RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTERING MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Introduction

Sports participation at the middle level varies from school to school. The prevailing philosophy in some schools is that sports competition is best provided in a well-articulated program of intramurals. In other schools, a high school model is followed, with students being able to access a full program of competitive, inter-school sports and activities.

Regardless of the model that a school adopts, the focus of middle level sports should be on helping students set goals that reflect their interests and abilities. In structuring a middle level activities program, schools should consider developmentally appropriate activities and guidelines for administering those programs. Some of those discussion topics and considerations should include the following: the recommended emphasis of the programs on participation, rather than on winning; unrealistically high expectations from parents and other adults; psychological and physical readiness of the student to participate; the effects of limiting team size; cutting students from participation; concepts that help assure the health and safety of participants; and a focus on the philosophies, traits, and characteristics of coaching at the middle level.

Current Regulations for Middle Level Athletics and Activities

The determination about middle level activities and how they will be administered rests, in large part, on local philosophy and decision-making. Very few formal rules exist for schools and communities to follow. As a result, practices vary greatly from school to school.

The Nebraska Department of Education addresses middle level activities within Rule 10, “Accreditation of Schools.” At the current time, the following middle level activities are listed in that rule:

004.2C  Pupils in kindergarten through sixth grade do not participate in any kinds of athletic contests between schools within a school system or between school districts except that Class I and nonpublic elementary schools having seventh and eighth grade athletics may include fifth and sixth grade students if the local governing body has a policy regulating participation. Annual field or play days are excluded from this regulation.

004.03A9 Practice for and participation in interscholastic activities cannot substitute for any part of physical education.

004.03C No student in grades seven or eight participates in interscholastic athletic contests between schools within a school system or between school systems which exceed four games in football and eight games in other sports.

The Nebraska School Activities Association maintains few regulations for middle level athletics and activities. The NSAA is a grades 9-12 association, providing governance and support for high school activities. However, the following bylaws and approved rulings apply to middle level activities:

Approved Ruling 2.2.1
2. If a school’s internal grade grouping, as reported to the State Department of Education, designates the ninth grade as a part of the high school, the students enrolled in the ninth grade shall abide by the Constitution and Bylaws of the Nebraska School Activities Association.
a. If a ninth grade student who is enrolled in a junior high school is promoted to participate on a senior high school team or competes against a team composed of senior high school students, this student(s) must abide by all NSAA regulations during the season of the sport, such as opening and closing dates of the NSAA sports seasons, being restricted from competing with or against seventh or eighth grade students, NSAA game/match and individual limitations, participation in non-school competition, and the organized practice rule.

b. A ninth grade student, whether part of the high school or junior high school, may compete on or against any team composed of ninth graders only, regardless of the school’s organization.

c. Once a junior high school student becomes a member of a high school team, the student has established his/her eligibility at that high school.

3. If a student reaches age 15 prior to August 1 and is in the seventh or eighth grade, the student may move to the next level of competition offered in his/her school and will be ineligible for seventh-eighth grade competition.

4. If a student is carrying over fifty percent of his/her work in the eighth grade, the student is not to be considered as being a high school student, provided the local authorities did not carry the student on their high school attendance records. If the student is carrying fifty percent or more of his or her work in the ninth grade, the student should be considered a ninth grade student.

Bylaw 2.3.2
A student in grade seven or eight who reaches age 15 prior to August 1 may participate on a senior high school team.

Bylaws 3.3.13 through 3.3.13.2
3.3.13 Seventh and Eighth Grade Competition. A senior high school team shall not compete against any team which is composed of seventh and/or eighth grade students or allow seventh and/or eighth grade students to participate on a senior high school team (Exception: If a student in grade seven or eight reaches age 15 prior to August 1, that student may participate on a senior high school team.)

3.3.13.1 If a student in grade seven or eight reaches age 15 prior to August 1, the student shall be eligible for interschool competition in grades seven or eight. The student may participate on a high school team.

3.3.13.2 Teams composed of students in grades seven or eight, or teams composed of students in grades seven and eight, which represent a junior high school in interschool competition shall be limited to the following number of contests (according to limitations established by the Nebraska Department of Education):

(a) Football, four games.
(b) All other athletic competition, eight contests.
(c) In boys and girls basketball, volleyball, wrestling, and baseball, a tournament counts as one contest even though a team or individuals may participate in more than one game or match during the tournament.

Purpose of this Manual

Middle level schools are expected to comply with the regulations specified in NDE Rule 10 and the NSAA rules listed earlier. However, there are a number of operating rules and procedures that are left to the discretion and enforcement of the local school. This manual is intended as a resource for schools in making those local decisions. Enclosed are some recommendations for administering a sound middle level activities program. Some of these recommendations are intended to provide some consistency to administration of the programs; others are provided to assist with risk management issues; still others are intended to assist in preserving the emphasis on instruction.

This document is intended to be informational only. The following topics and issues are raised to assist each school in their efforts to locally set guidelines and to administer a quality middle level activities program.
Recommended Items for Consideration

Below are topics that middle level schools should study and discuss to determine how middle level activities are to be administered on that level. In areas where high school guidelines or regulations might apply, that reference is provided.

A. Philosophy of Middle Level Program. Many middle level educators advocate that the general philosophy about 7th and 8th grade activities programs should include the concept of participation versus competition. It is recommended that the purpose of middle level activities should be to encourage and promote participation of all students; every student who chooses to participate should be granted that opportunity.

Issues that should be considered include the following: intramural vs. interschool competitive sports; multiple levels or teams so that all interested students have an opportunity for participation (preferred) vs. elite teams in which students are cut from the program; and emphasis on participation (preferred) vs. winning.

Title IX issues should also be considered. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits institutions that receive federal funding from gender discrimination in educational programs or activities. Because almost all schools receive federal funds, Title IX applies to nearly everyone. The law states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance”. In sports programs, gender equity requires that equal athletic opportunities be provided for both genders and encompasses the following areas: accommodating the athletic interests and abilities of the historically underrepresented sex (including the selection of sports and levels of competition); equipment and supplies; scheduling; opportunity to receive coaching; assignment and salary of coaches; and locker rooms, medical, and other facilities.

B. Athletic Physicals. It is recommended that middle level students who participate in athletic programs should have an annual physical examination before any participation in such activity. That physician’s certificate should indicate that the student is physically fit for athletic participation. The school should keep a copy of that completed physical examination form on file in the school office.

Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:

3.4.1 Each student who expects to participate in athletic contests shall present to the superintendent or principal once each year, before actual participation in any interschool sport, a physician’s certificate on a form recommended by the NSAA that he/she is physically fit for athletic participation.

3.4.1.1 The individual giving a physical examination for the purpose of certifying a student is physically fit to participate in athletic activities should be licensed to diagnose, treat, or recommend treatment in the areas covered by the recommended physical examination form. The individual giving a medical opinion must do so within the scope of his/her training and within the limits defined by state statutes as to services that can be legally performed by the field of practice to which the individual belongs.

3.4.1.2 The requirement that a student must have a physical examination once each year has been interpreted to mean the examination must be given during the school year in which the student participates or during the summer vacation period which precedes the school year in which the individual participates. A physical taken in the summer vacation period or anytime during the school year is good only to the end of the school year. Any physical taken May 1 or after will be considered a part of summer vacation.

3.4.1.3 The completed physical examination forms must be kept on file at the local high school.
C. **Parental Consent Forms.** It is recommended that middle level students who participate in activities programs should have a parental consent form on file with the school office before any participation in such activity. That parental consent form should contain an acknowledgement that the major rules and regulations governing the student's eligibility to participate in interscholastic activities have been disclosed to the student and his/her parent or guardian. It should also specify that there are dangers associated with athletic participation; participation in any athletic activity may involve injury of some type. The consent form should require the signatures of both the student and the parent.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

2.1.3 Consent of Parent and Student. A student shall become eligible for practice and competition in each activity that is under the jurisdiction of the Nebraska School Activities Association when a certificate of consent, signed by the student and one of his/her parents or guardian, is on file with the principal. The certificate of consent shall contain an acknowledgement that the major rules and regulations governing the student's eligibility to participate in interscholastic activities have been disclosed to the student and his/her parent or guardian.

2.1.3.1 Prior to permitting a student's participation in interscholastic competition, the superintendent or designate of each school shall file a report with the NSAA office, verifying that each Certificate of Consent has been properly signed and each student has been informed of NSAA rules.

D. **Length and Number of Seasons.** The length of season is often defined by the number of contests that are permitted. NDE Rule 10 permits four games in football and eight games in other sports. It is probably advisable to allow two to four weeks of practice before the initial contest. It is recommended that only one football game be scheduled per week.

The number of seasons is often predicated on regional or conference practices. In some locales, middle level schools operate on the standard three-season basis; in other areas, the prevalent practice is four distinct seasons. In determining the number of seasons and which sports to place within each season, it would be advisable to survey potential competition to assure that there are sufficient schools to schedule in a particular sport during a particular season.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

*The NSAA currently operates under a three-sport season structure. The length of each season varies by sport. NSAA activities have a designated starting date, a date that marks the earliest that a school may engage in organized practices. Typically, two or three weeks of preseason practices are permitted before the first allowable date for NSAA activities. Most NSAA activities have contest limitations; some have maximum limits for daily participation; some have limits for the number of contests per week. Those high school guidelines are listed in the NSAA Manual for each specific activity.*

E. **Participation on Non-school Teams.** Outside participation (participation on non-school teams) should be addressed in local policies. A determination should be made whether a student should be permitted dual participation on a school team and an outside team during the same season.

It is recommended that the school team should be distinctive from a club team. The club team culture is a growing phenomenon, with students being able to play a particular sport year-round and with few, if any, participation restrictions. Many club teams permit many more contests than are permitted for school teams, and providing the student's parents have
the resources, there are typically sufficient teams such that most students can participate. In some settings, club teams are looked to as the feeder system for high school sports. Some students participate in multiple club programs simultaneously with their middle level school sports participation, limiting time for homework and social activities. It is recommended that schools evaluate the outside participation issues and determine what their school’s restrictions, if any, will be.

F. Home School/Exempt School Student Participation. Home school/exempt school student participation at the middle school level is a local decision. Schools should weigh this participation issue. If home school/exempt school students are permitted to participate at the middle level, schools should check with their insurance agents to determine possible risk issues. Such students are ineligible to participate at the high school level; the deliberation about whether to let middle level home school/exempt school students to participate at the middle level should include the discussion about potential local issues when such middle level students advance to the high school level where they will be ineligible.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

Approved Ruling 2.2.1 1. To be a participant in any NSAA activity at either the varsity or non-varsity levels of competition, an individual must be a bona fide student of a member high school. Exempt-school or home-school students, unless enrolled in a minimum of twenty credit hours of schoolwork in the member high school, are not eligible to represent a member school in NSAA activities, regardless of the level of participation or competition.

G. Participation in Multiple Sports During Same Semester. Participating in multiple sports at the middle level during one season is a local decision. If schools provide multiple middle level sports during a particular season, those schools should determine whether it is permissible for a student to participate in more than one sport during that season.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

Bylaw 3.1.1.2 The division of sports seasons shall be as follows: No school shall register more than one varsity team per sport and no student shall participate simultaneously in more than one sport per season.

Approved Ruling 3.1.1.2 If a student is participating in one sport during a sports season and decides to quit that sport and participate in another sport during the same season, the student shall be restricted from practice and competing for seven school days. No student who has practiced or competed in one sport will be allowed to switch to another sport if the district or state meet in the student’s former sport is in progress or has been completed or a season has ended.

If a student participates in two sports simultaneously during a sports season, that student shall become ineligible to participate in the district and/or state contest during that sports season.

H. Length of Practice Sessions. Schools should limit the amount of time permitted for middle level athletic practices. Such practices are recommended to be a maximum of 1½ to 2 hours in length per day. Health, safety, and attention span issues should be considered. It is recommended that each school set practice length limitations, rather than leaving practice length to the discretion of individual coaches.
**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

**The NSAA imposes no restrictions on days that a team may practice, nor on the length of practices. On the high school level, this determination is left to the discretion of the local school.**

I. **Preservation of Instructional Time.** Accountability is a key issue in educational activities and athletics. Efforts to preserve instructional time should be considered when scheduling practices and contests, recognizing that there may be local conditions that provide constraints.

It is recommended that middle level practice sessions be scheduled outside of the school day. Further, it is recommended that activities and athletic competition be scheduled outside the school day or on Saturday. It is understood, however, that the length of some events or the travel distances may require beginning contests during school hours. Further, it is understood that geographic and logistical constraints may limit a school’s ability to exclusively schedule middle level practices outside the school day.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

**The NSAA imposes few restrictions on the starting times for regular season competition. Although the NSAA tries to constantly remind schools of the importance of honoring instructional time, on the high school level, this responsibility for minimizing lost instructional time is left to the discretion of the local school.**

J. **Coaching Requirements.** Assignment of middle level coaches is a local decision. Consideration should be given to knowledge of the sport or activity; understanding of the risk issues involved; ability to understand developmental differences in middle level students; personal qualities of honesty, integrity, and sound morals; and leadership and decision-making abilities.

Coaching requirements for middle level coaches are recommended to be the same as for a high school coach. NSAA bylaws require high school coaches to be certified by the Nebraska Department of Education. Coaches should also have a written job description.

**Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:**

2.12 **Coaches and Sponsors**

2.12.1 **School's Responsibility.** The entire management of a school's activity program must be under the control of school authorities, and any team competing in interschool competition must be under the direction of a member of the school's faculty.

2.12.1.2 **When a team or individuals from a school compete in interschool competition, the team or individuals must be accompanied by the head coach, or assistant coach as defined by the rules, or a school administrator, or certificated faculty member.**

2.12.2 **Head Coach, Assistant Coach, or Sponsor.** In order to serve as a head or assistant coach or sponsor of any activity sponsored by the Nebraska School Activities Association, the individual must possess a valid Nebraska Teaching Certificate or Nebraska Administrative and Supervisory Certificate and have a written contract of employment as a coach or sponsor with the school in which he/she is to perform these duties.

2.12.2.1 **Individuals who possess a Provisional Trades Certificate and/or Special Services Certificate endorsed in coaching may be employed by a school district as a head or assistant coach in NSAA sponsored activities.**

2.12.2.2 **The head coach/sponsor, assistant coach/sponsor, or certificated faculty member has the following responsibilities:**

1. Supervise the individuals or team representing the school in the competition.
2. Serve as the school's spokesperson in all administrative matters, controversial situations, obtaining medical assistance, talking with representatives of the media and any discussion with contest officials or judges.
3. In basketball, the only individual who is permitted to use the coach's box or approach the scorer's table for a correctable error situation.
4. Be seated on the team bench or within the team area during basketball, volleyball, baseball, football, soccer, and softball contests.
5. Accept awards presented to the school and/or coach.

2.12.3 Coaches' Aides. Schools may contract non-certificated personnel to assist with their activities programs, but such personnel shall be coaches' aides.

2.12.3.1 The individuals must have a job description.
2.12.3.2 The individual shall not initiate nor change instruction given by the head coach and must carry out specific directions given by the head coach.
2.12.3.3 The individual may assist in starting, executing, and completing the specific plan of the learning experience as defined and directed by the head coach.
2.12.3.4 The aide should be specifically prepared for duties assigned, to include the handling of emergency situations that arise in the course of his/her work.
2.12.3.5 Coach's aides are not to be given the sole responsibility of directing or supervising students during practice. The head coach should be in the immediate practice area.
2.12.3.6 When traveling to and from and participating in interschool competition, the team or individuals are to be accompanied by the head coach/sponsor, assistant coach/sponsor, or in case of an emergency, a certificated faculty member.

K. Eligibility and Transfer Rules. Local schools should individually determine whether eligibility and transfer rules should be used. Eligibility and transfer rules are probably not necessary at the middle level; however, NSAA bylaws permit a 7th or 8th grade student who is 15 years old prior to August 1st to participate at the high school level, and eligibility and transfer rules would apply to such students. This 7th or 8th grade participation at the high school level would apply to the 8 semesters of high school eligibility. Middle level academic eligibility should be addressed in local policies.

Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:

2.1.1 Student Eligibility. Only those students meeting the eligibility requirements as established in the Constitution, Bylaws, or Approved Rulings are permitted to represent a member school in interscholastic competition in those activities which are under the jurisdiction of the Nebraska School Activities Association.

2.2.2 Semester Limitation. A student shall become ineligible after eight semesters of school membership beginning with his/her initial enrollment in grade nine.

2.3.1 Age Limitation. No student shall be eligible for interschool competition who has attained the age of nineteen years except as follows: A student who becomes nineteen years of age on or after August 1 shall be eligible on the basis of age until the end of the current school year.
2.3.2 A student in grade seven or eight who reaches age 15 prior to August 1 may participate on a senior high school team.

2.5.1 Current Semester. To be eligible, the student must be continuously enrolled in at least twenty credit hours of instruction per semester at the school the student represents in interscholastic competition. Students enrolled in college classes at an accredited institution should be allowed to use those classes in meeting the 20-hour eligibility requirements. No student should be allowed to use more than two classes from an accredited institution in one semester. Proof of enrollment and payment of fees should be provided to the Athletic Director to verify they are registered and enrolled for the class(es).
2.5.2 Preceding Semester. To be eligible, a student shall have credit on the school records for twenty credit hours of schoolwork for the immediate preceding semester.

2.5.2.1 The term "preceding semester" means the semester immediately preceding the semester in which the student wishes to participate in activities.

2.5.2.2 The preceding semester rule is not to apply to students who are entering high school for the first time and have not competed or practiced with a high school team.

L. Conduct and Sportsmanship. Sportsmanship should be a primary emphasis at the middle level. Middle level schools may wish to adopt or modify the NSAA “sit-out” rule that is in place for high school athletics. NSAA bylaws state that if a coach or athlete is ejected from a contest, he/she is not allowed to compete in the remainder of that contest and must “sit-out” the next contest at that level and any other contests in the interim. Each middle level activity should teach a component of sportsmanship each day. Locally, schools should establish specific consequences for unsporting conduct.

Resource—NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:

2.10 CONDUCT

2.10.1 Conduct During Interscholastic Competition. Students, participants, and staff members representing member schools in interscholastic competition are expected to conduct themselves in a sportsmanlike manner.

2.10.1.1 Unsportmanlike conduct shall include physical or verbal assault upon any participant, game official, or spectator, or any acts that may endanger the personal safety of individuals involved, or acts that hinder the normal progress of a contest or lead to the restriction or discontinuance of a contest.

2.10.1.2 If a student, participant, and/or staff member representing a member school in interschool competition acts in a manner constituting unsportsmanlike behavior during such competition, the member school and/or individuals shall be subject to penalties as set out in Section 2.11.

2.10.1.3 If any participant or staff member while representing a member school in an Association-sponsored district tournament, playoff, or state contest acts in a manner constituting unsportsmanlike conduct, the individual is subject to penalties as set out in Section 2.11.

2.11.2 Student Violations. If a student violates any of the provisions of the Constitution, Bylaws, or Approved Rulings during the course of an Association-sponsored district contest, playoff, or state contest, the Board of Control or Executive Director may suspend the student from further competition for any portion or all of the remainder of the subdistrict, district, playoff, or state contests.

2.11.3 Participant Ejections from Athletic Contests. Any participant ejected from a contest for unsportsmanlike conduct shall be ineligible for the next athletic contest at that level of competition and all other athletic contests at any level during the interim, in addition to the other penalties the NSAA or the school may assess.

2.11.4 Coach Ejections from Athletic Contests. Any coach ejected from a contest for unsportsmanlike conduct shall be ineligible to coach the next athletic contest at that level of competition and all other athletic contests at any level during the interim, in addition to the other penalties the NSAA or the school may assess.

3.3.11 Conduct and Sportsmanship. Member schools shall maintain proper crowd control and enforce the principles of good sportsmanship and ethics during all interscholastic contests. Failure to fulfill this obligation shall subject the school to penalties as provided in Article 2, Section 2.11, NSAA Bylaws Governing All Activities.

3.3.11.1 Conduct of Coaches and Athletes. Coaches and athletes shall conduct themselves in accordance with the playing rules of the sport contest and refrain from
unsportsmanlike conduct during interscholastic competition. Failure to fulfill this obligation will subject the individual(s) to the penalties as provided in Article 2, Section 2.11, NSAA Bylaws Governing All Activities.

3.3.11.2 Definition of Unsportsmanlike Conduct. Unsportsmanlike conduct shall include the following: fighting, verbal abuse or dissent directed toward an official or opponent, racial or ethnic slurs, inappropriate comments or actions that may be construed as sexual harassment, profanity, obscene gestures, flagrant and violent fouls, taunting, trash talk, baiting, cheating, throwing or abusing equipment, inappropriate posters, physical intimidation or abuse of an official or opponent, and unauthorized leaving of a team bench area.

Approved Ruling 3.3.11 In the realm of good sportsmanship, it is the expectation that all student spectators wear shirts for all subdistrict, district, and state events. Each individual school shall be responsible for assuring that student spectators are appropriately attired.

M. December Moratorium. Time off for family time and travel should be observed at the middle level over the December holiday season. It is recommended that middle level schools adopt some form of moratorium on practices and contests. A recommendation might be to implement a minimum of a five-day moratorium during the month of December in which middle level students are not allowed to practice or compete in school activities. It is recommended that there be no contact between the school coach and athletes during these five days.

Resource--NSAA Requirement for High School Participation:

3.1.2 December Moratorium. For five consecutive days in December, there shall be no practice and no interschool competition by individuals or teams in any athletic activity sponsored by the Nebraska School Activities Association. The specific dates for each five-day period will be set by the Board of Control three years in advance. (Refer to calendar for these dates.)

Approved Ruling 3.1.2 The term “no practice and no interschool competition by individuals or teams” shall be interpreted to mean that a grades 9-12 student who is a participant in an NSAA activity shall not be permitted to practice or compete during the moratorium in a facility that is owned, used, or leased by the school, whether or not a coach, sponsor, or other adult person associated with the program is present. There can be no contact with the school coach, sponsor, or other adult person associated with the program if a student chooses to workout in a facility that is not owned, used, or leased by the school.

N. Playing Rules for Sports. Participating schools should agree on sport-specific playing rules prior to the start of the season, rather than waiting until the day of the contest to discuss, debate, and agree upon such rules. The National Federation publishes rules books for most activities; however, those rules are specifically developed for varsity competition only. Playing rules for middle level activities can be patterned after those National Federation playing rules, but adaptations could be made to meet the needs and interests of students and schools.

The information provided herein is intended to assist middle level schools in their efforts to offer sound middle level activities programs for their students. This manual is not intended to be all-inclusive; rather, it is intended to provide suggestions and directions for middle level administrators and coaches who are seeking assistance in administering athletic programs for middle level students.

Although the Nebraska School Activities Association only governs and regulates high school activities in this state, the NSAA staff is positioned to provide suggestions, discussion, and recommendations for middle level educators seeking input or assistance.