



**NATIONAL FEDERATION  
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL SPORTS**  
**NFMSS**

# EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

*National Federation of Middle School Sports (NFMSS)*  
Owned & Managed by In Time of Need Incorporated | A 501(c)(3) Nonprofit

*Official Position Statement on the Role of Athletics in Middle School Education*

<b>Grade Levels</b> Grades 6 – 8	<b>Document Type</b> Official Position Statement	<b>Issued By</b> In Time of Need Inc.
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### THE NFMSS EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS BELIEF STATEMENT

*"NFMSS believes middle school athletics are an extension of the educational experience. Athletic participation should support academic growth, school engagement, leadership, character, sportsmanship, and the physical, emotional, and social development of students in grades six through eight."*

— In Time of Need Incorporated, on behalf of NFMSS

## INTRODUCTION — WHY EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS MATTER

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The National Federation of Middle School Sports (NFMSS), operated by In Time of Need Incorporated, exists at a uniquely important intersection: the space where structured athletic competition meets the formative educational years of grades 6 through 8. This is not coincidence — it is purpose. NFMSS was built on the foundational belief that athletics, properly structured and supervised, are one of the most powerful educational tools available to middle school students.

Middle school is a critical developmental window. Students in grades 6 through 8 — typically ages 11 to 14 — are navigating one of the most complex transitions of their lives: the movement from childhood to adolescence. They are forming identities, testing boundaries, building peer relationships, discovering strengths, and beginning to understand who they are and what they stand for. Organized athletic participation, done right, accelerates every dimension of that growth in a safe, structured, and supervised environment.

This position statement defines what NFMSS means by 'education-based athletics,' establishes the principles that guide all NFMSS programs and standards, and articulates the shared responsibilities of every party in the NFMSS ecosystem — from In Time of Need Incorporated's leadership to the student-athlete on the court or field.

**FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE:** *At NFMSS, the word 'student' always precedes the word 'athlete.' Every rule, standard, and program in NFMSS is built around this priority. The student-athlete's academic success, personal growth, and long-term well-being are more important than any individual competition result.*

## WHAT EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS MEANS AT NFMSS

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Education-based athletics, as defined by NFMSS and In Time of Need Incorporated, refers to organized interscholastic athletic competition that is intentionally designed, operated, and evaluated as an extension of — never a substitute for — the school's academic mission. It is athletics in service of education, not athletics in competition with it.

This means every NFMSS-sanctioned program, event, and competition is held to a standard that goes beyond simply keeping score. The question NFMSS asks about every athletic program is not only 'Did they win?' but 'Did the students in this program grow — as students, as teammates, as community members, and as young people developing the character and skills they will need for the rest of their lives?'

### Education-Based Athletics Is NOT:

- A professional development pipeline prioritizing elite performance over broad participation
- A revenue-generating entertainment product that subordinates student well-being to wins
- An extracurricular afterthought disconnected from the school's academic and community goals
- A system that tolerates academic neglect in exchange for athletic achievement
- A structure where adults' competitive ambitions override students' developmental needs

### Education-Based Athletics IS:

- A school-based program in which athletics serve the educational, social, and personal development of every participating student
- A structured environment where competition teaches lessons that the classroom cannot fully replicate — resilience, teamwork, gracious defeat, composed victory, and accountability
- A complement to academic instruction that reinforces the school's values and mission in an active, experiential setting
- A community-building platform that connects students, families, schools, and neighborhoods around shared achievement
- A leadership development laboratory available to every enrolled student in grades 6 through 8, regardless of skill level

## THE SEVEN PILLARS OF NFMSS EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS

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NFMSS organizes its education-based athletics framework around seven core pillars. Each pillar represents a domain in which middle school athletic participation, properly governed and supervised, makes a measurable positive difference in the lives of student-athletes. Together, these seven pillars define what NFMSS expects of every program operating under its banner.

Pillar	What NFMSS Expects & Why It Matters
<p><b>01</b> Academic Achievement</p>	<p>Athletics must support — never undermine — academic success. NFMSS requires member schools to maintain eligibility standards tied to academic performance. Coaches are expected to encourage academic engagement, schedule practices and events around academic priorities, and actively celebrate their athletes' classroom achievements alongside their athletic ones. A middle school athlete who struggles academically is not succeeding, regardless of what the scoreboard says.</p>
<p><b>02</b> School Engagement &amp; Belonging</p>	<p>Research consistently shows that participation in school-based athletics increases school attendance, reduces dropout risk, and strengthens students' sense of belonging to their school community. NFMSS's school-based model — as opposed to club or travel sports — is intentional: it keeps athletes connected to their classmates, teachers, and school culture. The team jersey bears the school's name because the team represents the school.</p>
<p><b>03</b> Character &amp; Integrity</p>	<p>Competition is a character test. How a student-athlete responds to adversity, officiating decisions, opponents, and their own mistakes reveals and shapes who they are becoming. NFMSS expects coaches, athletic directors, and school administrators to treat every competition as a character-development opportunity. Sportsmanship is not merely a rule — it is a core NFMSS value, enforced through the Compliance Handbook and modeled by every adult in the program.</p>
<p><b>04</b> Leadership Development</p>	<p>Middle school is not too early to develop leaders. Team captains, locker room culture-setters, the athlete who stays after practice to encourage a struggling teammate — these are the early expressions of leadership that athletic programs uniquely cultivate. NFMSS programs are expected to create intentional space for leadership development: assigning responsibility, encouraging peer mentorship, and recognizing leadership alongside athletic performance.</p>
<p><b>05</b> Sportsmanship &amp; Respect</p>	<p>Sportsmanship at the middle school level is about more than shaking hands at the end of a game. It is about how athletes treat officials, opponents, coaches, and teammates in every moment of competition. It is about how adults in the stands conduct themselves. It is about the culture a program builds over time. NFMSS holds all participants — athletes, coaches, administrators, and spectators — to an explicit Code of Conduct because sportsmanship must be actively modeled and enforced, not assumed.</p>
<p><b>06</b> Physical, Emotional &amp; Social Health</p>	<p>The physical benefits of organized athletic activity are well documented, but NFMSS's education-based framework extends the health priority to emotional and social well-being. Age-appropriate competition structures protect developing bodies from overuse and inappropriate physical demands. Qualified supervision and coach training protect developing minds from toxic team cultures. NFMSS safety standards, facility requirements, and emergency action plan mandates exist because</p>

Pillar	What NFMSS Expects & Why It Matters
	student-athlete health — in all its dimensions — is non-negotiable.
<p><b>07</b></p> <p><b>Positive School &amp; Community Culture</b></p>	<p>Athletic programs, at their best, make schools better places and communities stronger. The student body rallies around a team. Parents become more connected to the school. Local businesses sponsor athletic programs. Alumni return for championship events. NFMSS national championships give communities something to celebrate together. This is education-based athletics working at its highest level — not just developing individual student-athletes, but strengthening the entire ecosystem around them.</p>

## NFMSS COMMITMENTS TO STUDENT-ATHLETES & MEMBER SCHOOLS

Education-based athletics is not a philosophy statement alone — it is a set of active commitments. The following table outlines what each of NFMSS's core commitments means in practice for student-athletes and for the schools that serve them:

NFMSS Commitment	What It Means for Student-Athletes	What It Means for Schools
Academic Priority	Athletics never supersede classroom obligations; eligibility tied to academic standing	Programs reinforce a culture where student identity comes before athlete identity
Character Development	Every practice and competition is an opportunity to build integrity, resilience, and respect	Coaches are educators first; their conduct in athletic settings models the values of the school
Inclusive Participation	Every eligible student in grades 6–8 deserves access to safe, structured competition	Schools are expected to remove barriers to participation based on background or circumstance
Safety & Well-Being	Age-appropriate competition structures protect developing bodies and minds	Facilities, supervision, and emergency protocols meet NFMSS standards at every event
Community Connection	Student-athletes represent their school and community — their conduct reflects both	Athletic programs are a source of school pride and positive community engagement
Leadership Pathways	Competition develops the decision-making, teamwork, and accountability skills students carry for life	Athletic participation is a structured leadership laboratory available to every enrolled student

## SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES — EVERYONE HAS A ROLE

Education-based athletics cannot be achieved by any single party acting alone. It requires a genuine shared commitment from every stakeholder in the NFMSS ecosystem. The following table defines the education-based athletics responsibility of each role and NFMSS's specific expectation for that role:

Role	Education-Based Responsibility	NFMSS Expectation
Student-Athlete	Maintain academic eligibility; represent school with character; grow through competition	Compete with integrity; uphold NFMSS Code of Conduct; be a student first
Head Coach	Teach sport as an extension of education; develop character alongside skill; model integrity	Hold current NFMSS certification; complete annual education-based athletics training
Athletic Director	Champion the educational value of athletics within the school; connect program to academic mission	Certify compliance; attend NFMSS annual conference; report outcomes annually
School Administration	Ensure athletics align with the school's educational mission and community values	Support AD and coaching staff; hold program accountable to academic standards
Parent / Guardian	Reinforce the student-before-athlete priority; model positive conduct at events	Respect officials, opponents, and the process; support school's athletic philosophy
NFMSS / In Time of Need Inc.	Establish, enforce, and continuously improve standards that protect the educational integrity of competition	Provide governance, resources, training, and national championship structure

**COACHES AS EDUCATORS:** *NFMSS holds a clear and non-negotiable position on the role of coaches in education-based athletics: every head coach operating under NFMSS is an educator first. Their responsibility is not limited to developing athletic skill. They are responsible for developing people — people who will carry the lessons of competition with them long after they have forgotten the final score.*

## RESEARCH BASIS — THE EVIDENCE FOR EDUCATION-BASED ATHLETICS

NFMSS's education-based athletics framework is grounded in a robust and growing body of research on the relationship between youth athletic participation and educational, developmental, and health outcomes. The following table summarizes the key evidence across each major outcome area and connects it directly to NFMSS programs and standards:

Outcome Area	Research Finding	NFMSS Application
Academic	Student-athletes consistently show higher	Eligibility standards reinforce the

Outcome Area	Research Finding	NFMSS Application
Performance	graduation rates and GPA trajectories than non-participants	academic-athletic connection at the school level
School Engagement	Participation in school-based athletics increases attendance, school connection, and sense of belonging	NFMSS school-based (not club-based) model keeps athletes connected to their school community
Social-Emotional Development	Team sport participation develops empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation in adolescents	Competition standards and coach training prioritize emotional safety alongside physical safety
Physical Health	Regular structured athletic activity reduces obesity risk and establishes lifelong fitness habits	NFMSS safety and facility standards ensure physical activity occurs in safe, appropriate environments
Character & Leadership	Adolescents who participate in structured athletic programs show stronger leadership traits in adulthood	Every NFMSS competition and event is designed as a character-building opportunity, not just a contest
Community Identity	School-based athletic programs strengthen community pride and increase civic engagement among families	NFMSS championships bring schools and communities together around shared pride in student achievement

The research is consistent and compelling: school-based athletic participation, when properly governed, supervised, and integrated into the educational mission, produces better students, stronger communities, and more complete human beings. NFMSS exists to ensure that middle school students in grades 6 through 8 have access to that experience — with the structure, standards, and national recognition it deserves.

## THE MIDDLE SCHOOL DIFFERENCE — WHY GRADES 6–8 ARE UNIQUE

NFMSS is exclusively focused on grades 6 through 8 — not because middle school athletics are a stepping stone to high school athletics, but because middle school athletes deserve an organization that is designed specifically for them, their developmental stage, and their educational context.

### Developmental Appropriateness

Students in grades 6 through 8 are in the midst of a profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and social transformation. Their bodies are developing at different rates. Their emotional regulation is a work in progress. Their social identities are forming in real time. An education-based athletics framework designed for high school athletes — or worse, for adult competitive standards — is inappropriate for this population. NFMSS structures competition, eligibility, safety standards, and coaching expectations specifically around the developmental reality of 11–14 year olds.

## **The Formative Nature of This Window**

Habits formed in middle school persist. Research on adolescent development consistently identifies the middle school years as among the most influential in shaping long-term patterns of behavior, self-concept, academic identity, and relationship skills. A positive athletic experience in grades 6 through 8 — one that reinforces academic identity, builds character, and creates a sense of belonging — can shape a student's trajectory for years. A negative one can do the same. NFMSS takes this responsibility seriously.

## **The Identity Question**

Middle school is when students begin to ask the question: 'Who am I?' Athletics gives them part of the answer — 'I am a student-athlete. I am a teammate. I am someone who works hard, competes with integrity, and represents my school.' NFMSS programs are designed to ensure that answer reflects the values of education-based athletics: student first, athlete second, and always a member of a community larger than themselves.

## **The Gap NFMSS Fills**

No national organization dedicated exclusively to school-based middle school athletics existed before NFMSS. High school students have structured national pathways. College students have the NCAA. Middle school students — in a developmental stage arguably more critical than either of those — had nothing. NFMSS, under In Time of Need Incorporated, was created specifically to fill that gap with a framework worthy of the moment.

## **ALIGNMENT WITH THE SCHOOL'S EDUCATIONAL MISSION**

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Every NFMSS member school is an accredited educational institution. Its primary mission is the education of students. NFMSS requires — and expects — that every athletic program operating under its banner is aligned with, not in conflict with, that educational mission.

## **Academic Eligibility as a Non-Negotiable**

Academic eligibility standards are the most visible expression of NFMSS's commitment to the student-first principle. Students who are not meeting academic standards should not be competing athletically. This is not punitive — it is a statement of priority. NFMSS member schools are required to enforce eligibility standards and are expected to use the athletic program as a motivator for academic engagement, not a reward divorced from it.

## **Scheduling with Academic Priority**

NFMSS seasonal calendars, event scheduling guidelines, and competition day policies are all developed with academic priority in mind. Competitions should not require students to miss excessive academic instruction. Travel to NFMSS events should be managed in a manner that minimizes

academic disruption. Schools that routinely allow athletic schedules to override academic schedules are not operating consistent with education-based athletics principles.

### **The Coach-Teacher Connection**

The best middle school athletic programs are those where coaches know their athletes as students — where they communicate with teachers, track academic progress, celebrate classroom success, and intervene when academic challenges emerge. NFMSS encourages and rewards this integration. The goal is not for a student to succeed athletically despite their academic environment, but because of it.

## **FINAL STATEMENT**

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***Athletics at the middle school level are not a luxury.***

***They are an educational tool, a developmental resource, and a community bond.***

NFMSS exists to ensure that every middle school student in grades 6 through 8 who steps onto a court, a field, or a track under our banner does so in an environment that is safe, fair, structured, and — above all — designed to make them a better student, a stronger person, and a more capable citizen.

***That is education-based athletics. That is NFMSS.***

This position statement is issued by In Time of Need Incorporated on behalf of NFMSS and is incorporated by reference into all NFMSS governance documents, including the Official Bylaws, Compliance Handbook, and Legal & Governance Packet. Member schools, coaches, athletic directors, and all other NFMSS-affiliated parties are expected to operate consistent with the education-based athletics principles established herein.

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