



Growing Is the Purpose: Keeping Education First in High School Sports

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High school sports are experiencing record participation. It is also experiencing unprecedented pressure.

Across the country, young athletes are training earlier, competing year-round and navigating expectations shaped by a rapidly expanding youth sports economy. For many families, athletics now feel like increasingly high stakes.

High school sports operate differently—by design. They exist within schools, alongside classrooms, guided by the same educational mission. Participation is structured to support academic success and to teach intangibles like discipline, teamwork, resilience and responsibility. Rules around eligibility, seasons and competition are not barriers to ambition; they are safeguards for students.

As expectations around winning and advancement continue to rise, we at the PIAA believe it is worth reaffirming the role that high school athletics play in education—and why that purpose matters.

Every high school athlete is a student first, and we see high school sports as a vital extension of the classroom. In “the last class of the day,” student-athletes develop character and integrity and learn life lessons they will carry with them long after their playing days are over.

Today’s high school student-athletes will be tomorrow’s leaders. So, while the goal of playing high school sports is to win, the true purpose is much greater—for students to learn and grow as people.

How? By keeping high school sports educational, competitively balanced and accessible for all students. Why? To ensure high school sports develop the whole person, not just the athlete.

Last summer, the New York Times published an article stating youth sports is now a \$40 billion industry. Private lessons, club sports, travel teams and elite competitions are costly and wildly popular.

For many student-athletes, their sports experience is focused on becoming an elite athlete and landing a college scholarship.

But according to the NCAA, of the 8.2 million high school student-athletes in the U.S. (an all-time record), only 7% go on to play in college, and only 2% earn any type of scholarship.

Further, data from College Board's "Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2025" report shows that **the total published cost of attendance (tuition, fees, room and board) at four-year colleges now averages roughly \$31,000 per year in-state and more than \$50,000 per year out-of-state**—underscoring why families feel intense pressure to secure athletic scholarships.

That's why the purpose of high school sports must be so much more than winning, earning trophies or advancing to the next level.

Only a select few go on to play in college and even fewer get scholarships. But nearly all student-athletes benefit from participating in high school sports. They experience personal growth. They learn leadership skills. They build community and more. When athletics are education-based, students' long-term development and well-being remain the top priority above all else.

With the guiding principle of students first, the NFHS and state high school associations like the PIAA are committed to preserving the integrity, opportunity and educational alignment of high school sports for all student-athletes.

The purpose of high school sports—helping students learn and grow as people—is what we are here to protect and preserve for generations to come. And it is our honor to do so.

Visit ProtectThePurpose.com to learn more.

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