



# **The Safe Return to High School Athletics**

**Report of Data Gathered From  
Stakeholders in the Alberta High School  
Sport Delivery System**

**Developed by the  
Alberta Schools' Athletic Association**

**Updated on July 6, 2020  
(To Include Open-Ended Responses)**

# School Athletics Valued as an Important Part of School Life in Alberta

## From the ASAA during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In early June 2020, the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association conducted a survey of 397 member school principals, athletic directors and their coaches. There were 2,500 respondents including over 200 principals, over 300 athletic directors and over 2,000 coaching staff. The survey goal was to try and understand how those integrally involved in school sport were feeling, to ask them how they perceive the value of returning to school sport, and to understand their preferences around options for returning to school sport. While it is hard to assimilate thousands of open-ended questions in a short timeline, the questions that allowed for graphical representation are noted below. We will be reviewing the open-ended answers to help guide the association.

What we cannot do right now is paint a picture of what school athletics will look like in the fall of 2020 and whether or not fall championships in golf, cross country running, football and volleyball will proceed as normal, be moved, or canceled as such decisions depend on direction from Alberta Health Services, Alberta Education, superintendents and principals. However, we are staying on top of all COVID-19 related matters, including collaboration with provincial sport organizations, and we will be issuing communications as updated situations around Alberta Education's back to school scenario decision on August 1, 2020, and the Alberta Government's Stage 3 of the relaunch occurs. Our communications to school principals and athletic directors will be via email and we will post the same information to our website and social media.

### Data Sample

Total Response: 2,494

The responses we received were from a good distribution of school sizes, zones, and roles within the Alberta high school sport system.

### Responses by Role

Principal Responses: 211

Athletic Director Responses: 301

Teacher-Coach Responses: 1594

Non-Teacher-Coach Response: 689

### Responses by School Size

14% from 1A Schools (1-99 students in Gr. 10-12)

21% from 2A Schools (100-299 students)

25% from 3A Schools (300-799 students)

40% from 4A Schools (800+ students)

### Full Survey Results

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-6GHZLWZF7/>

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**Key findings** of the survey we conducted were that school athletics is seen as an important and integral component of the life of a school and presents a significant opportunity for the development of positive attitudes and values in Alberta's students. Some takeaways:

1. **90%** of coaches said they would be comfortable returning to coaching school sport when it is deemed safe to do so; 10% were not as comfortable.
2. When asked to rate on a scale of 1-100 what impact they felt returning to school sport would have on student learning outcomes, with a score of 1 being the lowest negative impact and a score of 100 being the highest positive impact, the average response was **80%**. This finding highlights the perception of that participation in school athletics has a positive impact on academic performance, as many studies have already shown.
3. When asked if the ASAA should modify the nature of its sports (e.g. 3 on 3 basketball, etc.), **94%** of respondents said no. This provides clear direction for the running of ASAA high school provincials; coaches are telling ASAA not modify the sports as we know them at provincial championship level.
4. When asked what their most favoured preferences are if there were significant challenges in running high school sports in 2020/21, the responses were, in order:
  - 36.5% have a later start and finish to each season
  - 21.9% condense the season(s)
  - 17.8% cancel the sport
  - 16.3% completely move the season(s)
  - 7.5% modify the sport
5. When asked what their least favoured preferences are if there were significant challenges in running high school sports in 2020/21, the responses were, in order:
  - 57.7% cancel the sport
  - 26.4% modify the sport
  - 8.1.% completely move the season(s)
  - 4.6% have a later start and finish to each season
  - 3.1% condense the season(s)
6. Respondents were asked if they knew of any school travel restrictions being in place for the fall and while many did not yet know, the principals, as expected, provided more definitive responses. While there is a lot of clarification yet to occur around this question, it was evident that there are more restrictions in place currently in urban centres than in rural centres.

# Return to School Sport Survey Post-COVID-19 Summary, June 2020

## What is the Comfort Level with Coaching in 2020/21 after return from COVID-19?

"If the authorities deem it safe, then clearly I will accept that and go back to coaching and teaching. I will apply any safety guidelines required to make sports safe for my players, fellow coaches, and opposing teams." (Athletic Director)

"I have the utmost trust in our provincial leadership. When they deem it necessary, I would be thrilled to return to the basketball and track ASAP. I feel like we are safe now." (Teacher-Coach)

The majority of coaches (90%) are comfortable with returning to coaching high school athletics when it is deemed safe to return by the Alberta government. For individuals not returning to coach, factors consistently mentioned were: the additional risk of exposure, the nature of close contact sports for easy transmission of the virus, and having close family members who were more susceptible to Covid-19.

On average, 10% of coaches are not comfortable with coaching again next year. The sports that will be affected the most are: volleyball, followed by rugby, track & field, and basketball. Only 4% of football coaches are not comfortable with coaching again next year.

Sport	Coaches from 2019/20 school year	Coaches comfortable coaching in 2020/21	Percentage Drop (# of Coaches not comfortable)
Badminton	305	280	9% (25)
Basketball	828	744	11% (84)
Cross Country	253	245	4% (8)
Football	343	325	6% (18)
Golf	155	146	6% (9)
Rugby	292	248	16% (44)
Track & Field	454	403	12% (51)
Volleyball	796	653	18% (143)

Cheerleading, curling, team handball, and wrestling did not have a big enough sample size to draw accurate conclusions from the data.

## School Athletics and Student Learning Outcomes - Once it is safe to return to school athletics, what do you think the impact of school athletics will be on student learning outcomes?

"Athletics and academics have a direct correlation. Activity, camaraderie, sportsmanship, leadership and even some hardship, are all important and impactful aspects of the development of decent and resilient kids. These aspects can also help influence and shape the academic success of students as well. Hard work always pays off!" (Principal)

"it is no secret of the impact school sports play on the mental/physical and spiritual aspects of a child's life. We all know the stats of being on a team and anxiety, stress, absenteeism, leadership, learning from failure and success. Students need sports to have a connection with the school" (Athletic Director)

"This has been a very stressful time for everyone. Sport is a key way to relieve stress. Public health needs to be the primary lever for all decisions. How can we find a balance to support student-athletes and coaches? Mental health must be a key primary value alongside physical health. Students who are active physically are naturally more active with their academics. The majority of the strongest athletes at our school are also amongs the strongest academic students." (Principal)

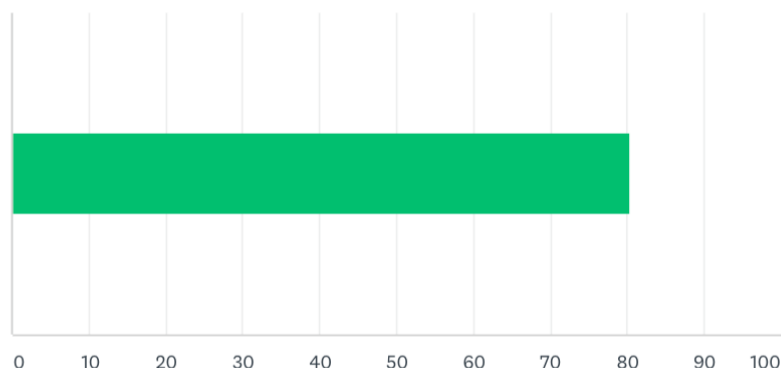
Overall, all respondents feel that there is a strong correlation between school athletics and positive learning outcomes. On a scale of 1 (Absolute Negative) to 100 (Absolute Positive), the response average was 80.

The response average for principals was 75. 2A principals had the lowest average at 71 with 1A principals had the highest average at 78.

The response average for athletic directors was 84. 2A athletic directors had the lowest average at 83 with 3A athletic directors having the highest average at 87.

The response average for teacher-coaches was 79.

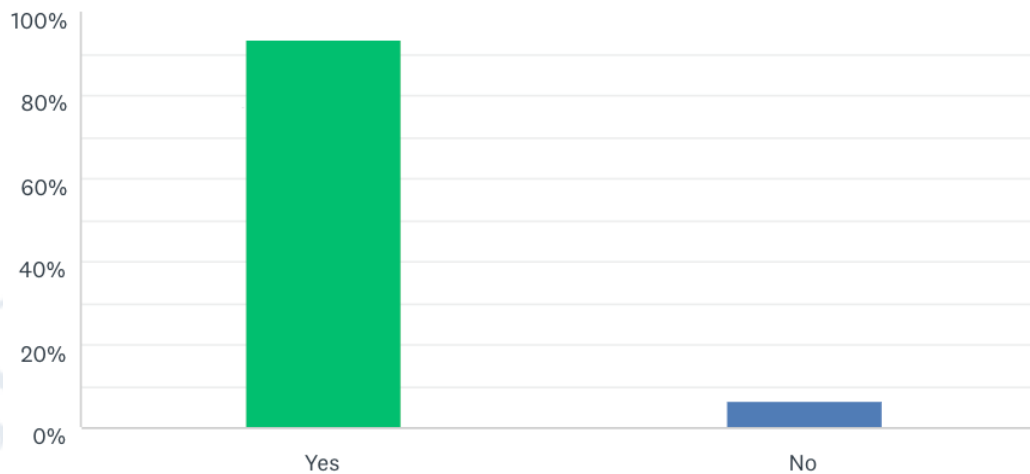
Answered: 2,494 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
Responses	80	200,143	2,494
Total Respondents: 2,494			

## Should ASAA Sports Continue Without Modifications?

Overall, 94% of respondents did not want to see any modifications to ASAA sports due to COVID-19. Principals were more inclined to prefer seeing sports modified than athletic directors or coaches. Respondents who were at a 4A school were more inclined to prefer seeing sports modified than smaller schools. Respondents from Calgary were more inclined to prefer seeing sports modified than elsewhere throughout the province.



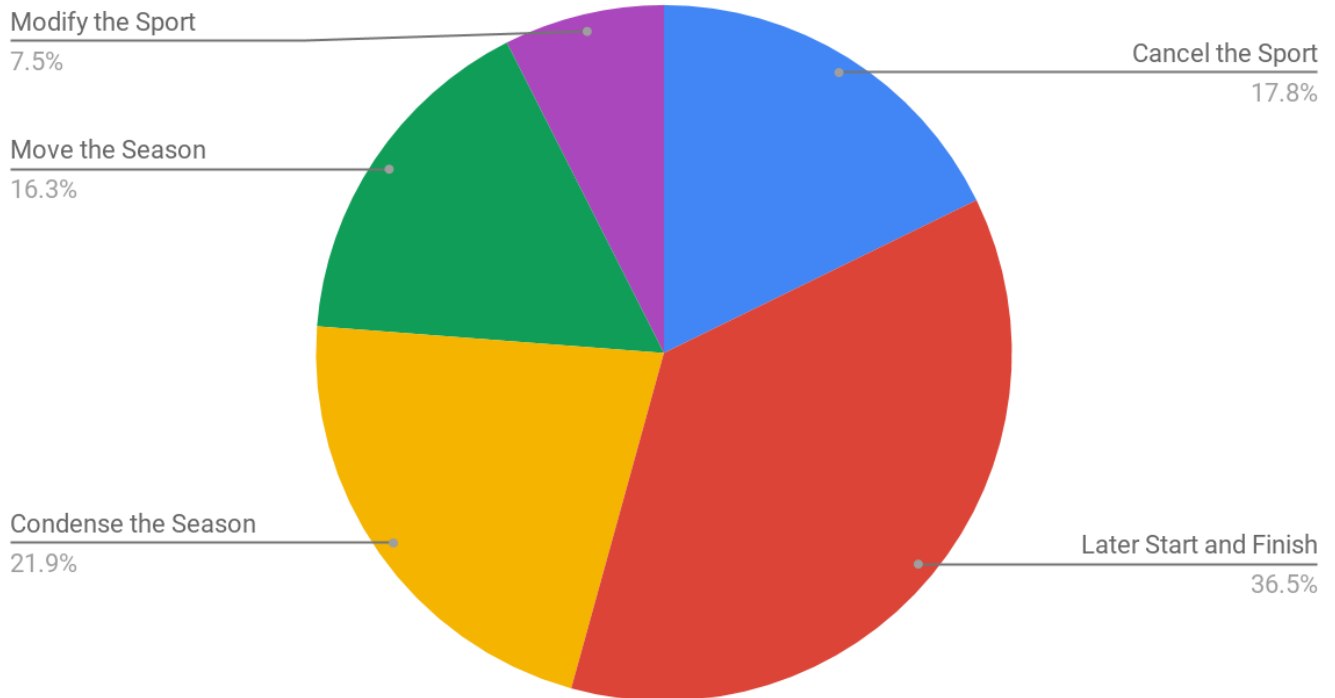
## What would like to see happen if there are significant challenges to running sports in the 2020/21 school year?

Overall, people want school sport to happen next year and are very open to what that looks like as long as sports are not modified from their current form.

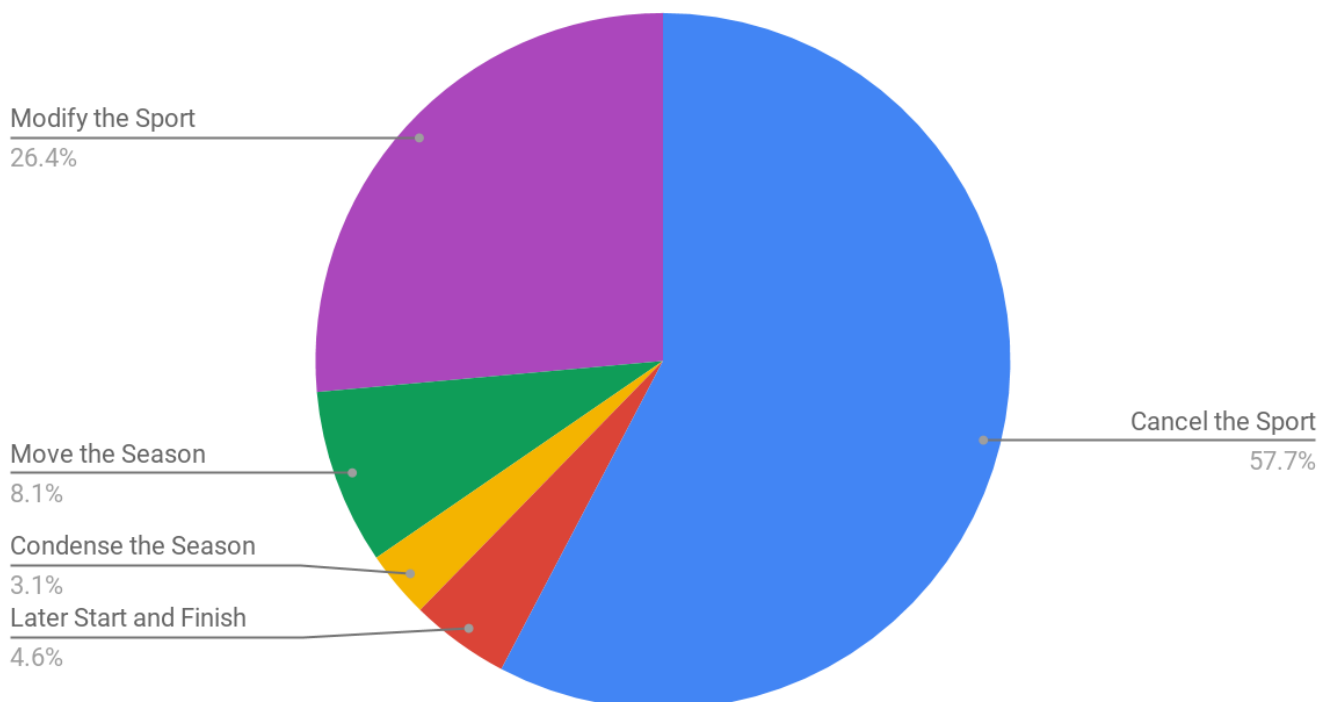
Whilst 50% of principals cited canceling sports as their least favorite of the five options offered, 24% of principals conversely listed cancellation as their preferred option. Principals in Calgary and the North West Zone were the most likely to be in favor of canceling sports next year whilst principals in the South and South Central zones were the least likely to be in favor of canceling sports next year. Principals in larger schools were more likely to be in favour of canceling sports than principals in smaller schools.

Whilst 60% of athletic directors cited canceling sports as their least favorite of the five options offered, 16% of athletic directors conversely listed cancellation as their preferred option. Athletic directors in the North Central and Central Zones were the most likely to be in favor of canceling sports next year. Athletic directors in the North West, Calgary, and South zones were the least likely to be in favor of canceling sports next year. Athletic directors in larger schools were more likely to be in favor of canceling sports than athletic directors in smaller schools.

## Overall Most Favourable Option

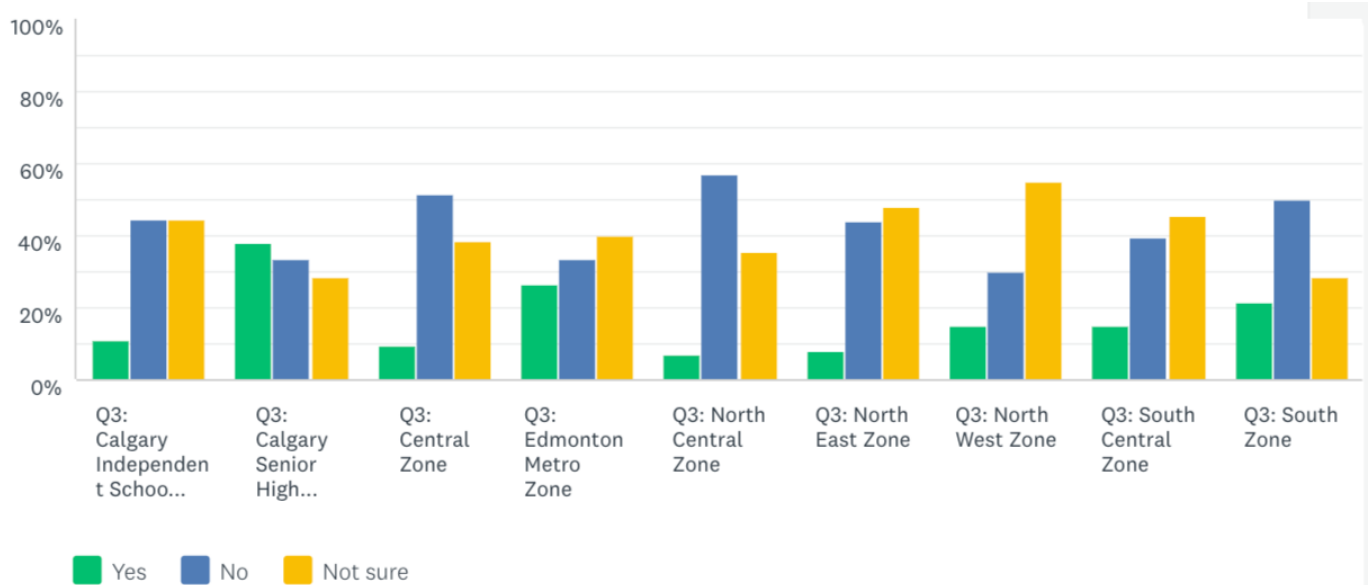


## Overall Least Favourable



## Travel Restrictions (Principal Responses)

Overall, throughout the province, there is still a significant level of uncertainty whether or not schools will have restrictions on travel in the fall. Major urban centers are more likely than rural areas to have restrictions on travel for the 2020/21 school year.



For more information or any questions related to the survey, please contact:



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@ASAA

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## Responses from ASAA coaches during the COVID-19 Pandemic

**When conditions for return to school athletics are deemed safe by the Alberta Government for your sport, will you feel comfortable returning coach high school athletics?**

"I trust that the ASAA will make decisions based on safety of players and coaches. They will have to take the lead of the CMO of Alberta and Alberta Education. If it is deemed unsafe to return to play, then I suspect the ASAA will not return to play" (Principal)

"Kids need sports and athletics. Some kids need this to accompany and motivate them in their academics" (Athletic Director)

"Since the spread of COVID is minimal, I feel we need to return to normal life, including athletics, and be aware of any spread of COVID through continued testing and self-isolation only if symptoms present themselves." (Teacher-Coach)

"If Alberta Health Services, ASAA, and our school board all deem it safe to participate then yes I would coach. I would not coach if any one of those three are not in agreement. As, well our funding from the provincial government may impact my choice to coach." (Athletic Director)

"If the authorities deem it safe, then clearly I will accept that and go back to coaching and teaching. I will apply any safety guidelines required to make sports safe for my players, fellow coaches, and opposing teams." (Athletic Director)

"If the health authorities and the ASAA feels that it is safe for school sport to resume I will be fully comfortable returning to coach. I have complete faith in our association to make the right decisions for students health and wellness." (Athletic Director)

"I believe that with the right measures in place and with everybody involved following the rules of health and safety, sporting events can take place to a certain degree. However, there are definitely certain things that have to change. There is no way we can have events that respect social distancing unless there are strict measures and changes put in place." (Teacher-Coach)

"I have the utmost trust in our provincial leadership. When they deem it necessary, I would be thrilled to return to the basketball and track ASAP. I feel like we are safe now." (Teacher-Coach)

**What changes do you think are necessary in order to make engaging in sports post-COVID-19 as safe as possible? Some examples may include pre and post game activities, rituals, etc.**

"Limit spectator access to game. Social distancing on sidelines." (Principal)

"increased sanitation and hygiene practices; possibly eliminating change rooms. Athletes come changed and leave in their gear" (Principal)

"Limiting spectators. Do not have hand-shaking after games, I know this is there to build sportsmanship, but it increase direct contact with members of other teams." (Principal)

"No shaking of hands, utilizing hand sanitizer, possibly streaming the game for spectators to watch at home." (Athletic Director)

"Remove the handshake/fistbump. Have hand sanitizer available at score table. Clean ball at every timeout. Have schools do a pre-screening before they head out to another school to play. Any student who is sick or showing symptoms should not be allowed to participate." (Athletic Director)

"Hand sanitization stations mandatory -Sanitization before going on the court/field and when getting off court/field. -Mandatory sanitization of sport implement (ball, javelin, etc..) -Leaving the court/field at 1 spot only (Ex: Mandatory spot for substitutions like substitutions in soccer (only entering and exiting from the center))." (Athletic Director)

"Small things such as having visiting teams go straight to the court and already be changed - No handshakes after the game/not sure what this means for games like basketball where everyone is touching the same ball - Alcohol disinfectants must be on each team bench or under each seat" (Teacher-Coach)

"No sharing of any equipment or water bottles. Sanitizer available on benches to sanitize hands frequently between plays. No hand shakes at the end of games." (Teacher-Coach)

"Transportation to Meets would have to be the responsibility of students. Making the Meets smaller won't work, as our season is so short to begin with." (Teacher-Coach)

"Cleaning and sanitation stations would need to be available/mandatory. Limits on numbers of spectators allowed in gyms. Sign-in and sign-out sheets. Clear mandate and follow through that no sick players, coaches, or spectators be allowed entrance. This may result in door monitoring before and during games" (Coach)

## **Once it is safe to return to school athletics, what do you think the impact of school athletics will be on student learning outcomes?**

### **Principals**

"Athletics is an integral part of our kid's education."

"Students have an additional purpose for school if sports are intergrated back in. In my experience, school sports do have a postive impact on student learning at all levels."

"We all understand that student gifts and talents do not wholly reside in the area of academics and that athletics can be a powerful motivator for and draw towards academic success. We are developing the whole person"

"This has been a very stressful time for everyone. Sport is a key way to relieve stress. Public health needs to be the primary lever for all decisions. How can we find a balance to support student-athletes and coaches? Mental health must be a key primary value alongside physical health. Students who are active physically are naturally more active with their academics. The majority of the strongest athletes at our school are also amongst the strongest academic students."

"The impact on sports and the mental state of an athlete that plays a sport may be huge. We already deal with many students that have anxiety. Can you imagine playing and worrying about catching COVID or spreading it to your family members. Some may never return due to safety concerns or they love playing video games and watching Netflix more."

"Athletics and academics have a direct correlation. Activity, camaraderie, sportsmanship, leadership and even some hardship, are all important and impactful aspects of the development of decent and resilient kids. These aspects can also help influence and shape the academic success of students as well. Hard work always pays off!"

"Athletes need to learn the physical, mental and emotional aspects of sport, it's a crucial part of there learning process."

"For many students it is athletics that helps them push through the grind of learning. We also know the positive benefits that exercise has on learning and mental health"

"self esteem, physical wellness, stress reduction, resilience, peer relationships, adult mentorship- all impacted"

"Sports are integral to student success and school sports are the most affordable and accessible things students can play and learn in."

## **Once it is safe to return to school athletics, what do you think the impact of school athletics will be on student learning outcomes?**

### **Athletic Directors**

"Athletics provide many great teachable moments as well as connection to school and peers, which helps many students attend and be engaged in school"

"Athletics is a strong motivator for academics in many cases. This may also provide an outlet of stress that will be important in a reintegrated school system."

"Not all kids come to school ready to learn in the traditional sense. They come for the athletics or other options. This is their connection to the school, relationships and their physical wellness. I believe some students' will lose their sense of belonging to a school if they don't have athletics which in turn will impact their learning in the classroom."

"Hearing from students they miss the social aspect of sports when it comes to their time at school. Some of those events are the best high school memories students have. When they have that outlet they often tend to perform better in school."

"Extra-curricular activities are the backbones of schools. Without them, the schools struggle with participation and learning."

"Athletics is the key to good mental health for so many of our students!!!! As a parent, I would look to send my child elsewhere, if anything is being played in the other provinces, if cancellation of the season occurs."

"it is no secret of the impact school sports play on the mental/physical and spiritual aspects of a child's life. We all know the stats of being on a team and anxiety, stress, absenteeism, leadership, learning from failure and success. Students need sports to have a connection with the school"

"A return to school athletics will improve student well-being in a mental and physical sense. Mental Health will improve because of social interactions and a return to normalcy. Physical health in that it will encourage students to be active. Improving a student's mental/physical health will then in turn positively impact student learning."

"I think not only will this be great for athletes but helps with the whole school culture and having some normalcy in everyone's lives."

"There is clear evidence that activity improves wellness and the ability to concentrate in school. Students need to connect with peers and this aspect of connection is huge on a sports field."

"Extra-curricular activities are the backbones of schools. Without them, the schools struggle with participation and learning."

"Athletics is the key to good mental health for so many of our students!!!! As a parent, I would look to send my child elsewhere, if anything is being played in the other provinces, if cancellation of the season occurs."

## **Last Question asked for Additional Comments**

### **Examples Below:**

"I thank you to reaching out and accessing the voice of your schools and coaches. I believe school sports are important but just like in school education, it needs to be phased in properly and safely." (Principal)

"Athletics is an important part of school culture and student engagement. If safe to do so - athletics should continue." (Principal)

"I feel that a decision about school sports and what they could look like needs to be made sooner than later. We need to give kids hope. We would also need to have time to thoughtfully plan for our school year in the face of change. Some decisions will most certainly impact the way we do things in all of our buildings." (Principal)

"I am glad we have so many people in the important meetings about the return to sport with the powers that be (AHS, ATA, School Boards, etc...) I hope they are seeing the importance of finding a way to get kids back onto fields/courts." (Athletic Director)

"I appreciate that you gave us an opportunity to give our feedback. I'm hopeful we can find a solution that balances the health of our students and the opportunity to have a thriving sports program." (Athletic Director)

"I really am hopeful that the ASAA finds a way to reinstate school sports whether that be through rearranging the seasons or starting seasons later than normal. It is something that positively affects our students and something we as an AD team look forward to each year as it brings students so many opportunities!" (Athletic Director)

"As stated above I have always been a strong supporter of school sport and will continue to be so. Sport provides incredible opportunities for students and staff to engage in a variety of activities. It teaches skills that can easily be missed in the classroom." (Athletic Director)

"Our job is first and foremost to advocate for students and school sport. Our students need to be active and interacting positively with their peers and their community. Research shows that it is very unhealthy for children to be inactive (physical health) and to not be interacting with their peers, enjoying life. (mental/emotional health). School sports need to be reinstated as soon as possible for the health and well-being of our students, parents, teachers, and communities." (Athletic Director)