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The Parents' Case for Education-Based Athletics and Activities

Findings from the National Parent Benchmark Study





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Disclaimer: The findings in this report are based on a national online survey of parents and guardians of current high school students participating in school-based athletics and activities. Results reflect parent-reported experiences and perceptions. They do not directly measure student outcomes or establish that participation caused the outcomes described. Because the study includes current participants, it does not represent families whose students could not access, discontinued, or chose not to participate in school-based athletics or activities. Findings should be interpreted as a structured national benchmark of participating households rather than a precise population estimate of all families in the United States.

Use of Materials: This report and related summary materials are provided for use by the NFHS and State Associations in advocacy, public communication, legislative outreach, school board discussions, media engagement, and member support. Findings should be presented as parent-reported and should not be described as causal student outcome evidence.

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A Message from the NFHS

School-based athletics and activities have long been part of the high school experience in the United States. They give students opportunities to belong, represent their school, connect with supportive adults and peers, and develop confidence, responsibility, leadership, and teamwork.

At the NFHS, we believe these opportunities are not extras. They are part of a student's overall education.

That belief is at the center of the National Parent Benchmark Study, which was created to understand how families experience school-based athletics and activities, what parents believe students gain from participation, and why these opportunities matter within the school setting.

The findings are clear. Parents report strong experiences, positive family impact, and broad support for continued investment. They associate participation with meaningful student development and believe school-based opportunities provide something valuable that cannot easily be replaced outside of school.

That matters now.

Across the country, schools and communities are making important decisions about funding, access, transportation, staffing, eligibility, student support, and future opportunities. In that environment, stories alone are not enough. We need evidence. We need parent voice. We need a clearer understanding of how families experience and value these opportunities.

This report provides that foundation.

It is intended to help the NFHS, State Associations, school leaders, policymakers, and community partners explain, defend, and protect school-based athletics and activities. It also establishes a benchmark that can be repeated over time to track changes in the parent experience and identify where support is most needed.

Most importantly, this report helps center the students.

When parents describe the value of athletics and activities, they talk about belonging, confidence, friendship, motivation, well-being, structure, and connection to school. They describe students finding their place, learning to work with others, and developing skills they can carry beyond high school.

That is the case for education-based athletics and activities.

The NFHS is proud to share these findings as part of its continued commitment to supporting State Associations, strengthening school-based participation, and safeguarding opportunities for students nationwide.

Executive Summary

The parent case is clear: families do not see school-based athletics and activities as extras. Parents see them as part of the educational experience and associate participation with confidence, connection, belonging, motivation, responsibility, well-being, and skills that carry beyond high school.

- Across the National Parent Benchmark Study, parents report strong experiences with school-based athletics and activities. They describe participation as positive for their families, say it meets expectations, and would encourage it again.
- Parents also connect participation to meaningful student development, including teamwork, confidence, responsibility, leadership, healthy routines, academic motivation, emotional well-being, and life skills. When asked to identify the greatest benefit, they point first to teamwork and relationships.
- The school-based setting is central to that value. Parents describe environments that are safe, supportive, age-appropriate, connected to school, and centered on student growth. They also report that participation is linked to academic and attendance expectations, adult guidance, student conduct, and the broader educational mission.
- The findings also show why continued support matters. Most families say participation is manageable, but time, cost, transportation, scheduling, and sustainability remain real pressures. Access cannot be assumed simply because programs exist.
- For the NFHS and State Associations, this report provides parent-backed evidence to defend and safeguard school-based athletics and activities in legislative conversations, school board discussions, funding decisions, public communication, and future advocacy.

Recommended Actions

USE PARENT VOICE AS EVIDENCE

Translate the findings into clear advocacy materials that help the NFHS and State Associations show what families believe students gain from school-based athletics and activities.

POSITION PARTICIPATION AS EDUCATION-BASED

Use the findings to challenge the idea that these opportunities are optional extras. Parents connect them to student development, school engagement, well-being, and belonging.

PROTECT ACCESS AND REDUCE BARRIERS

Address the practical pressures that can limit participation: time, cost, transportation, scheduling, and family sustainability.

SUPPORT THE ADULTS WHO SHAPE THE EXPERIENCE

Continue investing in clear expectations, training, conduct, sportsmanship, and resources for the adults who shape the student experience.

TURN THE REPORT INTO USABLE ADVOCACY TOOLS

Create legislative one-pagers, State Association toolkits, school board briefs, parent voice summaries, public-facing infographics, media talking points, and decision-maker presentations.

REPEAT THE BENCHMARK OVER TIME

Use this study as the baseline for tracking parent experience, perceived student impact, access, sustainability, and the value families place on school-based athletics and activities.



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Why This Study Matters



Why This Study Matters

BACKGROUND

The value of school-based athletics and activities is difficult to capture in a single number.

For students, participation can create structure, motivation, connection, and meaning. For families, it provides a visible window into their child's growth. For schools, athletics and activities can strengthen identity, belonging, and community. For the NFHS and State Associations, they are a core part of the education-based experience that deserves to be understood, protected, and supported with credible evidence.

The NFHS National Parent Benchmark Study was developed to help document that value from the parent perspective.

The study provides a national benchmark of parents and guardians of current high school participants. It gives the NFHS a structured way to understand how families experience these opportunities, what parents believe students gain, and how school-based programs compare with non-school alternatives.

This matters because the environment around school-based athletics and activities is changing. Schools and State Associations face pressure related to funding, access, transportation, student wellness, eligibility, policy, workforce capacity, and the future of co-curricular programs. Although deeply valued, athletics and activities remain vulnerable to being treated as optional, expendable, or separate from the educational mission.

This study helps challenge that assumption.

By capturing parent experiences nationally, the study gives the NFHS a stronger foundation for making the case that school-based athletics and activities are not simply add-ons to the school day. Parents connect participation to student development, school connection, academic motivation, well-being, belonging, responsibility, and life skills.

That is the larger purpose of this report: to move the conversation from general support to evidence-based defense.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the NFHS National Parent Benchmark Study is to understand how parents experience and value school-based athletics and activities and what impact they believe participation has on students and families.

The study was built to answer a practical set of questions that matter to the NFHS, State Associations, schools, and those making decisions about the future of student opportunities:

- How do parents rate the current experience?
- What benefits do parents believe students gain from participation?
- How do parents believe participation relates to school connection, academic motivation, and overall well-being?
- How manageable and sustainable is participation for families?
- What makes the school-based experience different from non-school options?
- Where does parent voice strengthen the case for continued investment?

The study also establishes a baseline that can be repeated over time. One survey describes a moment; a benchmark can track whether the parent-reported experience is strengthening, weakening, or changing in ways that require attention.

For the NFHS, this study serves several purposes at once.

1. It provides a national read on parent experience and credible evidence State Associations can use in their own conversations.
2. It helps define what families believe the education-based experience should deliver.
3. It begins building the evidence base needed for public communication, policy discussion, legislative engagement, and resources that safeguard school-based opportunities.

The goal is not only to report what parents said, but to make the findings usable.

WHY THE PARENT VOICE MATTERS

Parent voice is powerful because families see parts of the participation experience that other data cannot capture.

Parents see the practices, rehearsals, competitions, performances, meetings, travel, costs, stress, joy, disappointment, friendships, and growth that accompany participation. They observe changes at home and whether their child appears more confident, connected, motivated, or willing to engage with school. They also see the strain when participation becomes difficult to manage.

That makes parents an important audience and source of evidence.

Conversations about school-based athletics and activities often focus on budgets, schedules, facilities, policy, and participation numbers. Those measures are necessary, but they do not fully explain why these opportunities matter. Parent voice adds human context to the operational reality.

When parents describe the value of school-based participation, they rarely focus only on wins, awards, or performances. They point to a sense of belonging, friendships, trusted adults, structure, confidence, accountability, motivation, and connection to school. They describe students finding a place where they are known.

That language matters because it is the language of education.

It positions athletics and activities not as extras, but as experiences parents associate with student development and school engagement. It also gives the NFHS and State Associations a stronger way to speak with policymakers, school boards, district leaders, families, and community partners. The case is stronger when it reflects not only institutional priorities but also the voices of participating families.



HOW THIS REPORT CAN BE USED

This report is intended to be more than a summary of survey results.

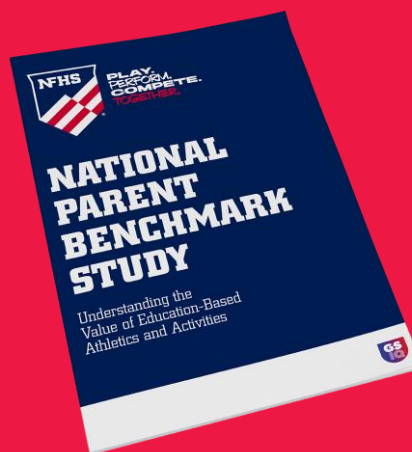
It is designed to help the NFHS, State Associations, schools, and partners explain the value of school-based athletics and activities with greater clarity and confidence. The findings can support advocacy, policy and legislative outreach, school board and funding discussions, public communication, and internal planning.

Nationally, the report gives the NFHS a parent-informed case for keeping education-based athletics and activities central to the high school experience. It shows that parents associate participation with value extending beyond the field, court, stage, classroom, or activity space.

For State Associations, the findings provide national evidence and language that can be adapted for conversations with legislators, superintendents, principals, school boards, athletic and activity directors, families, and community stakeholders.

At the school and district level, the report can support decisions about access, staffing, transportation, program investment, student support, and the role of athletics and activities in the broader educational mission.

The findings can also be translated into legislative one-pagers, State Association toolkits, parent voice briefs, talking points, presentations, media materials, and decision-maker summaries.



The goal is simple:

To help those closest to the work defend and safeguard school-based athletics and activities with credible data, clear language, and parent-backed evidence.



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Study Design And Respondent Profile



Study Design And Respondent Profile

METHODS

The NFHS National Parent Benchmark Study was conducted as a national online survey of parents and guardians of current high school students participating in school-based athletics and activities.

Respondents had to be at least 18 years old, live in the United States, and be the parent, step-parent, foster parent, or legal guardian of a student enrolled in grades 9–12. The student also had to participate in at least one school-based athletics, activity, performing arts, or fine arts program.

Each respondent answered about one focal student. When more than one eligible high school student lived in the household, the respondent answered for the student with the most recent birthday. This standardized the selection process and reduced the likelihood that parents would choose which child to describe.

The final sample included 2,500 parents and guardians of current high school participants across the United States. Sixty percent reported that their focal student participated in both athletics and activities, while 21% reported athletics only and 19% reported activities only. Each respondent was then assigned to a primary participation segment for reporting: athletics or activities. Segment results reflect the student's primary reporting context and should not be interpreted as exclusive participation in that area.

The study was designed as a structured, repeatable national benchmark of families with current high school participants. Standard online quality controls included review for duplicate respondents, unusually fast completion, inattentive or inconsistent response patterns, screening inconsistencies, and low-quality open-ended responses.

Data were collected from May 27, 2026, to June 5, 2026. The sample was structured and monitored during fielding to achieve the study's intended participation, demographic, and geographic distribution. Because the final sample closely reflected that design, results are presented on an unweighted basis.

SURVEY STRUCTURE

The survey covered participation context, parent experience, perceived student impact, family burden, and the distinctiveness of the school-based setting.

The questionnaire included the following major sections:

- Screener and eligibility to confirm that respondents were parents or guardians of current high school students participating in school-based athletics and/or activities.
- Participation context, to understand the student's primary participation area and level of involvement.
- Overall experience, to measure how parents rate the experience, whether it has been positive for the family, whether it has met expectations, and whether they would encourage participation again.
- Developmental value and perceived student impact, to assess how much parents believe participation helps with confidence, responsibility, teamwork, leadership, school connection, academic motivation, well-being, healthy routines, stress management, and life skills.
- Environment and culture, to understand whether parents view the setting as safe, supportive, welcoming, age-appropriate, fair, growth-oriented, and connected to the school community.
- Access, burden, and sustainability to measure how manageable participation is for families and where challenges exist, including cost, transportation, time demands, scheduling, balance, and availability of opportunities.

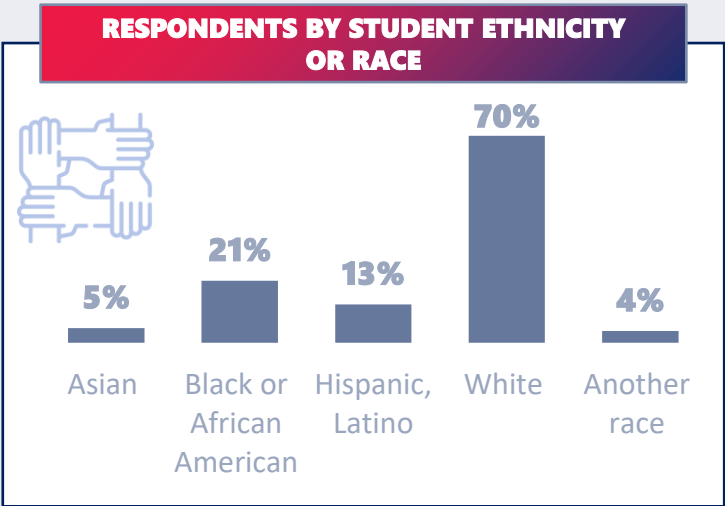
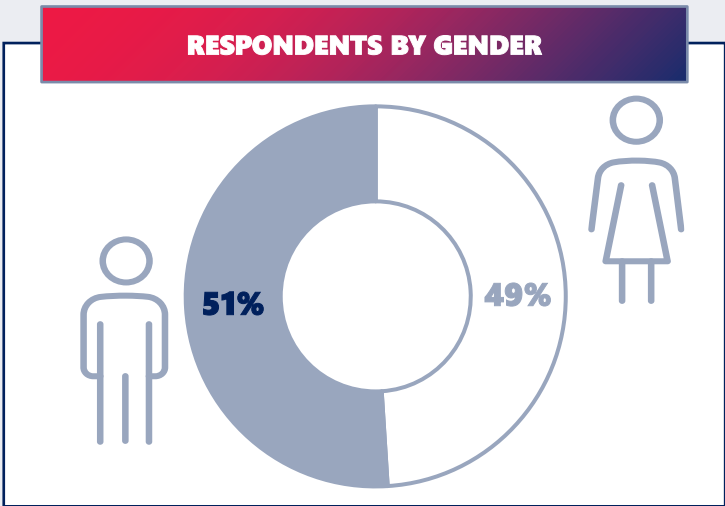
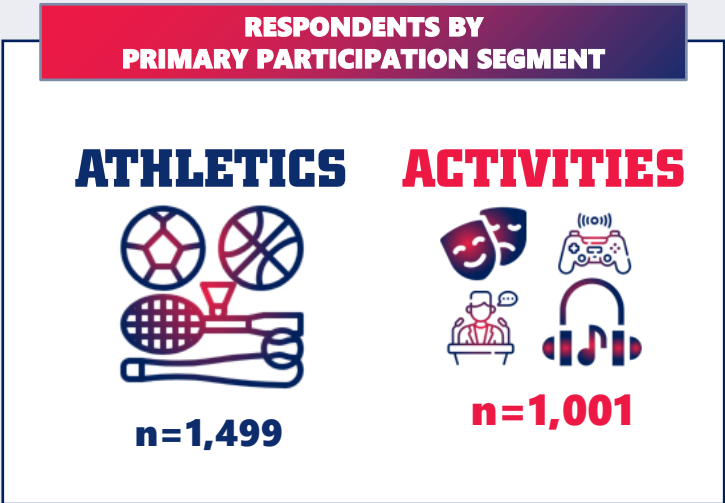
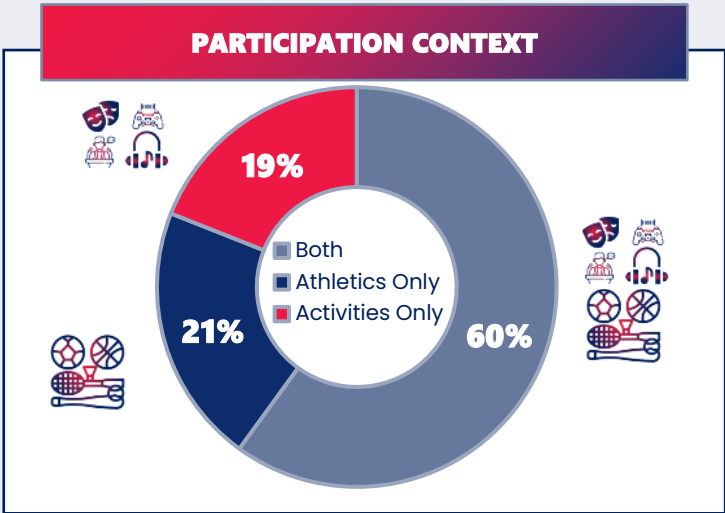
SECTION 2

- Distinctiveness of the school-based experience, to compare school-based athletics and activities with non-school options and measure whether parents believe the school setting provides something unique.
- Parent voice, to capture open-ended reflections on what parents' value most and how they believe participation relates to the student's school connection, well-being, and development.
- Respondent and student characteristics, to describe the participating families and provide context for the findings.

Because many students participate in both athletics and activities, each respondent was assigned to a primary reporting segment. This supports clear comparisons while recognizing that participation often overlaps.

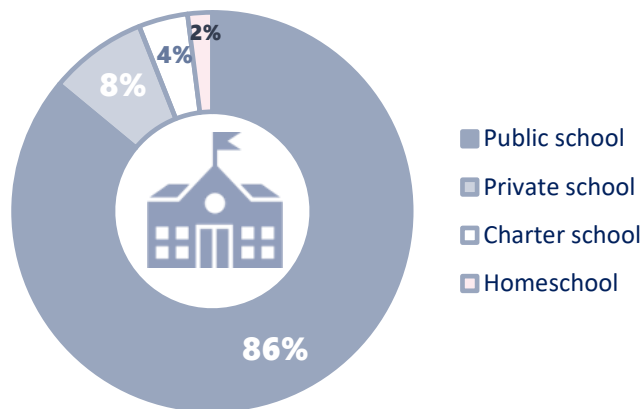
RESPONDENT PROFILE

The study included 2,500 parents and guardians of current high school participants across the United States. The profile below shows each student's participation context and assigned primary reporting segment, as well as student and household characteristics. Because participation often overlaps, the athletics and activities segments represent primary reporting contexts rather than mutually exclusive populations.

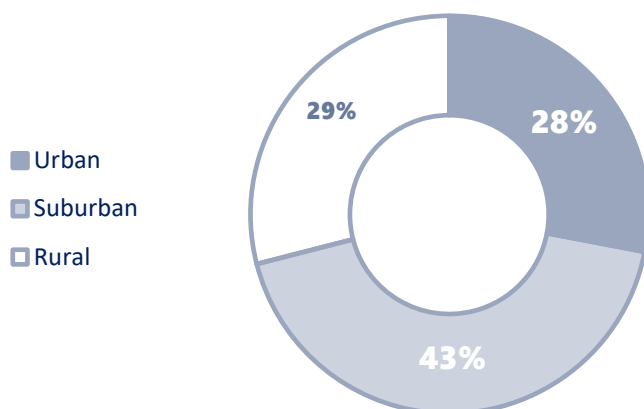


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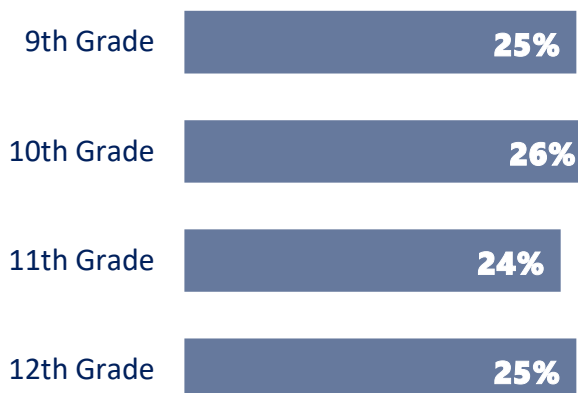
RESPONDENTS BY SCHOOL TYPE



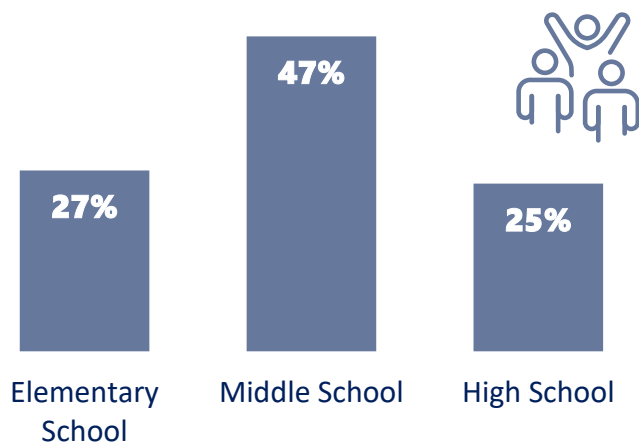
RESPONDENTS BY URBANICITY



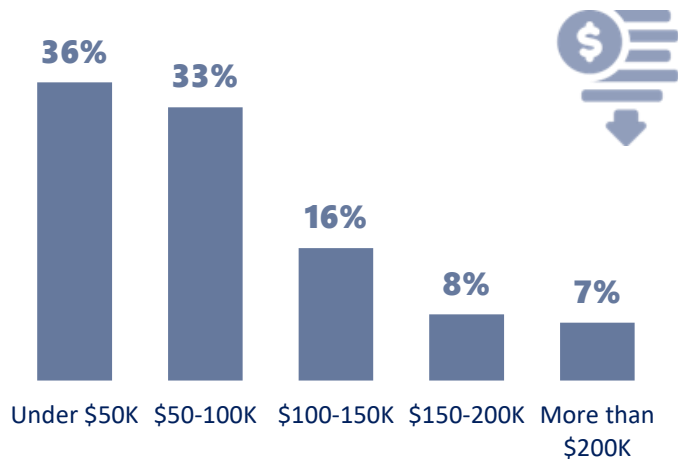
RESPONDENTS BY STUDENT GRADE



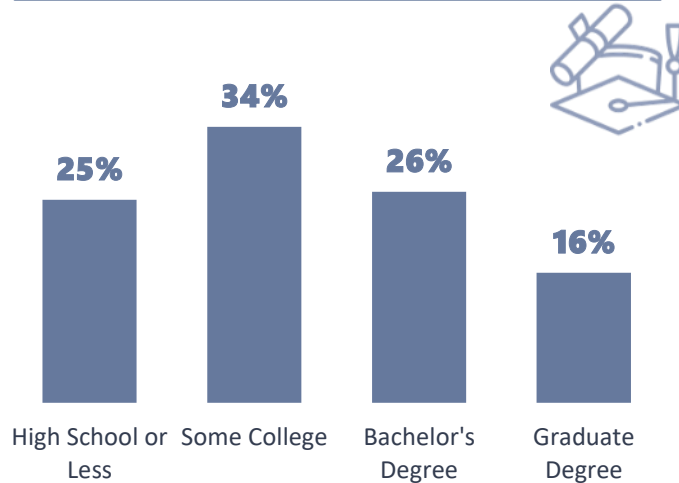
RESPONDENTS BY FIRST INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL-BASED ATHLETICS AND ACTIVITIES



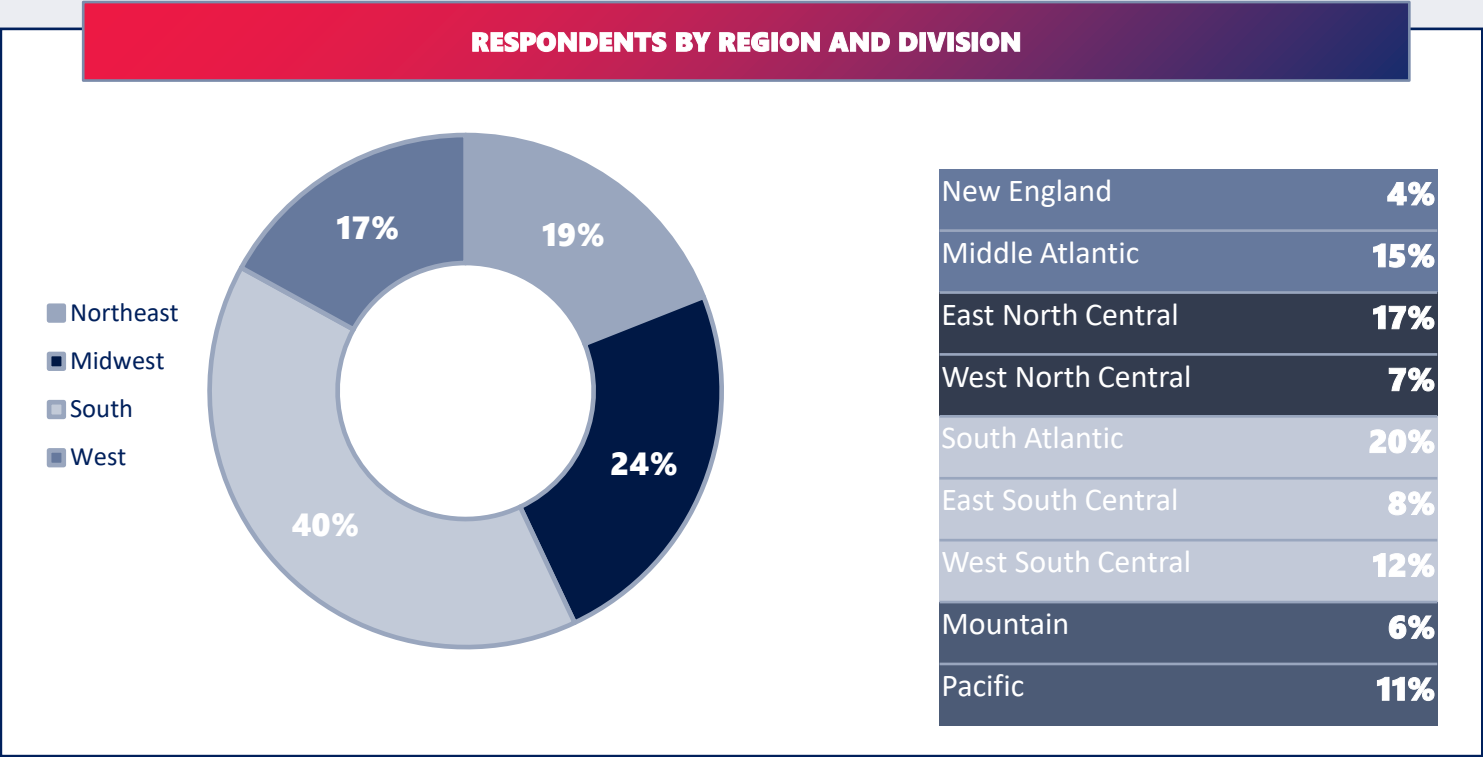
RESPONDENTS BY PARENT HOUSEHOLD INCOME



RESPONDENTS BY PARENT EDUCATION



Base: n=2500/Question(s): What type of school does this student attend?; Would you describe the area in which you live as?; What grade is this student currently in?; When did this student first become involved in school-based athletics or activities? What is your approximate total household income before taxes?; What is the highest level of education you have completed?



NOTES ON READING THE FINDINGS

This study provides a national benchmark of parents and guardians of current high school participants in school-based athletics and activities.

The findings reflect what parents observe, experience, and believe about their child’s participation, including perceived effects on development, school connection, academic motivation, well-being, and family experience.

The study does not directly measure student outcomes or establish that participation caused the outcomes parents report. It captures the parent perspective, which is important because parents are key decision-makers, supporters, advocates, and observers of the student experience. Because the study includes current participants, it does not capture the perspectives of families whose students could not access, discontinued, or chose not to participate in school-based opportunities.

The study should be interpreted as a structured national benchmark of participating households rather than a precise population estimate of all U.S. families with high school participants.

The findings are strongest when read as a pattern rather than as isolated percentages. Across multiple measures, parents consistently report positive experiences, perceived student benefits, stronger school connection, generally manageable participation, and support for continued investment.

Small differences between groups should be interpreted cautiously. The report emphasizes broad patterns and does not treat every percentage-point difference as substantively meaningful.

Base: n=2500/Question(s): Census Region; Census Division



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The Parent Experience

The Parent Experience

Parents report consistently strong experiences across both athletics and activities.

Parents give school-based athletics and activities strong marks across every core experience measure.

Across the full sample, parents rate the experience highly, describe it as positive for their family, say it has met or exceeded expectations, and would encourage future participation. These ratings are strong across both athletics and activities.

That consistency matters. Parental confidence is not limited to a single part of the experience. Families view school-based athletics and activities as positive, worth choosing again, and valuable within the broader high school experience.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this is a foundational part of the case: parents closest to the day-to-day experience view these opportunities as positive, worthwhile, and deserving of continued support.





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The Student Impact

The Student Impact

Parents see broad growth. That growth connects to school engagement and well-being. And when asked to name the greatest benefit, they point to teamwork and relationships.

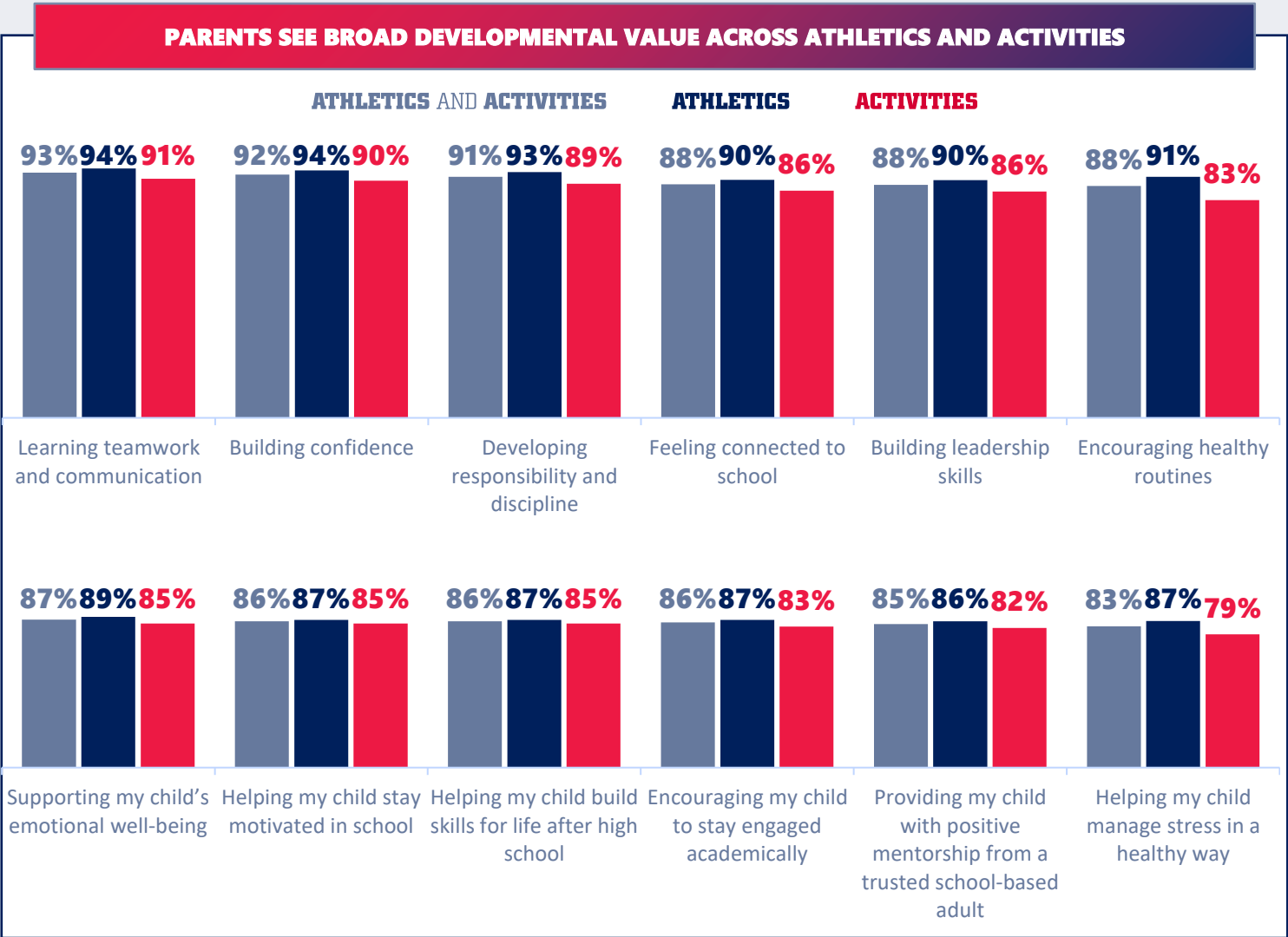
Participation Builds Skills That Matter

Parents connect school-based athletics and activities to growth that extends beyond participation itself.

Across both segments, parents report that participation helps students develop teamwork, confidence, responsibility, leadership, healthy routines, emotional well-being, school motivation, academic engagement, life skills, positive mentorship, and healthy stress management.

The perceived value is broad. Parents see students developing habits, relationships, and skills they can carry into school, family life, and life after high school.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this strengthens the student development case: parents view school-based participation as a structured setting where students can grow, connect, and build skills they carry forward.

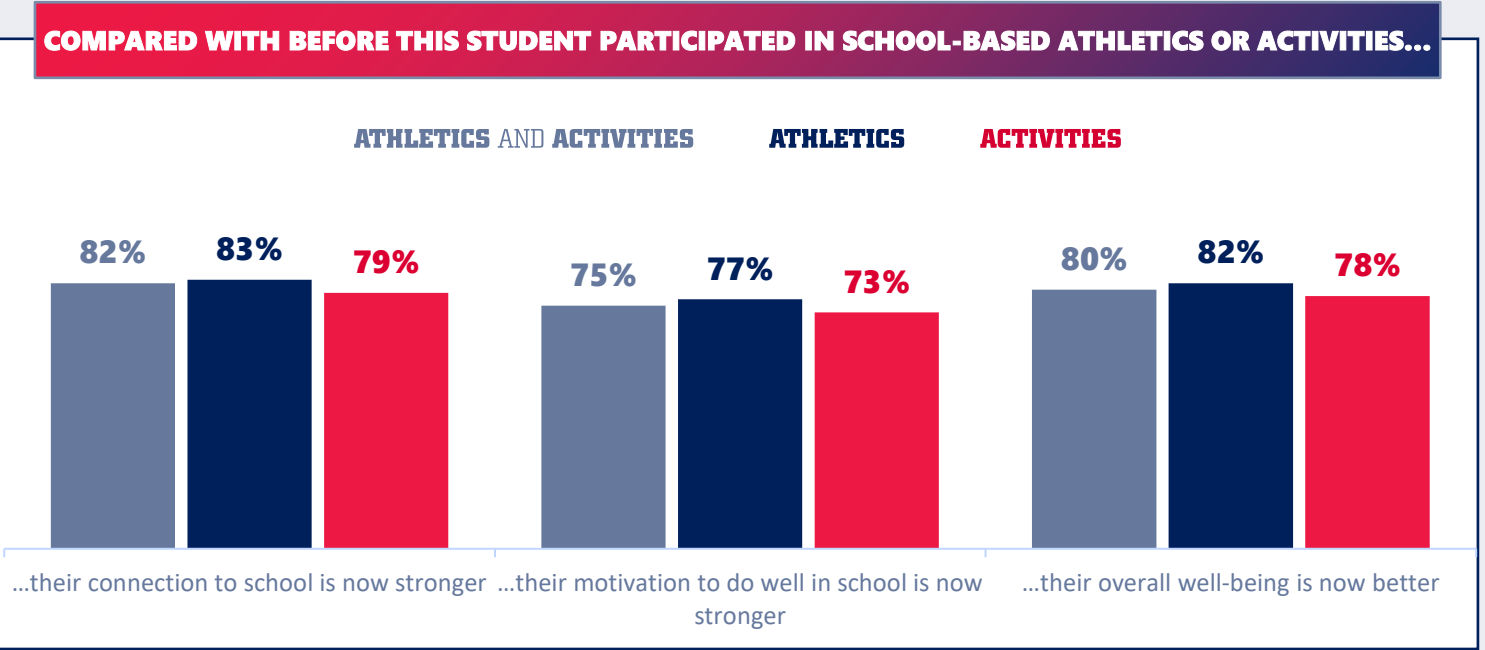


Base: n=2500 | Question(s): Based on your experience, how much has participation helped your child in the following areas?

Participation Is Linked To Stronger School Connection, Motivation, And Well-Being

Parents do not view school-based athletics and activities as separate from the student’s broader school experience. They report that students are more connected to school, more motivated to do well, and experiencing better overall well-being than before participation.

These findings strengthen the connection between participation and the broader educational mission. Parents view athletics and activities as part of what helps students remain engaged, supported, and connected.



What This Shows:

Parents connect participation to outcomes schools care about: connection, motivation, and well-being.

The Greatest Benefit Is Teamwork And Relationships

When parents were asked to identify the single greatest benefit of participation, teamwork and relationships ranked highest.

That finding reinforces the broader student-development story. Parents locate the value of school-based athletics and activities not only in participation itself, but also in the relationships, shared responsibility, peer connections, adult guidance, and life skills they believe students gain through the experience.





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5

The Education-Based Environment



The Education-Based Environment

School-based participation is different because it is connected to school expectations, student development, and the broader educational mission.

What Makes the Experience Education-Based

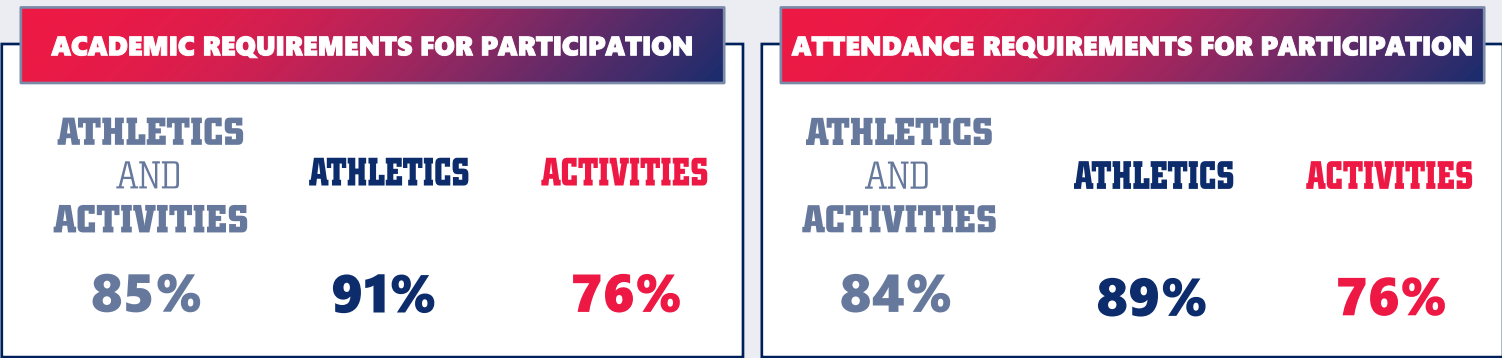
School-based athletics and activities operate within the broader educational environment.

Unlike many non-school options, school-based programs operate within school expectations, routines, and responsibilities. These may include academic standing, attendance, adult guidance, student conduct, and the broader goal of keeping students engaged.

As part of this study, parents were asked whether, to their knowledge, their child’s school requires students to meet academic and attendance requirements in order to participate.

These findings help illustrate that the school-based model is not only about access to teams, clubs, competitions, performances, or activities. For many students, participation also takes place within expectations related to attendance, academics, responsibility, and follow-through.

From the parent perspective, the value is not only that students participate, but that they do so through school, within a setting connected to educational expectations and student development.



Parents See The Environment Reflecting The Education-Based Model

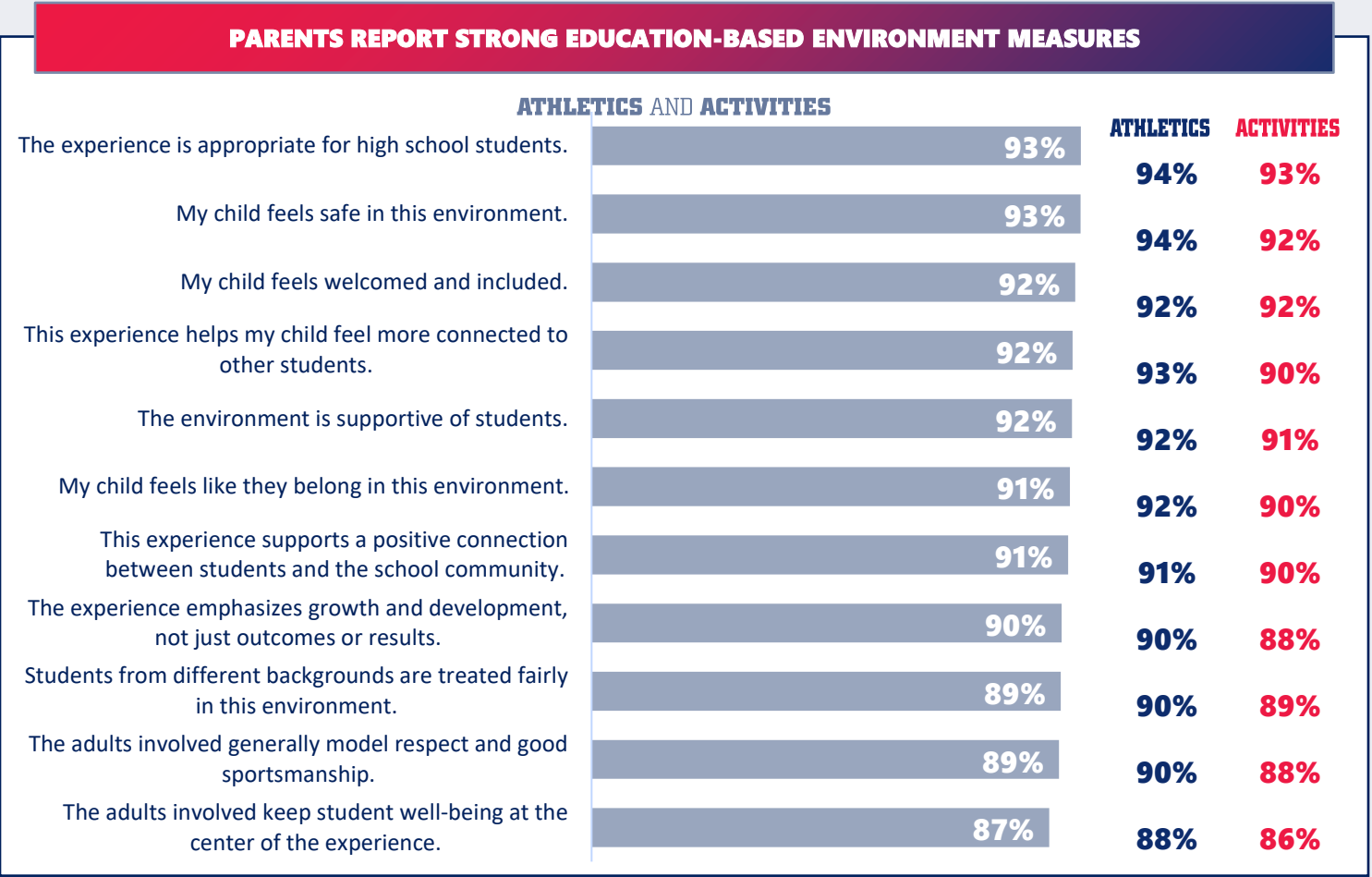
Parents give high marks to the environment and culture surrounding school-based athletics and activities.

Across both segments, parents largely describe the experience as appropriate for high school students, safe, welcoming, supportive, and connected to the school community. They also report that students feel included, connected to peers, and supported in settings that emphasize growth and development.

For the NFHS and State Associations, these findings strengthen the case that school-based athletics and activities offer a distinct participation experience: one that parents associate with student development, school connection, and educational purpose.

SECTION 5

Parents consistently describe the school-based environment in positive terms. The strongest ratings center on safety, age appropriateness, inclusion, peer connection, support, belonging, and connection to the school community.



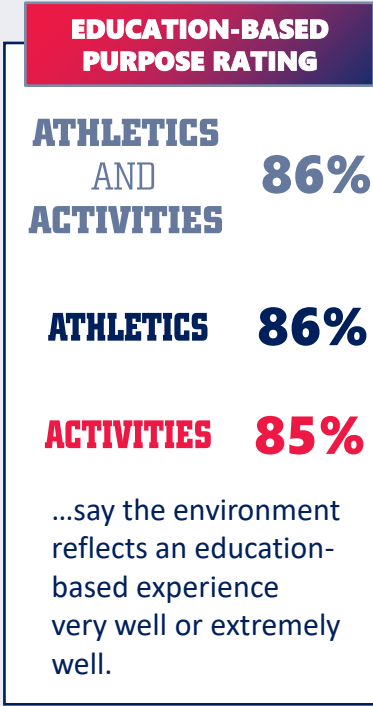
Parents Say The Environment Reflects Its Education-Based Purpose

Parents are not only rating the environment positively; they also believe it reflects an education-based purpose.

Across the full sample, 86% of parents say their child’s school-based athletics or activities environment reflects an education-based experience very well or extremely well. Results are nearly identical across segments, with 86% of athletics parents and 85% of activities parents rating the environment this highly.

This matters because the question moves beyond general satisfaction. Parents were asked whether the environment supports student learning, growth, character, connection, and development — not just performance or results.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this is a strong advocacy point. Parents say the school-based environment aligns with the values these programs are intended to uphold: student growth, character development, connection, and learning through participation.



Conduct And Behavior

Parents evaluate more than the student experience; they also observe the adults, peers, and culture surrounding it.

Across the full sample, conduct and behavior are rated positively, with the strongest marks given to students and coaches or instructors. This suggests that the day-to-day environment is generally viewed as respectful, structured, and well managed.

Ratings for athletic and activity directors and for parents and fans remain positive, but are somewhat lower and warrant continued attention.

Adult behavior, communication, and sportsmanship shape whether the experience feels safe, supportive, and education-based.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this reinforces the need for clear expectations, education, training, and resources that support respectful, student-centered environments.

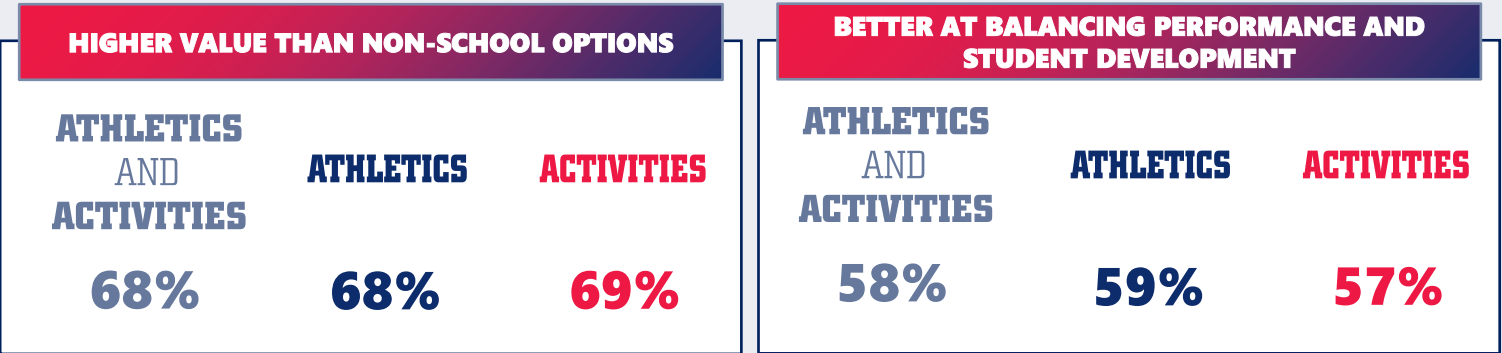
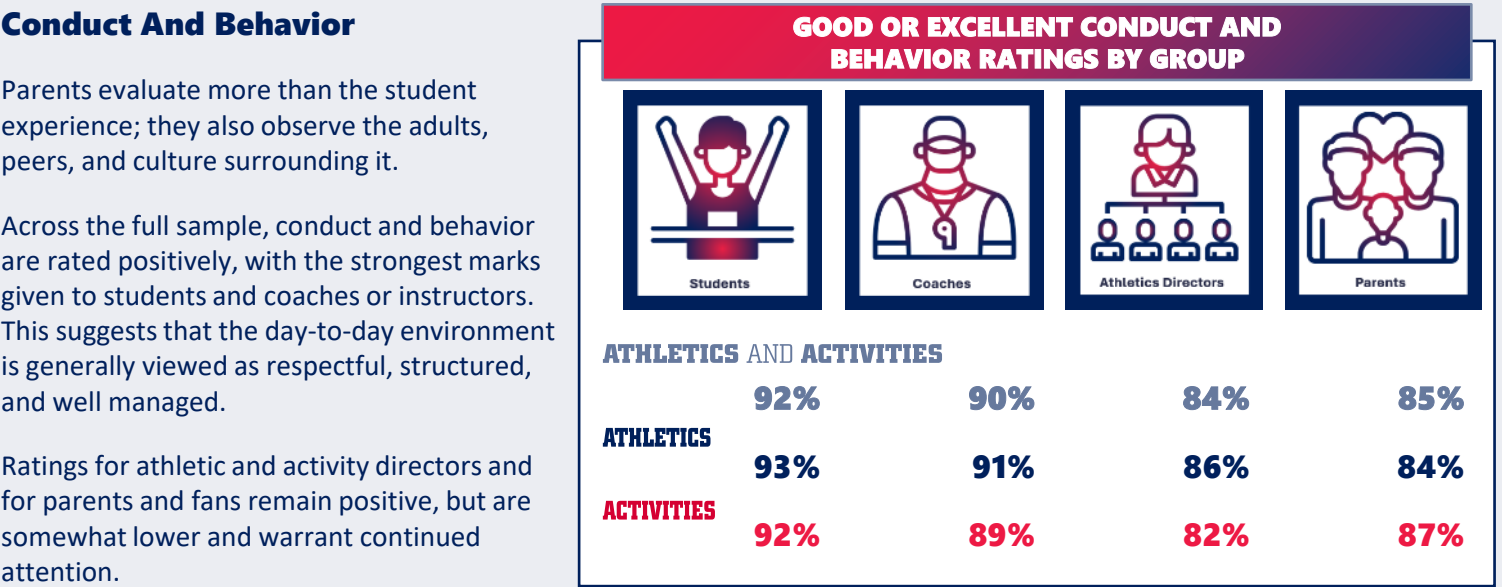
School-Based Vs. Non-School Options

Parents see clear value in the school-based model.

Compared with non-school options, 68% of parents say the school-based experience provides higher value. Fifty-eight percent also say it does a better job balancing competition or performance with student development.

That distinction matters. Parents are not simply saying that school-based opportunities are available or convenient. They are saying the school-based setting provides a different kind of value.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this is an important advocacy point. Parents do not view the school-based model as interchangeable with outside programs; they value its connection to the school, its educational structure, adult guidance, and its balance between development and performance.



What Cannot Easily Be Replaced

The case for school-based athletics and activities extends beyond whether parents value them. Many also believe the school-based experience provides something unique.

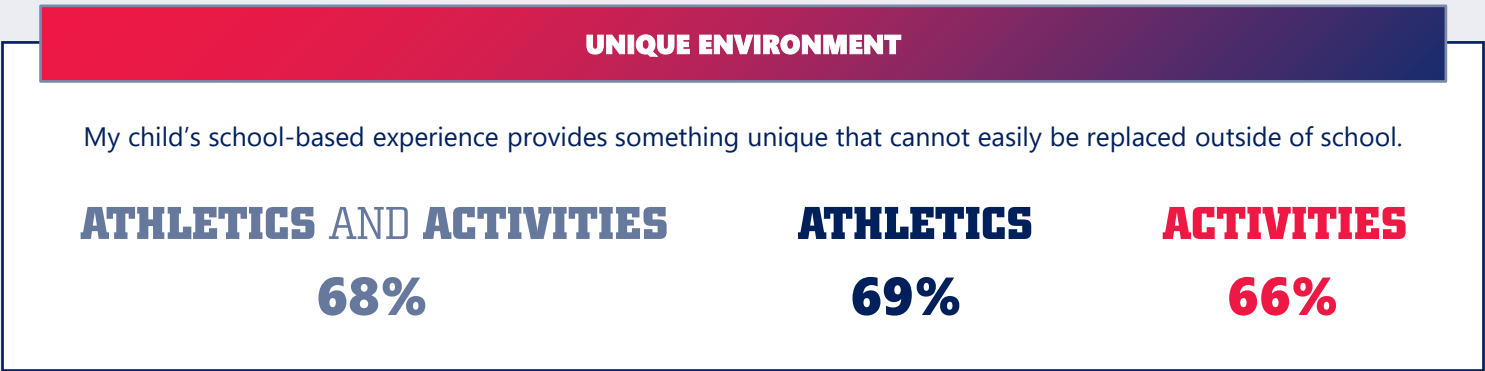
Across the full sample, 68% of parents say their child’s school-based experience provides something unique that cannot easily be replaced outside of school. Another 25% say the experience is valuable but could largely be replaced outside of school, while 7% are unsure.

This finding is central to the advocacy story. If school-based opportunities are reduced, underfunded, or moved outside of schools, families may lose something they do not believe can be fully replicated elsewhere.

Parents are pointing to a model that combines participation with school connection, shared identity, academic and attendance expectations, adult guidance, peer relationships, and student development.

That combination is what parents see as difficult to replace. The value lies not only in the team, club, performance, competition, or activity, but in the fact that it takes place through school within a structure centered on students.

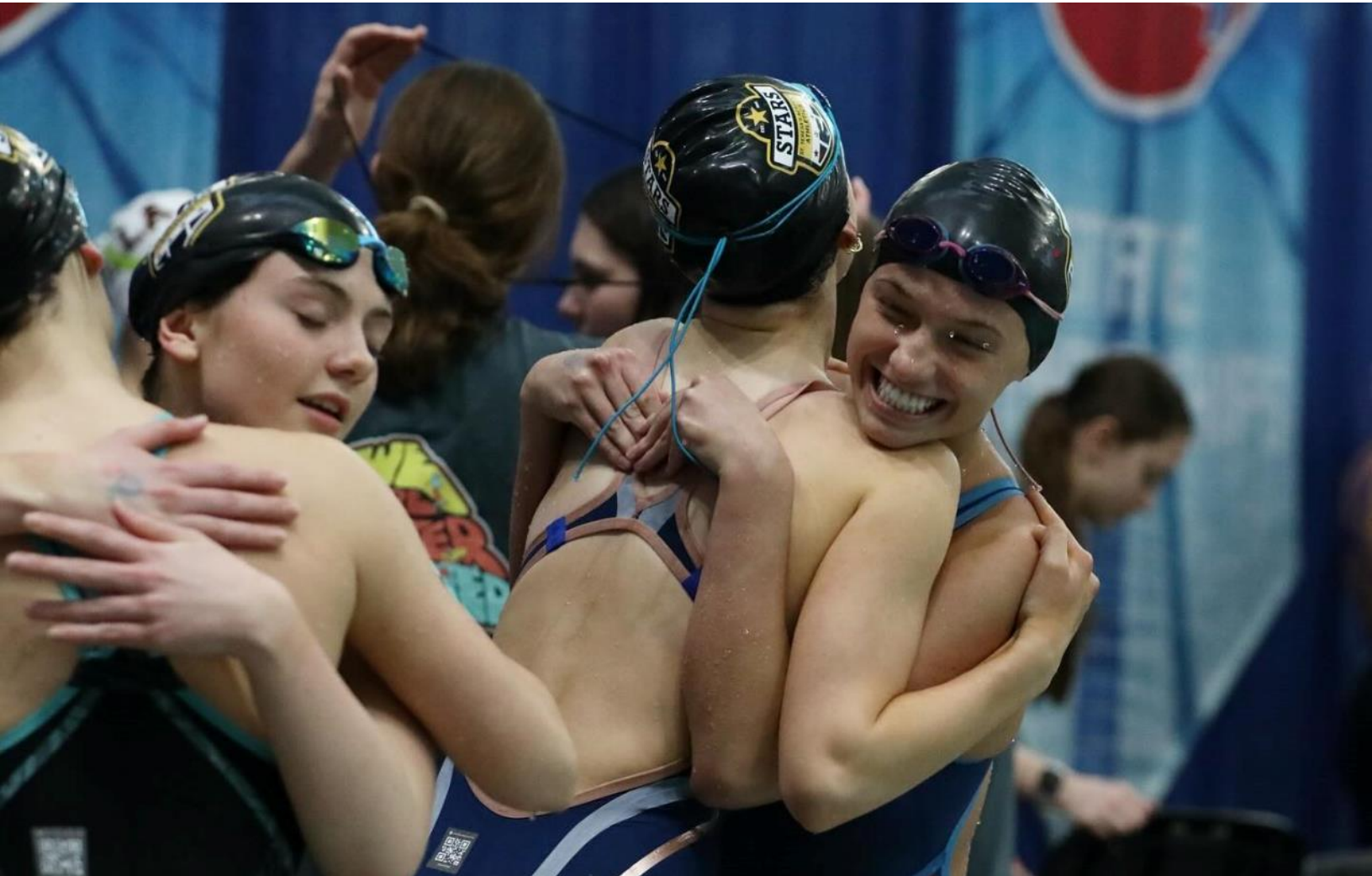
For the NFHS and State Associations, this strengthens the case for protection and investment. Many families view school-based athletics and activities as a distinct experience that alternatives may not fully replicate.



Base: n=2500 | Question(s): Which statement comes closest to your view?



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6

Access, Sustainability, And Continued Support



Access, Sustainability, and Continued Support

Parents say participation is manageable for most families, but access and sustainability still require attention.

Participation Is Manageable For Most Families, But Not Effortless

Most parents report that school-based athletics and activities are manageable for their family, despite the time, transportation, scheduling, communication, and support participation often requires.

At the same time, manageability should not be confused with ease. While 93% say participation has been at least somewhat manageable, 86% say this level of participation is at least somewhat sustainable for their family.

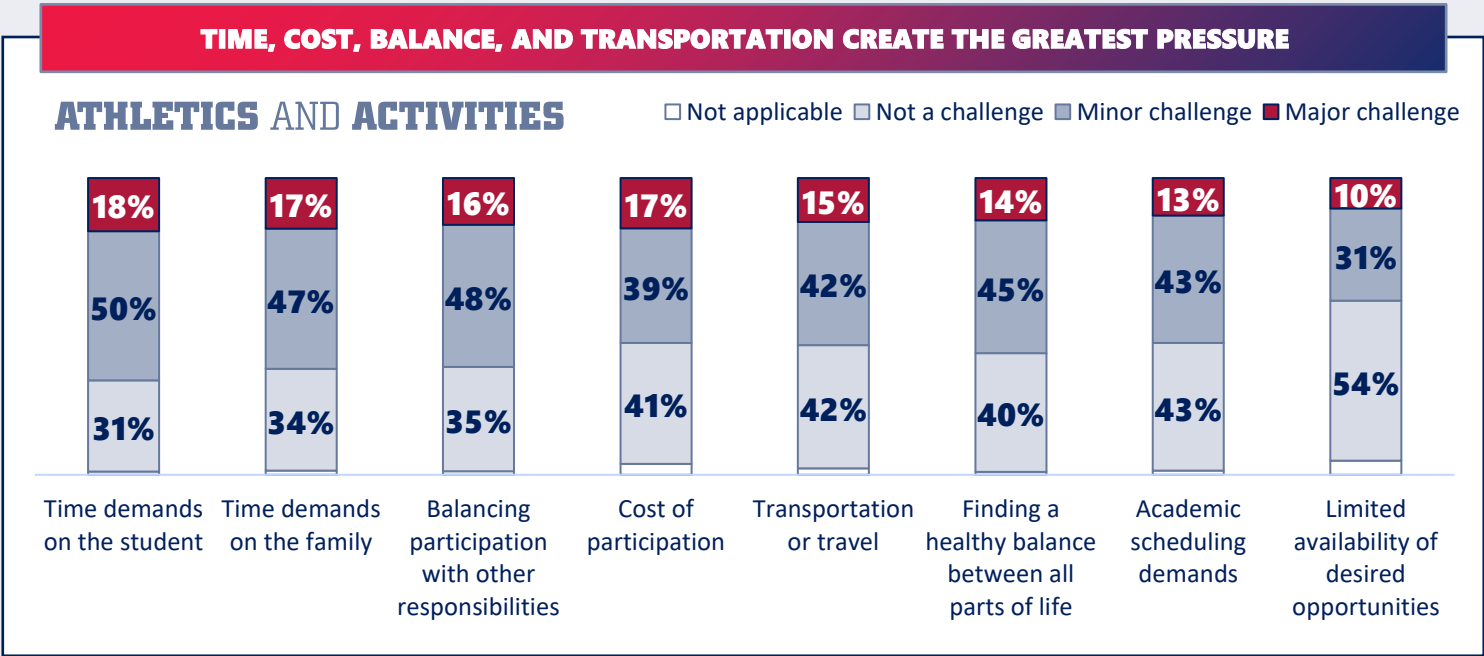
MANAGEABILITY VS. SUSTAINABILITY		
ATHLETICS AND ACTIVITIES	Manageable 93%	Sustainable 86%
ATHLETICS	93%	87%
ACTIVITIES	92%	85%

That gap suggests that while most families are managing participation today, some are less certain they can sustain it over time.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this is where the conversation about access begins. Protecting school-based opportunities means paying attention not only to whether programs exist, but also to whether families can realistically continue to participate.

The Biggest Pressures Are Time, Cost, Balance, And Transportation

The challenges parents identify most often are practical. Time demands on students and families, balancing participation with other responsibilities, cost, transportation, and academic scheduling are the most common major challenges. No single barrier affects most families, but together they show where access can become difficult to sustain.



The relatively low “major challenge” percentages are encouraging, but they should not be dismissed. Even when most families are managing participation, the families experiencing these barriers are the ones most at risk of being left out.

For the NFHS and State Associations, these findings point to the areas where policy, resources, communication, and local support can make the biggest difference.

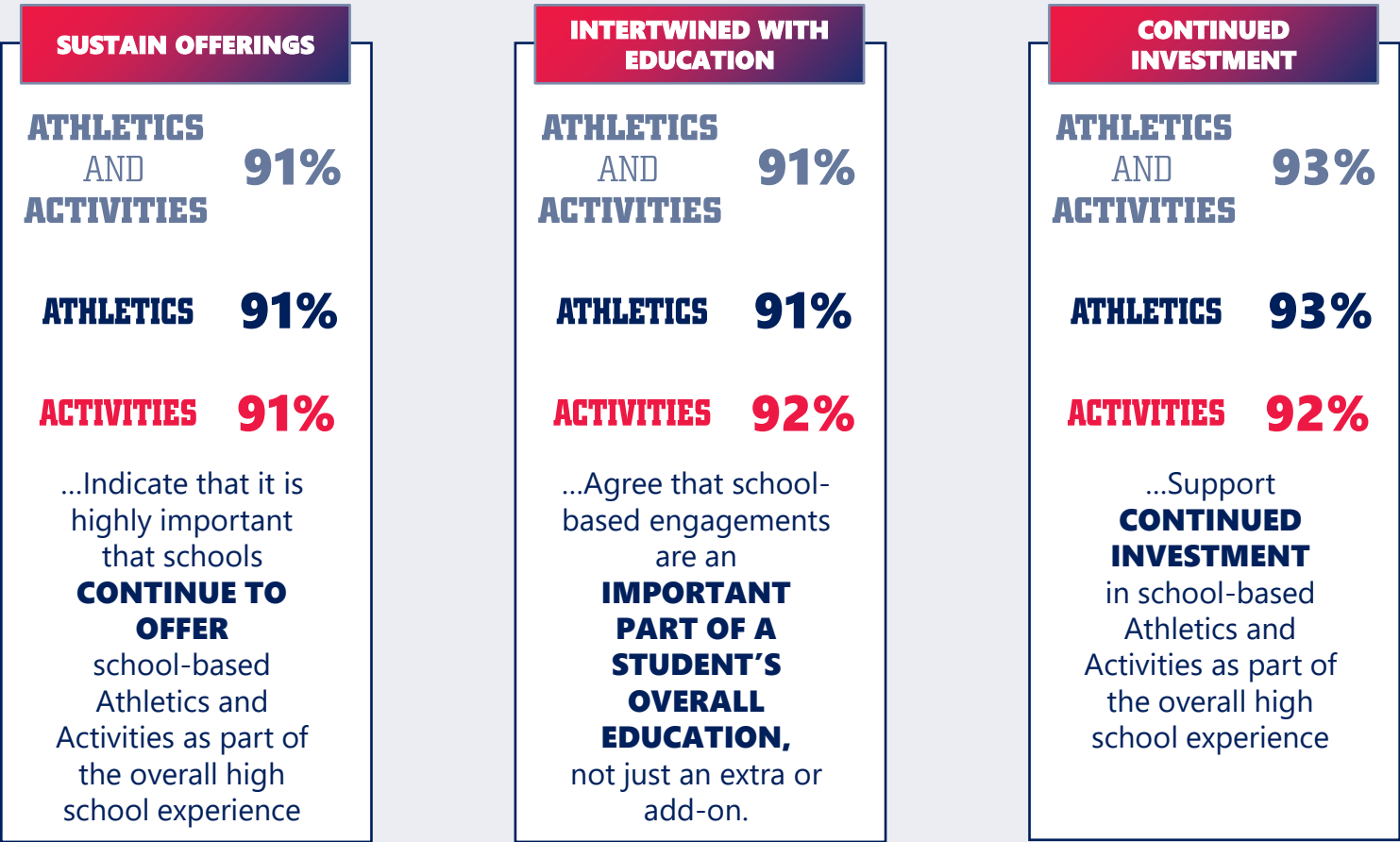
Parents Support Continued Investment

Parents do not only value their child’s current experience. They also want schools to continue providing and investing in these opportunities.

Across the full sample, 91% say it is highly important for schools to continue offering athletics and activities, 91% agree they are an important part of a student’s overall education, and 93% support continued investment.

The consistency across these measures matters. Parents see school-based athletics and activities as part of the educational experience and believe they deserve continued support.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this provides a clear parent-backed mandate: protect access, sustain programs, and resist treating these opportunities as optional when budgets and priorities are under pressure.





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7

Parent Voice



Parent Voice

Parents describe the value of school-based athletics and activities in terms of belonging, confidence, connection, responsibility, and growth.

What Parents Say Is Most Valuable

When asked what they value most about their child’s experience, parents reinforced the broader study findings.

Parents did not define value only through competition, performance, or achievement. They emphasized friendship, belonging, confidence, teamwork, leadership, structure, motivation, and personal growth.

Five themes rose to the top:

BELONGING, FRIENDSHIP, AND CONNECTION	CONFIDENCE AND PERSONAL GROWTH	TEAMWORK, LEADERSHIP, AND LIFE SKILLS	SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION	WELL-BEING, STRUCTURE, AND POSITIVE OUTLETS
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These themes reflect what parents believe students carry forward from the experience. They see value that extends beyond a season, performance, competition, club, or activity to relationships, confidence, responsibility, and a stronger connection to school.

For the NFHS and State Associations, parent voice expresses the case in plain language. Families describe benefits that are difficult to capture in a single measure but are central to why these opportunities matter.

How Parents Believe Participation Relates To School Connection, Well-Being, And Development

Parents were also asked how, if at all, they believe school-based athletics and activities have affected their child’s connection to school, well-being, or development.

The responses show a consistent pattern. Parents describe students as more connected to school, supported by peers and adults, confident, responsible, and motivated to stay engaged.

Five themes rose to the top:

STRONGER SCHOOL CONNECTION AND PRIDE	BELONGING, FRIENDSHIP, AND SUPPORT	CONFIDENCE, MATURITY, AND PERSONAL GROWTH	WELL-BEING, HEALTHY OUTLETS, AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	RESPONSIBILITY, MOTIVATION, AND ACADEMIC FOCUS
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This is where parent voice becomes especially useful for advocacy. Parents are not only describing enjoyment; they associate participation with students feeling known, supported, motivated, and connected.

That is the education-based case in family language: parents see school-based athletics and activities as giving students a reason to show up, a place to belong, supportive adults and peers, and opportunities to grow.



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8

The Case For Action

The Case For Action

The parent perspective gives the NFHS and State Associations a stronger evidence base to defend, protect, and invest in school-based athletics and activities.

Why This Matters Now

School-based athletics and activities are facing real pressure.

Across the country, districts are making difficult decisions about budgets, staffing, transportation, program support, and access. In some communities, athletics, activities, arts, and other school-based opportunities risk being reduced, shifted further onto families, or eliminated altogether.

That is why this study matters now.

The findings provide a parent-backed case that school-based athletics and activities are not extras. Parents connect them to student development, school engagement, well-being, belonging, responsibility, and life skills. They also believe the school-based setting offers value that cannot easily be replaced elsewhere.

For the NFHS and State Associations, this report helps shift the conversation away from whether these opportunities are optional and toward what may be lost when they are weakened or removed.

What The Findings Mean

The findings point to a clear conclusion: parents see school-based athletics and activities as meaningful parts of the high school experience.

Parents rate the experience highly and connect participation to confidence, teamwork, responsibility, motivation, school connection, well-being, and relationships with peers and trusted adults. They also see the school-based model as distinct because it is tied to educational expectations, attendance, conduct, adult guidance, school identity, and student development.

This is the central message of the report: the value of school-based athletics and activities is not limited to participation itself.

Parents describe a structure they believe helps students remain connected, accountable, supported, and engaged. That is the parent case for protecting these opportunities as part of the educational experience.

Implications For The NFHS And State Associations

For the NFHS and State Associations, the findings provide a stronger foundation for advocacy, communication, policy support, and member service.

The findings can help leaders make the case that school-based athletics and activities should not be treated as expendable when budgets tighten or priorities shift. Parents associate these opportunities with skills, relationships, a sense of belonging, and connection to school.

They also value an education-based alternative to outside options that may not provide the same structure, accountability, or school connection. The findings also point to where continued support matters most: protecting access, reducing unnecessary barriers, supporting coaches and activity leaders, strengthening expectations around conduct and sportsmanship, and helping schools maintain safe, respectful, student-centered environments.

This is where the report becomes practical. It gives the NFHS and State Associations language, data, and parent voice that can be used with legislators, school boards, superintendents, principals, community partners, families, and the public.

Legislative And Policy Opportunity

This report provides a starting point for stronger legislative and policy resources.

Budget pressure is placing school-based athletics, activities, and arts programs at risk in some communities. Decisions about cuts, cost shifting, transportation, staffing, and program availability can directly affect whether students continue to have access to these opportunities.

The parent findings provide a stronger evidence base for protection and investment.

Parents say these opportunities matter. They associate participation with development, connection, motivation, and well-being; view the school-based environment as distinct; and strongly support continued investment.

The next step is to translate this report into tools that can be used in real decision-making settings: legislative briefs, State Association talking points, school board resources, parent voice summaries, public-facing advocacy materials, and policy one-pagers.

Recommended Uses For The Report

This report can be used to support:

- **Legislative conversations about protecting and funding school-based athletics and activities**
- **State Association advocacy with policymakers, school leaders, and community partners**
- **School board and district discussions about program value, access, and investment**
- **Public communication about the role of athletics and activities in student development**
- **Parent and community engagement around education-based participation**
- **Internal planning related to access, sustainability, conduct, sportsmanship, and student support**
- **Future benchmarking of parent experience and perceived student impact**

The findings are strongest when used together. No single number tells the full story. The pattern is what matters: parents consistently report strong experiences, perceived student benefits, a distinct school-based environment, and support for continued investment.

Final Case Statement

School-based athletics and activities are not simply programs students join. They are part of how many students experience school.

Parents associate these opportunities with confidence, relationships, responsibility, motivation, well-being, and connection. They value the school-based setting because it links participation to education, accountability, adult guidance, peer relationships, and student growth.

That is why these opportunities should be protected.

For the NFHS and State Associations, the path forward is to use this evidence to defend the role of school-based athletics and activities, safeguard student access, and support the schools and communities that make these opportunities possible.



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