

Recommendation to the Northwood-Kensett Community School District Board of Education

Eighth Grade Participation in High School Athletics

Background

Recent changes to Iowa law and accompanying Iowa Department of Education rules provide local school districts the authority to allow eighth-grade students to participate in high school interscholastic athletics. The legislation does not require districts to permit participation; rather, it places the decision in the hands of each local Board of Education.

Administration believes this decision should be guided by what is educationally sound, supports student development, and protects the integrity of both our middle school and high school athletic programs.

District Philosophy:

The Northwood-Kensett Community School District believes that the middle school athletic experience is the most appropriate setting for the development of eighth-grade students. Participation with peers promotes skill development, confidence, leadership, teamwork, and positive social growth while preparing students for future success at the high school level.

Accordingly, **participation in middle school athletics will remain the expectation for all eighth-grade students.** Participation at the high school level should be considered an exception rather than the norm and will occur only when it is clearly in the best interest of both the student and the athletic program.

This philosophy reflects the District's commitment to educationally based athletics by placing student growth and long-term development ahead of short-term competitive success.

Administrative Recommendation

Administration recommends the Board adopt a local policy that permits eighth-grade participation in high school athletics only under clearly defined circumstances. This balanced approach provides flexibility when warranted while preserving the integrity of middle school athletics.

The purpose of this recommendation is to:

- Prioritize student growth, safety, and long-term development.
- Preserve strong middle school athletic programs.
- Provide flexibility for legitimate high school program needs.
- Establish a transparent and consistent decision-making process.
- Ensure decisions are based on objective criteria rather than individual preference.

Guiding Principles

The following principles should guide all decisions regarding eighth-grade participation:

- Middle school athletics will remain the primary athletic experience for eighth-grade students.
- High school participation should occur only in exceptional circumstances.
- Student safety, physical maturity, emotional readiness, and overall well-being will be the primary considerations.
- Decisions should support both the student's long-term development and the health of the District's athletic programs.
- Participation decisions will be made consistently through an established administrative review process.

Eligibility Criteria

An eighth-grade student may be approved to participate in a high school sport when one or more of the following conditions exist:

- The high school program has a legitimate roster or participation need.
- The student possesses the athletic ability necessary to safely compete at the high school level.
- Participation will not significantly diminish the educational or competitive opportunities available within the middle school and/or high school program.
- The student demonstrates the maturity, academic responsibility, and commitment expected of high school student-athletes.

Approval Process

Each request will be reviewed individually. The evaluation will take into account all relevant factors before making a final determination. A collaborative process will be used involving:

- Co-Activities Directors
- Middle/High School Principal

If a family chooses to appeal the decision, the Superintendent will make the final decision.

Participation Expectations

Students approved for high school participation:

- Must meet all district expectations regarding conduct and participation.
- May participate on only one school-sponsored team during the same sport season, as required by Iowa regulations.

- Will not be guaranteed playing time or a specific team role.
- Must understand that approval for one sport or one school year does not guarantee future eligibility.

Benefits of This Approach

This recommendation allows Northwood-Kensett to exercise local control while ensuring decisions remain student-centered, equitable, and consistent.

The proposed framework:

- Preserves the developmental value of middle school and high school athletics.
- Supports exceptional opportunities when they clearly benefit the student and the athletic program.
- Protects the integrity and viability of both middle school and high school athletic programs.
- Provides coaches and families with clear expectations.
- Promotes fairness through a consistent administrative review process rather than subjective decision-making.

Administrative Recommendation

Administration recommends approval of this local policy framework for eighth-grade participation in high school athletics beginning with the 2026–2027 school year. This balanced approach reflects Northwood-Kensett Community School District’s philosophy while providing the flexibility intended under Iowa law. It ensures that decisions remain focused on what is educationally sound, developmentally appropriate, and in the best interest of both students and the District’s athletic programs.
