaches, but also on the other adults that support them such as athletic trainers, school leaders, and their communities.

Each state highlight focuses on a different part of the student-athlete experience, using data to show what is working for student-athletes and where there is room to grow.



"What we have known for years is now factual and evidence-based. This isn't an evaluation or a 'gotcha.' It's grounded in research-based themes that give coaches a clear path forward. When coaches can measure the behaviors that drive success, they can better understand what's working, where growth is needed, and how to achieve the outcomes they want."

Chivonne Kiser
Director of Athletics Princeton ISD TX

Alaska: Vaping and Student Athletes



Interscholastic athletics in Alaska is a different experience than those taking place in states within the continental USA. Alaska school teams travel long distances, usually by plane, to compete. Many schools are small, and in some communities the school team is one of the main places young people gather outside of class. That makes athletics, and the role of a coach, an important component within a student-athlete's life, and it makes the team an important place to shape healthy habits.

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid into a vapor the user inhales. That liquid usually contains nicotine and in some cases THC or other chemicals. Because the devices are small, come in many flavors, and give off little odor, they are easy to hide from parents, teachers, and coaches.



In 2019, The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) identified several reasons vaping is a particular concern for student-athletes[5]:

- **Many teens underestimate the risk.** Young people often believe vaping is safer than smoking or that it contains little or no nicotine. In reality, some vaping products deliver as much or more nicotine than traditional cigarettes.
- **It affects performance.** Vaping can reduce lung capacity, which makes it harder to train and compete at a high level.
- **It can cost athletes their season.** Students caught vaping often face suspension, which can pull them away from their team and interrupt their development.
- **Athletes influence their peers.** Because student-athletes are often seen as leaders in their schools, prevention efforts aimed at them can reach well beyond the team

90% of Alaska *Student-Athletes* choose not to vape or use E-cigarettes.

Analyzing assessment data from 1,300 Alaska student-athletes during the 25-26 school year, we examined vaping use and whether the coach-athlete relationship is connected to lower use. 90% of Alaska student-athletes choose not to vape or use E-cigarettes.

91% of Alaska student-athletes stated that they make that decision due to their participation in athletics. In addition, 90% have been either told or encouraged not to vape or use E-cigarettes due to their participation in sports. Overall, when student-athletes in Alaska feel cared for and supported by their coach, they are likely not to vape or use E-cigarettes.

[5] *https://nfhs.org/stories/vaping-misperceptions-and-pitfalls-for-student-athletes*

Georgia: The Multi-Sport Athlete

In recent years, more student-athletes have been encouraged to pick one sport early and play it year-round. Club seasons, private training, and showcase events can make it feel like specializing is the only path to success. Yet many coaches, athletic directors, and sports medicine professionals have pushed back on this trend, pointing to the benefits of playing more than one sport.

High school is one of the best places for students to do that. School sports run in seasons, which makes it possible for a student to play football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball or track in the spring. Each sport brings a new set of teammates, a new coach, and a new set of skills.



Playing more than one sport offers benefits that reach beyond any single season:

- **Fewer overuse injuries.** Playing different sports uses different muscles and movements, which gives the body a break from repeating the same motions all year.
- **Less burnout.** Changing sports keeps the experience fresh and gives athletes a mental break from the pressure of one sport.
- **Better all-around athletes.** Skills like footwork, balance, speed, and spatial awareness carry over from one sport to another. Many college coaches say they look for recruits who have played multiple sports.
- **More relationships.** Each team adds new friends and a new coach, which means more trusted adults and a wider support system at school.
- **More time connected to school.** Athletes who play across seasons stay connected to a team, and to the structure and expectations that come with it, for most of the school year.
- **Broader life lessons.** Being a starter on one team and a role player on another teaches humility, adaptability, and how to contribute in different ways.

71% of Georgia *Student-Athletes*
reported playing more than one school sport during the academic year.

Playing multiple sports isn't right for every student, and balance still matters. But for many young people, it leads to a healthier, more complete high school experience.

71% of Georgia student-athletes reported playing more than one school sport during the academic year. Georgia student-athletes who play multiple sports are getting more out of their high school experience, such as access to more teammates, mentors, skill development, and time connected to their school.

Encouraging that kind of participation is a simple, practical way to support the long-term health and growth of every student-athlete in the state.



Illinois: A Coach's Investment in Academic Success

For every student-athlete, their future is shaped by what happens on the playing field and in the classroom. Coaches who understand this see academic success as part of their job, not a separate concern left to teachers and counselors.

In Illinois, coaches spend a significant amount of time with their athletes. This gives them a unique opportunity to notice when a student is falling behind, to encourage good habits, and to show that they care about the athlete's success beyond the season.

Supporting academics goes beyond enforcing eligibility rules.

Supporting academics goes beyond enforcing eligibility rules.
A coach who is truly invested in a student-athlete's academic success:

- **Pay attention to grades.** They check in regularly, not just when a player is at risk of becoming ineligible.
- **Shows they care.** They ask about classes, tests, and assignments the same way they ask about practice and games.
- **Connects athletes to help.** When a student is struggling, they point them to tutoring, teachers, or study time, and help remove barriers to getting that help.
- **Works with teachers.** They communicate with classroom teachers so problems are caught early and handled together.
- **Sets clear expectations.** They make it known that schoolwork matters and that being a good teammate includes being a responsible student.
- **Look ahead.** They talk with athletes about their goals after high school, whether college, trade school, the military, or the workforce.

95% of Illinois Student-Athletes agreed or strongly agreed that their coach cares about how they are doing academically in school.

95% of Illinois student-athletes agreed or strongly agreed that their coach cares about how they are doing academically in school. Paired with nearly 97% of student-athletes stating that their academic success is important to them, this suggests that academics remain a shared priority for both athletes and coaches who work with them.

Rather than viewing school and sport as competing demands, most student-athletes appear to experience a supportive environment in which their coaches reinforce the value of classroom achievement. This alignment reflects a core purpose of interscholastic athletics: the development of student-athletes who succeed both on and off the field. Continuing to strengthen this connection between coaches and student-athletes can support participation in school sports and academic growth.





Louisiana: The "Other" Coach—The Role of the Athletic Trainer

Having a trained medical professional on-site can make the difference between a problem caught early and one that becomes serious.

When people think about the adults who shape a student-athlete's experience, they usually think of the coach. But on many teams, another professional plays an equally important role: the athletic trainer. **Athletic trainers are licensed healthcare providers who work to prevent, recognize, and treat injuries and medical emergencies.** For many student-athletes, the athletic trainer is the first person they go to when something hurts, when they feel unwell, or when they are unsure whether they should keep playing.



Louisiana presents real challenges for athlete health and safety. Long seasons in heat and humidity raise the risk of heat-related illness, and contact sports carry risks of concussion and other injuries. Having a trained medical professional on-site can make the difference between a problem caught early and one that becomes serious.

An athletic trainer's responsibilities may include, but are not limited to:

- **Preventing injuries.** Helping with warm-ups, conditioning, equipment fit, and monitoring practice conditions such as heat and hydration.
- **Responding to emergencies.** Providing immediate care for serious injuries and medical events, and leading the school's emergency action plan.
- **Managing concussions.** Recognizing concussion symptoms, removing athletes from play when needed, and guiding a safe return.
- **Treating and rehabilitating injuries.** Helping athletes recover and return to play safely instead of rushing back too soon.
- **Connecting athletes to care.** Communicating with families, doctors, and school staff, and referring athletes for further medical or mental health support when needed.
- **Supporting coaches.** Giving coaches a trained medical partner, so decisions about an athlete's health aren't left to someone whose main focus is the game

Athletes often share concerns with their trainer about pain, stress, or how they're feeling that they may not share with their coach.



Athletic trainers also serve as another trusted adult in a student-athlete's life. Athletes often share concerns with their trainer about pain, stress, or how they're feeling that they may not share with their coach.



85% of Louisiana student-athletes said they have access to an athletic trainer when needed. In addition, student-athletes who said their coach communicates frequently and openly with their athletic trainer were also more likely to have access to an athletic trainer when they needed one, whether at practice, during games, or for rehab.

85% of Louisiana Student-Athletes said they have access to an athletic trainer when needed.

When coaches and athletes stay in close contact, athletes are more likely to feel that medical support is there for them. While this data point does not prove that better communication causes better access, it points to the coach-trainer relationship as an important part of keeping student-athletes safe and supported. The data shows that athletic trainers make a real difference in how protected Louisiana student-athletes feel, and in whether they speak up when something is wrong.

Louisiana's student-athletes are pushed to compete in demanding conditions. Making sure each of them has access to an athletic trainer is one of the most direct ways to protect their health, support their coaches, and keep them in the game.



The data shows that athletic trainers make a real difference in how protected Louisiana student-athletes feel, and in whether they speak up when something is wrong.

Michigan: The Value of Education-Based Athletics



In communities across Michigan, wrestling tournaments, track meets, and hockey games are just a few of the interscholastic athletic events that bring students, families, and neighbors together around their local schools. According to NFHS, Michigan ranks 6th in terms of high school sports participation in the nation.[6]

Education-based athletics is a co-curricular activity and extension of a school's learning environment, and there are several benefits according to NFHS[7]:

- **Stronger academic results.** Across many studies, students in school sports and activities tend to have higher grades, better attendance, and lower dropout rates than their peers.
- **A stronger connection to school.** Participation helps students form friendships and feel like they belong, which keeps them engaged in school overall.
- **Life skills.** Teamwork, discipline, goal-setting, and handling pressure are learned through practice and competition.
- **Healthier habits.** Athletes are more likely to be physically active and less likely to engage in several risky behaviors, such as smoking.
- **Benefits after graduation.** Former participants are more likely to attend college, vote, volunteer, and stay active as adults.

Michigan's data supports that when students are involved in education-based athletics, they are more likely to show up, stay engaged, and succeed in the classroom.

From our assessment data we found that 70% of Michigan student-athletes prioritize school sport, and 74% said that they either agreed or strongly agreed that their athletic experience at their school was positive. Michigan's data supports that when students are involved in education-based athletics, they are more likely to show up, stay engaged, and succeed in the classroom.

Michigan student-athletes are invested in their teams, and that investment carries into the rest of their school experience. The findings also show that participation alone is not the whole story. The coach plays a major role in whether athletes get the full benefit.



[6] *https://www.mhsaa.com/media/press-releases/michigans-ranking-high-school-sports-participation-continues-outpace*
[7] *https://nfhs.org/stories/the-case-for-high-school-activities*

Nebraska: Volleyball as a Vehicle for Academic Success

In Nebraska volleyball is a cultural, social, and competitive sport throughout the state. The state has become synonymous with producing elite volleyball student-athletes, powerhouse programs, and a fanbase that is built starting at a very early age.[8]

It was at The University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2023 where a women's sporting event attendance world record was broken when over 92,000 fans filled Memorial Stadium to watch the volleyball team play. Volleyball is part of the state's identity. Young Nebraska student-athletes grow up watching the sport, and carry that excitement into their high school programs. Volleyball can be seen as a vehicle for academic success for student-athletes.

Every sport offers lessons that carry into the classroom, but volleyball has several features that make it especially well suited to support academic growth:

- **Volleyball begins early in the school year.** As a fall sport, volleyball season begins right when the school year does. Volleyball student-athletes begin the year with structure, routines, and clear expectations, which can help set academic habits for the months ahead.
- **Volleyball depends on communication.** Volleyball requires constant talking, listening, and adjusting. Players learn to speak up, ask questions, and work through problems together, skills that matter both on the court and classroom.
- **Volleyball rewards focus and quick thinking.** Volleyball rallies move fast, and players must read situations and make decisions in a split second. Practicing focus and attention on the court can build habits that help students stay engaged in class.
- **Volleyball creates close-knit teams.** Smaller roster sizes and constant interaction mean players rely on one another. Teammates can hold each other accountable, including with their academics.

98% of Nebraska student-athletes said that their academic success was important to them, higher than the 95% reported by student-athletes in all other Nebraska sports combined.

While student-athletes across Nebraska value their education, volleyball players stand out as especially committed. This suggests that the culture across Nebraska volleyball programs supports their student-athletes excelling on the court and classroom.



[8] *https://firstthings.com/how-nebraska-became-the-volleyball-state/*

Tennessee: School District Snapshot of Maury County Public Schools

The snapshot of Maury County Public Schools (MCPS) provides a school district example of the importance of athletics within a changing educational landscape. Understanding how coaches influence student-athletes, how student-athletes respond athletically and academically within their schools, and the role of the community were important for MCPS educators to assess as they made strategic decisions that impacted their schools.

81% of MCPS COACHES agreed that their role helps to promote a positive school culture.

MCPS is a pre-K through 12 school district in Columbia, Tennessee serving more than 13,500 students. The school district has focused on providing instruction, tools, and a learning environment that helps their students succeed in LIFE (life-long learners, independent thinkers, fearless innovators, and exemplary citizens).

Like other school districts around the country, MCPS has faced a changing education landscape that has seen an increase in educational choices for students and their families.

School vouchers, a statewide one time transfer rule, and increased competition have required MCPS to be innovative and forward-thinking when it comes to providing high-quality academic and athletic offerings.



91% of parents and guardians within the district reported that having their child participate in MCPS athletics was important to them. This near-universal support shows that families in MCPS view school athletics as a co-curricular activity that helps their child academically. 81% of MCPS coaches agreed that their role helps to promote a positive school culture. MCPS coaches are leaders who help shape how students feel about school, how they treat one another, and what is expected of them.

For a district committed to educating every child for LIFE, MCPS athletics offers a solid foundation for student-athlete participation, and support for coaches to build connections to their student-athletes and broader community. Families value student-athlete participation and coaches see themselves as culture builders, creating an environment within MCPS where education-based athletics has become a powerful tool for shaping educational outcomes and opportunities.

Texas: The Community Behind Education-Based Athletics

In Texas, high school sports belong to the whole community. Stadiums fill on Friday nights, gyms are loud with fans to support their home team, local businesses hang team posters in their windows, and families who no longer have children in school still show up to cheer. In many towns, the high school team is a shared point of pride and a reason people come together.

The community around a team, including the parents, booster club(s), local businesses, school leaders, and fans, has a part in shaping the overall student-athlete experience. A community's support can make a program a place where young people feel supported and grow, or it can add pressure that pulls the focus away from learning and development. While a coach leads their team, it is the broader school and local community that invests socially, monetarily, and emotionally in that team.

83% of Texas ***Student-Athletes*** agreed or strongly agreed that their community supports the athletic teams at their high school.

According to our data, community support can be defined in several ways:

- **Showing up.** When families and community members attend games and events, student-athletes feel that their effort is noticed and valued.
- **Providing resources.** Booster clubs, local businesses, and volunteers often help cover equipment, travel, meals, and facility needs that school budgets cannot fully meet.
- **Backing the coach.** Coaches who feel supported by parents and administrators are more likely to stay in the profession and invest in their athletes long term.
- **Modeling behavior.** How adults act in the stands, on social media, and in conversations with players teaches student-athletes what respect and sportsmanship look like.
- **Reinforcing the right priorities.** When the community values effort, character, and academics alongside wins, student-athletes get a consistent message about what matters.

83% of Texas student-athletes agreed or strongly agreed that their community supports the athletic teams at their high school. That support is something worth celebrating, but it also presents an opportunity for reflection. Communities have tremendous influence over the experiences young people have through athletics.

The true measure of a supportive community is not how loudly it cheers on Friday nights, but how consistently it invests in the growth, character, and well-being of student-athletes long after the final whistle.



Recommendations

The findings in this report show that coaching quality matters, and it matters beyond what is shown on the scoreboard. **When student-athletes play for coaches who build strong relationships, set clear expectations, and create an environment where it is safe to make mistakes, they tend to enjoy their sport more, feel more confident, attend school more often, and perform better in the classroom.** This year's data reinforces those connections and adds new detail about where coaches are succeeding and where they need more support.

The good news is that most student-athletes have positive experiences with their coaches. Across the *Six Pillars of Coaching Effectiveness* the majority of athletes rated their experiences with coaching positively. Nationwide, interscholastic coaches are organized, clear, and committed to helping their student-athletes improve. Coaching today is not easy, yet the coaches involved in education-based athletics are getting the job done and supporting their student-athletes well.

Last year's report focused on building awareness. It introduced the *Six Pillars of Coaching Effectiveness*, made the case that coaching should be measured by more than wins and losses, and encouraged schools and states to invest in coach training and student-athlete feedback. Those recommendations remain important, and many schools have begun putting them into practice.



"I believe school activities are the number one motivator for academics, behavior, and attendance in our schools. While schools rightly invest heavily in training classroom staff, we often fail to provide the same investment in the coaches and advisors who run these programs—yet their impact on student growth, resilience, and lifelong success is profound."

Billy Strickland
Executive Director at ASAA

Recommendations

This year, the recommendations take the next step. The question is no longer whether coaching quality matters, but how schools, districts, and states can support coaches in a consistent and measurable way. That means:

- Using data to guide decisions, so coaches and leaders know where to focus their time and resources.
- Building the Six Pillars into everyday systems, including hiring, evaluation, mentoring, and certification, rather than treating them as a one-time training topic.
- Closing specific gaps, especially in mental health awareness, personal connection, and access to support such as athletic trainers.
- Making sure every student-athlete benefits, regardless of the size, location, or resources of their school.

The recommendations that follow are organized by audience: coaches, administrators, policymakers, and governing bodies. These groups depend on one another.



A coach can commit to improving, but that coach needs time, training, and support from their school.

An athletic director can build strong systems, but those systems need funding and clear standards from state and national leaders.

Policymakers can set expectations, but those expectations only matter when they reach the coaches working with athletes every day. Progress happens when synergy amongst all stakeholders is moving in the same direction.

Most importantly, these recommendations are grounded in what student-athletes revealed. Their feedback was the foundation of this report, and it should remain the foundation of how we measure and improve coaching moving forward. Every student-athlete, in every school, should have the support of a coach who wants to help them succeed in their sport, school, and life.

Recommendations
For Coaches

The 2025 State of Coaching Report called on coaches to build trust, listen well, and model the behavior they expect from their student-athletes. This year, the focus shifts from knowing what good coaching looks like to measuring and improving it.

Use data to set goals.
Coaches set goals for their teams every season. Coaches should do the same for their own coaching. When coaches receive feedback from their athletes, they could select one or two areas (related to the Six Pillars) and build a plan to improve on them. For example, a coach whose athletes rate their Communication might commit to weekly check-ins or to explaining the reason behind major decisions.

Know the person and the athlete.
64% of student-athletes said their coach takes an interest in their life outside of sports. Coaches that do well in this area take small, consistent actions to learn about their student-athletes. Learning about classes student-athletes are taking, asking about family events, or knowing plans after graduation are just a few examples of how coaches can get to know the entire student-athlete. Coaches should keep notes on each athlete's interests and goals so those conversations become a habit rather than an afterthought.

Learn the warning signs and know where to send athletes for help.
The data revealed that only 67% of student-athletes agreed that their coach recognizes when they are feeling overwhelmed. Coaches are not expected to be counselors, but they are often the first adult to notice when something is wrong. Every coach should be trained to spot signs of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout.
Coaches should know who to contact at their school when a concern is raised, and knowing the referral path ahead of time means a coach can act quickly and responsibly for their student-athletes.

Coaches are not expected to be counselors, but they are often the first adult to notice when something is wrong.



Recommendations
For Coaches

Make academics part of the team routine.
Coaches who show that they care about grades are more likely to have student-athletes who perform well in the classroom. Regular academic check-ins, team study time, and open lines of communication with teachers make school success part of team success.

Develop assistant coaches.
Head coaches are an important part of the student-athlete experience but are not the only ones. Assistant coaches often work closely with their student-athletes and are often the trusted adults that they turn to first when needing to communicate or build connections. Head coaches should invest in developing their assistant coaches by giving them responsibilities beyond game strategy and skill instruction, such as checking in on academics or leading team-culture conversation.

In addition, they should provide on-going feedback that includes recognizing their strengths and setting goals for ongoing development. Finally, head coaches should advocate for their assistant coaches to become members of state coaching associations, attending clinics and conferences, and being involved in head coaching training academies that can help prepare them for the next level.



Recommendations

For Athletic Directors and School Administrations



Last year's report urged administrators to collect student-athlete feedback and offer targeted professional development. The next step is to build systems that turn that feedback into lasting improvement.

Turn feedback into individual growth plans. Collecting feedback is only valuable if it leads to action. Athletic directors can meet with coaches after their season(s) to review student-athlete feedback, celebrate strengths and successes, and agree on growth areas for the next season. These conversations should result in clear, actionable goals supported by relevant professional development opportunities and ongoing check-ins to monitor progress and encourage continuous improvement.

Build a mentoring program for new coaches. Early career coaches often learn on their own. Pairing each new coach with an experienced mentor gives them a go-to person for advice on handling parents, building team culture, and supporting athletes through difficult moments. A structured year with a mentoring plan can improve both coaching quality and the chance that early career coaches stay in the profession.

Connect athletics data with academic data. Schools already track attendance, grades, and discipline. Connecting academic data alongside athletic participation and coach feedback will show the direct impact of an athletic program. Also, it will help identify athletes who need extra support. Sharing these results with school boards and the broader community can make a stronger case for continued investment in interscholastic athletics.

Support coach well-being and retention. Coaches carry heavy workloads, long hours, and growing pressure from student-athletes, families, and the community. Administrators can support coaches by setting clear expectations for parent communication, stepping in when outside pressure becomes harmful, recognizing coaches publicly, and checking in on coaches' own well-being. Supporting and investing in good coaches (and coaching) is an effective approach for maintaining strong athletic programs.

Strengthen coaches' support. Coaches should be encouraged and supported to work with other adults who are responsible for athlete health and success. Access to athletic trainers, clear connections and communication with school counselors, and coordination with teachers give coaches the support they need. Administrators can help coaches across sports work together on scheduling and expectations that can support student-athletes in possibly participating in more than one sport.

Policymakers and Governing Bodies. Last year, we called on policymakers to expand professional development, support student-centered research, and recognize coaches who succeed in supporting their student-athletes. This year, the focus shifts to setting clear standards and making sure schools have what they need to meet them.

Recommendations

For Athletic Directors and School Administrations

Publicize a statewide standard for coach training.
Training requirements for coaches can vary by state, as they often focus on rules and certification. State associations and education agencies can set a baseline that every coach, including assistant and part-time coaches, completes training in key areas such as relationship-building, mental health awareness, and academic support. These standards should extend beyond initial certification to include ongoing professional development and periodic renewal requirements, ensuring coaches continue to strengthen their skills, adapt to the evolving needs of student-athletes, and apply best practices throughout their careers.

Track and publicize outcomes beyond wins and losses.
States are required to collect numerous data points on student achievement, and officials could work to connect athletics to those outcomes. Governing bodies could consider working with education agencies to report how student-athletes compare to their peers on attendance, grades, and graduation. This can promote the promise of interscholastic athletics and give leaders important information to support the continued growth and public value of education-based athletics.



Increase access and resources.
Smaller, rural, and lower-income schools are often less likely to have access to full-time athletic trainers, complete coaching staffs, or budgets that provide professional development opportunities. Policymakers can direct funding and shared-service models to schools with the greatest need, so that all students have access to a high-quality athletic experience. Invest in the development of the coaching pipeline. Many states struggle to find and keep qualified and good coaches.

Policymakers can consider providing additional resources so that schools can increase pay for coaches, create pathways for teachers and interested community members to enter the coaching profession, and fund mentoring programs for new coaches. A strong, stable coaching workforce is necessary for building sustainable athletic programs, fostering meaningful relationships with student-athletes, and ensuring young people consistently benefit from the educational and developmental opportunities athletics provides.

Promote student-athlete voice.
Student-athletes should have a voice in shaping interscholastic athletics. Creating and supporting student-athlete advisory groups that provide a place for student-athlete feedback could help to promote and strengthen athletic policies. Their perspectives can help policymakers and athletic leaders better understand the student-athlete experience and make informed decisions that prioritize student well-being and personal development.

Conclusion



More students are playing education-based athletics today than at any point in history. That growth is a sign of how much student-athletes and their families value being part of a school team. Beyond participation, student-athletes gain a positive experience from athletics based upon their interactions with the coaches who lead them.

Across the Six Pillars, student-athletes gave their coaches strong marks. Most student-athletes feel supported, challenged, and connected to their coaches. The state spotlights showed that coaching does not happen in isolation.

In **Alaska**, coaches are positioned best to help address vaping. In **Georgia**, playing multiple sports is connected to a more complete high school experience for student-athletes. In **Illinois**, a coach's interest in academics is linked to better outcomes in the classroom. In **Louisiana**, access to athletic trainers affect how safe athletes feel. In **Michigan**, school-based sports support engagement and academic success. In **Nebraska**, volleyball shows how a single sport can help to reinforce academic commitments for student-athletes. The **Maury County** snapshot adds a district-level view, showing how families and coaches see athletics as central to school culture, especially as districts compete for students in an evolving educational landscape. In **Texas**, the role of community support for education-based athletics. Taken together, these findings highlight that the value of education-based athletics depends on the people, policies, and resources surrounding each team.

The recommendations in this report are meant to help turn these findings into action.

Coaches can use athlete feedback to set goals and strengthen the areas where they are falling short. Athletic directors and school leaders can build the Six Pillars into hiring, evaluation, and mentoring, and make sure coaches have support from athletic trainers, counselors, and teachers. Policymakers and governing bodies can set clear training standards, track outcomes beyond wins and losses, and direct resources to the schools that need them most. No single group can do this alone. Real progress comes when all three work toward the same goal.

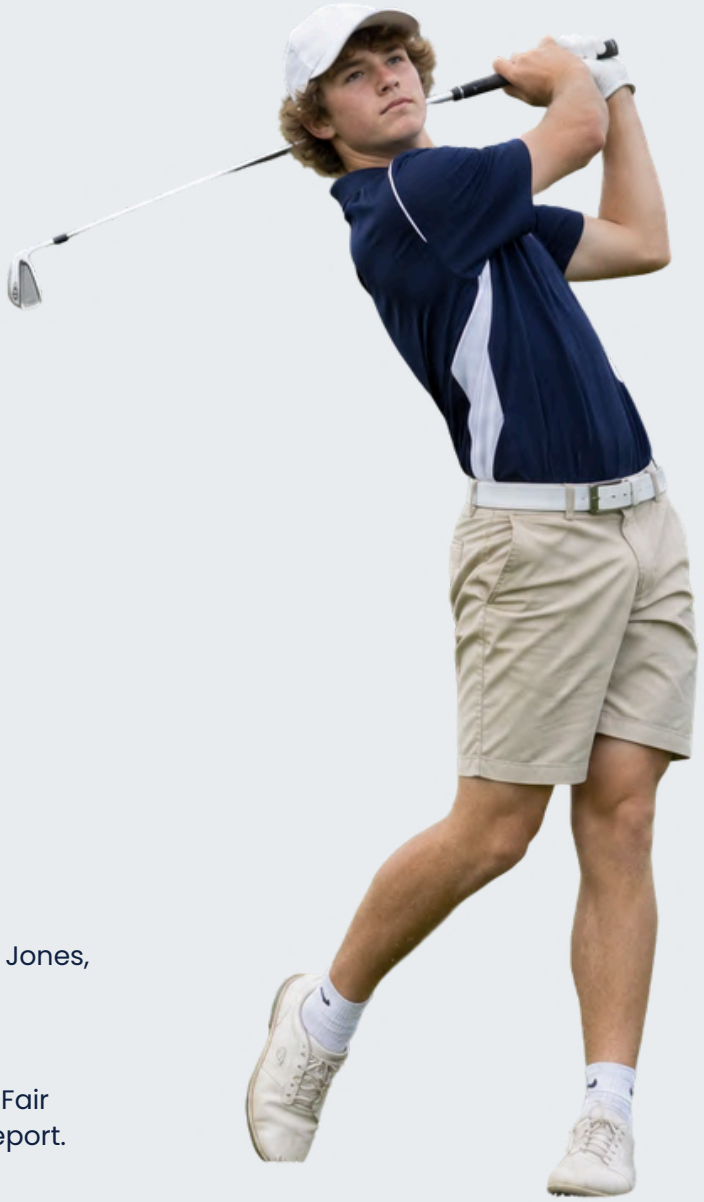
Conclusion

The case for investing in coaches is stronger than ever. With record numbers of students on high school teams, the demand for well-prepared coaches will only grow. Schools and communities have an opportunity to meet that demand not just by filling positions, but by preparing and supporting the people in them. Every student-athlete deserves a coach who knows them, believes in them, and helps them grow in their sport, in school, and in life.

Over the coming months, we intend to follow-up on this report with the following:

- A strategies report focused on the supports and tools available for coaches,
- A state-specific report providing localized insights,
- A comprehensive research report examining national coaching trends and
- outcomes, and
- An in-depth exploration of the Pillars of Interscholastic Coaching.

All publications will be published before the end of the 2026-2027 academic school year.



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