

# **Strategies for the Recruitment and Retention of Officials**



*Developed by the NFHS Officials Consortium Participants (April 2022)*

## INTRODUCTION

The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) held its first ever Officials Consortium on April 12-14, 2022, in Indianapolis, IN. The Consortium hosted officiating leaders from more than 40 sport entities and organizations at the youth, high school, collegiate and professional levels. All sports were represented, and the group met with the goal of identifying problems and barriers to the recruitment and retention of officials and developing **collaborative** solutions to build and maintain the officiating pipeline for all stakeholders.

Following the Consortium, the NFHS held eight sectional meetings from May 17-June 2, 2022, to share the findings of the Consortium with administrators, coaches, officials and any other individual or entity who wanted to be a part of the solution.

In the final follow-up stage of the process, the NFHS held close to 30 one-on-one conversations in June and July with individuals who attended the April Consortium to discuss partnerships and relationships with the NFHS, with an aim toward continuing to address the officiating crisis together.

The information presented in this document is a compilation of the ideas from the Consortium and the subsequent meetings and is intended for the use of anyone who is interested in improving the sport landscape for the individuals who serve as officials across the country and at all levels.

The document is divided into sections, which were the “barriers” identified at the Consortium. Beneath each of the identified barriers are the identified “Strategies for Improvement” devised through the Consortium and follow-up meetings. Those sections are as follows:

- **Assignors and Assignments**
- **Behavior/Sportsmanship & Work Environment**
- **Financial Issues**
- **Mentorship, Observation and Evaluation**
- **Recruitment and Outreach**
- **Respect and Empathy for the Official**
- **Support**
- **Training & Education**
- **Additional Information**
  - **NFHS Initiatives – Recruitment & Retention**
  - **Acknowledgements**

Please feel free to share this information with anyone who wants to assist in this cause! If you have questions about any of the materials contained in this document, please contact NFHS Director of Officiating Services, Dana Pappas, at [dpappas@nfhs.org](mailto:dpappas@nfhs.org).

Thank you for your support of sports officials. Always remember that without officials, there can be no games!

## ASSIGNORS AND ASSIGNMENTS

One of the identified barriers to the retention of sports officials revolves around issues with game assignments – how they are done, who is doing them and an overload of contests, just to name a few.

- Good old boy/good old girl systems. Assignors choosing their favorites – advancement and assignment not merit-based. Issues with favoritism or perceived favoritism.
- Assignment process is not well-communicated or not transparent.
- Expectations of officials in terms of advancement, post-season selection are not clearly delineated.
- Lack of training for assignors.
- Lack of diversity in assignments.
- Placing officials on games they are not ready for just to ensure games are covered.
- Burnout from too many assignments.
- Assignors gauging officials with “booking” fees.
- Scheduling of games – times are impossible for officials with careers, families, and other commitments.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- TRAIN your assignors – transparency of process, creation of opportunities for all officials, meritorious assignments and advancement, the need for diversity in assignments.
- Address issues and concerns from officials with your assignors immediately.
- Review assignments and assignment practices to ensure that advancements are made based on merit.
- If it is within your authority, replace ineffective assignors.
- Ensure that any “booking fees” being charged to officials are reasonable and that assignors are not charging multiple entities or individuals for assigning the same game.
- Work with schools, leagues, teams on spreading out games across the week instead of stacking them all on one day.
- Work with schools, leagues, teams to schedule games after work hours – remind them that it increases their odds of getting a crew assigned!

## BEHAVIOR/SPORTSMANSHIP/ WORK ENVIRONMENT

Boorish behavior and poor sportsmanship are the most common and visible issues identified in terms of why there is a common struggle with recruiting and retaining officials.

- Lack of oversight from administration (school, game site, league, facility) with respect to sportsmanship; this is often left to officials.
- Lack of training for administrators (school, game site, league, facility), security and fans relative to their roles and responsibilities at athletic events.
- Lack of accountability for fans.
- Absence of security at youth and high school contests.
- Absence of a “safe space” for officials to dress and to hold pre-game and post-game conferences and debriefs.
- Local level clubs and youth directors sometimes do not want officials to enforce rules (i.e., ejections when needed) because there is no emphasis on sportsmanship.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Development of zero tolerance policies by governing bodies for spectators. “Three strikes” is too many.
- Ensure the creation of a safe environment for officials before, during and after the contest (dressing room, parking lot, during the game).
- Training of administrators and security as to their role in behavior. What goes on in the stands is NOT the responsibility of the officials.
- How to identify problems with fans, what to look for.
- Administrators need to define expectations of coaches, players, fans and must define consequences for not meeting those standards and follow-through with those consequences.
- Develop partnerships with your coaching associations and other key players.
- Make kids the ones to lead the effort! Student sections – cheer for officials, champion good behavior. Kids create/present PSA’s about parent behavior. Use at all events and at parent meetings.
- Officials’ ambassadors – Students/players welcome officials to game site, escort them onto the playing field.
- Offer education to administrators, fans, security as to the role of an official and what they go through to certify. Give them information officiating crisis and the role they play in the dwindling officiating pool.

### **SPREAD THE WORD AND HELP US #BenchBadBehavior**

*The NFHS behavior campaign, #BenchBadBehavior, officially launched on September 15, 2022. For more information about the campaign, go to <https://benchbadbehavior.com/>. State associations can download their state specific toolkit at <https://benchbadbehavior.com/toolkit>. Other entities interested in a customized toolkit, please email Dana Pappas at [dpappas@nfhs.org](mailto:dpappas@nfhs.org) and she will get you in touch with the NFHS Marketing Department to develop a co-branded toolkit for the NFHS and your organization! See page 10 for more information about this campaign!*

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

While officials at the youth and high school level are generally not in it for the financial gain, there are financial factors that contribute to problems with recruiting and retaining officials.

- The pay for officials is not increasing with the rising cost of everything else (uniforms, equipment, officials' dues gas, etc.). While there has been a marked increase in the amount of money officials pay to serve as officials, their game fees have stagnated in many associations and organizations.
- The lack of timeliness in payment continues to be an issue for officials.
- The issue of multiple dues, multiple uniforms, multiple background checks for officials working various levels can force individuals to make a choice between one or the other leagues.
- The start-up cost for new officials is often a deterrent for signing up.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Use national data to set pay schedules. By ensuring that your pay schedule is in line with other similar entities in your part of the country, you can offer a competitive fee to your officials.
  - As part of this, you need to also examine what other entities and levels are paying. If a group of sports officials in your is are making more money for less of a commitment, this may be a reason why you are unable to recruit or retain in your association.
- Regularly review your pay scale to keep up with rising cost of uniforms, equipment, gas, etc. It is advised the organizations include this as an "action item" either annually or every other year. Do not wait to factor in officiating as a cost of doing business until you are too far behind the curve!
- Seek out partnerships with uniform and equipment vendors for first year officials or for officials in financial need.
- Provide stipends or discounts to officials who reach certain years of service (for example, \$5 discount at five years of service, \$10 discount at 10 years, etc.)
- Provide incentives for officials who continually give back to your organization or association. We all have the tendency to call upon the same officials for assistance; make sure we are providing them with an incentive or reward for their work.
- Offer discounts or other incentives for officials who recruit others into your organization or association.

## MENTORSHIP, OBSERVATION AND EVALUATION

As officials come into their respective associations and organizations, it is often difficult for them to understand the business of officiating – how is organization is structured and its chain of command, where purchase uniforms, who serves in which leadership roles and who to contact for answers to their questions. In addition, officials often do not receive enough feedback as they begin working games to know how they are doing and areas in which they need to improve. These are all reasons that contribute to problems with retaining officials.

- Lack of proper mentorship.
- Absence of evaluations/feedback/observations for officials. How do you improve if you don't know what you're doing wrong?
- Difficulties connecting with/relating to younger officials.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Focus on the importance of mentorship – creation of formalized mentoring system or, if your organization does not have enough officials for a formalized system, make sure that your membership understands the importance of mentoring and that new officials can meet and work with veteran officials. An informal system is better than none.
- Evaluation of officials. It is imperative that officials receive feedback about their performance from observers/evaluators or assignors. It is impossible for officials to improve if they are not provided feedback in some way. Like mentorship, even if the evaluation system is informal, the feedback is necessary.
- Talk to new officials about where they want to go, goals, mentors. Conduct check-ins to ensure they are being properly fostered through the process.
- Ensure training is tailored to the new official and, further, that every level is receiving education appropriate to their competency level.

## RECRUITMENT & OUTREACH

The recruitment of officials and outreach to potential officials are age-old problems for most organizations. While the need for officials continues to increase, the ability to find new officials continues to be a challenge.

- Not doing a good job of outreach to current high school and college students to recruit them into officiating.
- Lack of targeted recruitment of women and minorities.
- Inadequate targeted recruitment of law enforcement personnel and military.
- Not enough collaboration between sports entities – cross-recruitment

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- WHY Become an Official campaign. Time to flip the script and promote the positive in officiating. Accentuate the WHY, promote the family of officiating. Publicize these testimonials.
- Targeted recruitment for women, minorities.
- Outreach to high school and college students. Organizations should ask teams/schools for time at practices and scrimmages for officials to talk to the players.
- Outreach to military (Battlefields2Ballfields, Wounded Warrior Umpire Academy).
- Officiating as a pathway (transferable skills) AND as a way to be a lifelong athlete.
- Sharing resources – get all resources in the same place and make them available to the public.
- Personal invitation to officiating is necessary.
- Let go of what you think is yours and bring everyone in. Don't worry about someone taking your games – plenty to go around.
- Shift from "me" to "we."
- Organizations should Invite officials to parent pre-season meetings in to talk about rules and rules changes and to encourage parents to stay involved in a sport after their kids graduate or stop playing sports. If officials aren't invited, officiating organizations should ask for these types of opportunities.
- Train younger officials in volume to build the pipeline – course offering as part of curriculum at high school, JC, collegiate levels. Increase initial recruitment with training; also leads to retention when properly trained and mentored.
  - Getting youth involved in officiating may help with empathy toward officials.
  - Grow next generation of leaders.
  - Standardized curriculum.
- Accept experience from out-of-state officials or other organizations' officials to start them at a level comparable to the level in your state or organization. The need to start over often discourages people from joining your association.

## RESPECT AND EMPATHY FOR THE OFFICIAL

The lack of respect and empathy for each individual official AND for the entire officiating profession/avocation is certainly prevalent societally. The official is often the scapegoat for a team's loss or for the ejection of a player or coach. Because officials are often seen as "not human," spectators and sometimes media lay blame on these perceived faceless and nameless beings when something does not go their way.

- Lack of respect for the role of an official, what individuals go through to be an official.
- Lack of empathy and compassion for officials by coaches/fans/media.
- Lack of support from media as to the decisions of officials, lack of training for media.
- Unrealistic expectations of officials by coaches, fans, media – "perfection."
- Social media highlighting "bad" calls.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Educate all parties involved as to what officials do and the process for becoming certified. Talk to them about how much time, money and effort officials put forth so they work a game for kids.
- Provide training for media relative to the role of officials and how they can help to support instead of scrutinize.
  - Remind them that people think that media personalities are officiating experts, even when they aren't. Giving their "opinions" breeds negativity.
- Find ways to humanize officials who work games for your organization and in their communities. A great resource is Officially Human ([www.officiallyhuman.com](http://www.officiallyhuman.com)).
- Devise policies for coaches, parents, and players relative to social media conduct. This, as well as overall behavior toward officials during contests, could be a part of the overall pre-season code of conduct that every coach, player, and parent is required to sign for participation in a sport.



## SUPPORT

From the officiating standpoint, another reason why officials tend to leave the avocation/profession is due to the absence of support from their state associations, local associations, or other governing bodies.

- In many cases, there is no advocacy for officials, and they are often faced with having judgment calls overturned by governing bodies.
- Some organizations do not adequately celebrate and recognize their officials.
- Lack of infrastructure/inadequate staffing to support the administration of officials.
- No designated director of officials or the person who works with officials has other job duties and cannot dedicate 100% to officials.
- Officials not supporting other officials causes a lack of trust.

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Celebrate the accomplishments and milestones for officials within your organization (years of service, state tournament assignments, promotion to the next level).
- Send thank you notes and birthday greetings to your officials.
- Assist with the training all stakeholders as to the importance of their role in the improvement of the sport environment (administrators, coaches, security and spectators). This is one of the best ways to support officials.
- Provide mental health resources for officials.
- Create an awareness about legislative items, such as officials' assault legislation and how over 20 states currently have more stringent penalties for assaulting a contest official.
- Help to forge relationships and partnerships between officiating, coaching, administrative entities, and all levels of sport. Improved relationships with coaches are particularly necessary. Creating face-to-face opportunities outside of the game setting.
- Ensure you have adequate staffing to support the needs of your officials and/or officials' association or that you are providing enough external resources to ensure they have what they need.
- Support the decisions and judgments of contest officials to the best of your ability! Make sure you talk to them if you have concerns with a game.
- Ensure that officials are familiar with their own codes of conduct and are aware of the expectations of them during their own games and also relative to how they treat fellow officials.
- Participate in NFHS Officials Appreciation Weeks or create your own! The NFHS will have one week per season:
  - Fall Sports: October 17-21, 2022
  - Winter Sports: January 30-February 3, 2023
  - Spring Sports: April 10-14, 2023

## TRAINING & EDUCATION

The training and education of officials continues to play a critical role in how organizations can retain their officials. The old expression, “knowledge is power,” certainly applies when it comes to officials and by training and educating our staffs, we arm them with the ability and capability to work their games.

- Lack of “soft skills” in training – verbal judo, de-escalation, communication, conflict resolution.
- What are we teaching them prior to putting them on their first game.
- Need to focus more on the “art” of officiating, in addition to the “science” (rules and mechanics).
- Varying rules and mechanics between different leagues can make it difficult for new officials to work multiple levels (i.e., youth AND high school).

### **STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

- Provide better training and education for your officials. Seek out individuals and organizations to assist in finding resources if your organization does not have enough.
- Offer instruction in soft skills, such as communication, conflict resolution and game management.
- Sharing resources between entities to ensure that officials are receiving ample training.
- Make sure all officials are made aware of educational opportunities and ensure that there is a good variety of instruction – in-person, online, classroom and on the court or field.
- Work to ensure training meets the needs of all levels of officials and all types of learners.

## NFHS INITIATIVES – RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

**RECRUITMENT:** #BecomeAnOfficial was launched in 2017, by the NFHS, to address the nationwide officials' shortage. Since its inception, over 83,000+ interested officials have signed up at [HighSchoolOfficials.com](https://www.HighSchoolOfficials.com) to learn more about how to become a registered official in their states!



**RETENTION:** Poor behavior by fans, students and coaches continues to be an issue at sporting events around the country. This makes it difficult to recruit and retain high school officials who are essential to the game. This is why the NFHS launched the [#BenchBadBehavior](https://www.BenchBadBehavior.com) campaign to proactively address behavior at high school athletic events. For more information on [#BenchBadBehavior](https://www.BenchBadBehavior.com) please visit [BenchBadBehavior.com](https://www.BenchBadBehavior.com).



Join the NFHS in these important conversations on social media!

Twitter (@NFHS\_Org)

Facebook (@NFHS1920)

Instagram (@nfhs\_org)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The NFHS would like to thank the following organizations for their participation in the NFHS Officials Consortium in April. This document is the product of their presentations, discussions, and feedback, which we are now able to present to entities throughout the country.

Alabama High School Athletic Association  
American Football Coaches Association (AFCA)  
American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA)  
Association of Black Sports Officials  
Big Ten Conference  
Colorado Alliance of Basketball Officials (CABO)  
Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference, Inc.  
Delaney Consulting  
Georgia High School Association  
Indiana High School Athletic Association  
International Association of Approved Basketball Officials (IAABO)  
Iowa High School Athletic Association  
Kansas State High School Activities Association  
Montana High School Association  
National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA)  
National Association of Sports Officials (NASO)/Referee Magazine  
National Association of Women's Gymnastics Judges (NAWGJ)  
National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)  
National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)  
National Football League  
National High School Football Coaches Alliance  
National Ice Hockey Officials Association (NIHOA)  
National Intercollegiate Soccer Official Association (NISOA)  
National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA)  
NFHS Officials Advisory Committee  
Officially Human  
Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association  
Professional Association of Volleyball Officials  
Shape America  
The Pictor Group  
United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA)  
United Umpires  
US Youth Soccer  
USA Fencing  
USA Field Hockey  
USA Hockey  
USA Lacrosse  
USA Soccer  
USA Softball  
USA Swimming  
USA Track & Field  
USA Volleyball