

NDHSAA & Fenworks: Pioneering North Dakota High School Esports

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Fenworks respectfully submits this proposal to become a Presenting Partner of the North Dakota High School Activities Association (NDHSAA) for Esports.

We understand that any partnership must adhere to NDHSAA guidelines as outlined in its Presenting Partner Agreements, including:

- **Education-Based Program:** All student participants must be fully enrolled in NDHSAA member schools, and teams must be organized on the basis of each student's attendance at a high school.
- **Widespread Endorsement:** The proposed activity must be available to numerous schools. Fenworks currently supports 51 North Dakota high schools and well exceeds the NDHSAA requirement of a minimum of 12 committed school-based teams.
- **Independent Organizational Structure:** Presenting Partners must be equipped to oversee regular season and postseason play prior to an NDHSAA-presented state championship. Fenworks already operates a successful competitive league with dedicated regular and postseason schedules.
- **Financial Independence:** In accordance with NDHSAA policies, the activity must not rely on NDHSAA funding for the operation of the regular season. Fenworks already operates a regular season for North Dakota schools, and will continue to do so into the future, fully funded by us.
- **By-Law & Eligibility Compliance:** Fenworks fully supports NDHSAA eligibility rules and has experience working within cooperative agreements that mirror NDHSAA Co-op By-Laws. We recognize the NDHSAA Board of Directors as the sole authority to review and approve this proposal and commit to following the timeline the Board adopts for any official partnership.





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In meeting these criteria, Fenworks demonstrates readiness to act as a Presenting Partner. We look forward to collaborating with the NDHSAA Board of Directors to ensure that Esports becomes a sanctioned, education-based opportunity benefiting North Dakota's high school students.

Please find included in this proposal:

- 1. Introduction to Fenworks & Esports**
- 2. Why Sanctioning Esports Matters**
- 3. Letters of Support from 12 North Dakota Partner Esports Schools**
- 4. Listing of Fenworks' Current ND Esports Co-op Arrangements for NDHSAA's Review**





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Introduction to Fenworks & Esports

Esports is a form of competitive gameplay between individuals or teams using video games. While competitive video gaming has existed since the 1970s, modern Esports began gaining traction in the late 1990s and achieved widespread popularity in the United States around 2012.

Recognizing the increasing interest in Esports among youth, Fenworks launched after-school Esports programs in 2021 out of Grand Forks, North Dakota. Since then, we have steadily expanded to serve hundreds of schools across North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Wisconsin. Currently, in our fourth official Winter Esports season, we provide programs to 51 North Dakotan schools and engage more than 500 North Dakotan students statewide.

In recent years, numerous states have sanctioned after-school Esports as an official activity. Notably, the South Dakota High School Activities Association (SDHSAA) formally recognized Fenworks as the statewide Esports provider in 2023. Similarly, the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) is actively considering statewide adoption of Esports programs.

Today, we present our proposal to the North Dakota High School Activities Association (NDHSAA) with a shared vision: to recognize and sanction after-school Esports as an official activity. This initiative aims to provide North Dakota students with opportunities to thrive in a modern, competitive setting, mirroring the benefits students in traditional activities have enjoyed for decades.

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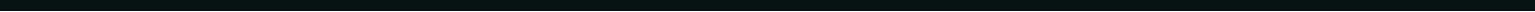

Why Sanctioning Esports Matters

Many schools across North Dakota are eager to offer after-school Esports but are prevented by district bylaws requiring NDHSAA recognition. By sanctioning Esports, NDHSAA can legitimize these programs just as traditional sports and activities are recognized, clearing the way for new or expanded Esports teams across the state. Sanctioning also benefits students by allowing formal team concepts like lettering, fostering greater buy-in from administrators and generating the support students need to flourish.

Esports reaches students who might not otherwise be involved in any extracurricular activities. Research shows that 60% of participating Esports students are not included in other programs^[1]—meaning Esports creates a vital opportunity for previously uninvolved students to connect, socialize, and succeed. Esports is especially relevant to today’s teenagers: 97% of teen boys and 83% of teen girls report playing video games^[2], and 85% of all high schoolers play games, with 41% playing daily^[3].

Participation in Esports has been linked to positive academic and attendance outcomes. Students who join Esports programs have seen an average 1.7-point increase in GPA^[4] and a 19.3% lower absence rate^[5]. In an era where overall activities enrollment has declined since COVID-19^[6], adding Esports can bolster participation and keep students engaged.

Beyond the immediate educational benefits, Esports can help students take advantage of growing scholarship opportunities. Nationwide, Esports scholarships surpass \$22 million and are increasing by \$1–2 million annually^[7]. North Dakota students have personally received scholarship offers from in-state universities thanks to their Esports skill and



involvement—often totaling over \$4,000^[8]. Today, almost every major university or college has a varsity Esports program^[9], and higher education institutions in North Dakota are beginning to offer academic programs—both majors and minors—in Esports-related fields^[10].

By sanctioning Esports through NDHSAA, schools can more readily form teams, appoint staff-side General Managers, and tap into both the competitive and developmental benefits of the medium. Students who participate gain teamwork skills, enhance their academic achievement, and may even open doors to collegiate-level Esports and scholarship support.

Footnotes & References

1. Future of Education Technology Conference (2023). *Gamers Not in Traditional Sports or School Activities: 60.2%*. Slide 22.
Link: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/11b_w63_RnTo11VSQ2MtqotxAQhx7I6O0_Poc-piZXCY/edit#slide=id.g2...
2. Pew Research Center (2018). *5 Facts About Americans and Video Games*.
Link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/09/17/5-facts-about-americans-and-video-games/>
3. EdWeek.org (2024). *Gaming Is Part of Teen Life. These Districts Use It for Better Student Outcomes*.
Link: [https://www.edweek.org/leadership/gaming-is-part-of-teen-life-these-districts-use-it-for-better-student-outcomes/2024/06#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20\(85%20percent\)](https://www.edweek.org/leadership/gaming-is-part-of-teen-life-these-districts-use-it-for-better-student-outcomes/2024/06#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20(85%20percent))
4. Family Online Safety Institute (July 2024). *The Role of Esports in Modern Education: A Guide for Digital Parents*.
Link: <https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/the-role-of-esports-in-modern-education-a-guide-for-digital-parents#:~:text=Benefits%20of%20Esports%20in%20Education>
5. Future of Education Technology Conference (2023). *Attendance Improvements From Esports: 19.3% Lower Absence Rate*. Slide 19.
Link: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/11b_w63_RnTo11VSQ2MtqotxAQhx7I6O0_Poc-piZXCY/edit#slide=id.g2...

6. National Federation of State High School Associations (2022). *2021–22 High School Athletics Participation Survey*.
Link: <https://nfhs.org/articles/participation-in-high-school-sports-rebounds-but-still-down-from-pre-covid-levels>
7. National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) (2023). *Esports Scholarship Growth Data*.
Link: <https://nacesports.org>
8. Fenworks (2022-2024). *North Dakotan Student and GM Interviews Regarding Scholarship Offers*.
Multiple students on-camera confirmed receiving ~\$4,000 in scholarship offers.
See Fenworks YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@fenworksofficial>
9. National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) (2023). *About NACE*.
Link: <https://nacesports.org> (Indicating nearly all major universities now host or support varsity Esports)
10. University of North Dakota (UND) (2024). *Esports (B.S.) Program*.
Link: <https://und.edu/programs/esports-bs/index.html#:~:text=UND's%20Esports%20bachelor's%20degree%20program,from%20youth%20scholastic%20leagues%20upward>

12 Letters of Support from North Dakota Esports Schools to NDHSAA

In accordance with NDHSAA guidelines for applying for a Presenting Partner Agreement—specifically the requirement that programs must secure written commitments from a minimum of 12 school-based teams—Fenworks has gathered letters of support from 12 distinct North Dakota high schools. These letters affirm each school’s readiness and willingness to participate in an NDHSAA-presented state championship for Esports.

Collected from a diverse range of North Dakotan communities, the letters demonstrate a shared commitment to respectful competition, good sportsmanship, and adherence to NDHSAA eligibility standards. Each high school has shown a proven record of successful Esports participation or has expressed clear intent to implement a program once NDHSAA sanctioning is in place. Together, these letters reflect both the momentum behind high





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school Esports and the alignment of Fenworks' program with NDHSAA policy, reinforcing that formal recognition would foster inclusive student engagement statewide.

Please refer to these in the separate attachment to this proposal.

Fenworks' Current Esports Co-op Arrangements for NDHSAA Approval

Intentions:

- Clearly identify which current Fenworks Esports co-op arrangements align with traditional activities co-ops previously endorsed by the NDHSAA.
- Specify the year each co-op arrangement was established.
- Outline Fenworks' intentions for each co-op arrangement in the 2025-2026 school year.
- Highlight any programs that fall outside standard co-op arrangements, including unified teams and teams that allow players from other schools to join.

Current Standard Fenworks Esports Co-Op Arrangements

- 1. New Rockford-Sheyenne x Hazen x Garrison**
 - a. Year Established:**
 - i. 2022-2023
 - b. NDHSAA Activities Co-op'd:**
 - i. None.
 - c. Intention:**



- i. This coop will be disbanded for the 25-26 school year, the schools have already agreed and are making arrangements to coop with schools that match existing NDHSAA-endorsed traditional activity arrangements. At that time, we will direct them to apply to the NDHSAA per existing coop rules.

2. Glen Ullin x Hebron

a. Year Established:

- i. 2024-2025

b. NDHSAA Activities Co-op'd:

- i. *Boys Cross Country*
- ii. *Girls Cross Country*
- iii. *Boys Basketball*
- iv. *Girls Basketball*
- v. *Boys Track and Field*
- vi. *Girls Track and Field*

c. Intention:

- i. We intend to continue this co-op arrangement.

3. Kenmare x Bowbells

a. Year Established:

- i. 2024-2025

b. NDHSAA Activities Co-op'd:

- i. *Boys Cross Country*
- ii. *Girls Cross Country*
- iii. *Football*
- iv. *Volleyball*
- v. *Boys Basketball*
- vi. *Girls Basketball*
- vii. *Softball*
- viii. *Boys Track and Field*
- ix. *Girls Track and Field*
- x. *Boys Golf*

c. Intention:

- i. We intend to continue this co-op arrangement.

4. Park River x Fordville-Lankin

a. Year Established:

- i. 2024-2025



b. NDHSAA Activities Co-op'd:

- i. Volleyball*
- ii. Boys Basketball*
- iii. Girls Basketball*
- iv. Boys Track and Field*
- v. Girls Track and Field*

c. Intention:

- i. We intend to continue this co-op arrangement.**

Current Fenworks Esports Unified Teams

1. West Fargo Unified

a. Dialogue:

- i. West Fargo high schools—Horace, Sheyenne, and West Fargo High School—currently compete as a unified team under a single General Manager due to a lack of interest in the General Manager role at each school. We believe this stems from challenges in securing coaching stipends, and that NHDSAA sanctioning would support these efforts.**

b. Intention:

- i. We plan to establish separate school teams with individual General Managers for the 2025-2026 ND Winter Esports season.**

2. Fargo Unified

a. Dialogue:

- i. Fargo Public Schools high schools—Davies, North, and South—compete under one General Manager as a unified team. We believe this is due to difficulties in advocating for coaching stipends, and that NHDSAA sanctioning would benefit the conversation.**

b. Intention:



- i. We aim to have separate teams for each school with their own General Managers in the 2025-2026 ND Winter Esports season.

3. Minot Unified

a. Dialogue:

- i. Due to the logistical challenge of adding another campus to their district in the 2024-2025 school year, and with General Managers based at a single school, Minot has been running the activity only for 11th and 12th graders. They decided to have a single team, welcoming students from both campuses.

b. Intention:

- i. We plan to establish separate school teams with individual General Managers for the 2025-2026 ND Winter Esports season.

4. Hankinson/Lidgerwood

a. Dialogue:

- i. Hankinson and Lidgerwood intended to enter Esports in the 2024-2025 school year through a standard co-op arrangement. However, due to hesitancy from both school boards without NDHSAA sanctioning, they opted for a standalone program at Hankinson, allowing Lidgerwood students to join for that year only. This is a temporary setup, with a standard co-op arrangement as the goal starting in the 2025-2026 school year.

b. Intention:

- i. We intend for Hankinson and Lidgerwood to either form a standard co-op arrangement or establish two distinct programs by the 2025-2026 seasons.

5. Jamestown/Valley City

a. Dialogue:

- i. Jamestown, a long-time standalone partner with Fenworks, inquired in October about having up to three Valley City students compete with their team for the 2024-2025 seasons. Fenworks agreed, provided that both Jamestown and Valley City register as separate schools by the 2025-2026 seasons.

b. Intention:

- i. We plan for Jamestown and Valley City to operate as two distinct, standalone programs for the 2025-2026 seasons.





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