

EQUAL TREATMENT DENIED

**THE VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL LEAGUE'S FAILURE TO
COMPLY WITH TITLE IX IN GIRLS WRESTLING**

A Fact-Based Review of the Virginia High School League's
Treatment of Girls Wrestling in the 2025–2026 Season

2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Roughly **1,300 girls** who competed in Girls Wrestling at public high schools in Virginia during the 2025–2026 season were categorically denied the opportunity to compete for team state championships and placements, team regional championships and placements, individual regional placements and honors, and even school-provided medals and trophies.

It was not supposed to be this way.

The Virginia High School League (VHSL) officially sanctioned Girls Wrestling in May 2025 by a unanimous 32–0 vote. But its new leadership reversed course without public explanation, passing Emergency Legislation in October 2025 that stripped away the competitive structure that had been promised. By the end of the 2025–2026 season — supposedly Girls Wrestling's first year as a fully sanctioned sport — the treatment of Girls Wrestling was indistinguishable from its previous status as an 'emerging' sport that had not yet earned official recognition.

VHSL's treatment of Girls Wrestling is particularly troubling when compared with how it treats Boys Wrestling, which is a fully sanctioned sport that received six separate sets of team and individual competitive opportunities — one for each of the six different Classes for Boys Wrestling — in the 2025–2026 season. Girls Wrestling received zero. The disparity cannot be justified by participation levels — Girls Wrestling's athlete pool exceeds or equals that of multiple Boys Wrestling Classes.

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls Wrestling qualified for sanctioned status under VHSL rules, meeting the 50%+1 threshold in 5 of 6 Classes after only the second 'emerging' season.
- VHSL voted unanimously (32–0) in May 2025 to fully sanction Girls Wrestling and adopted a post-season structure equivalent to Boys Wrestling.
- New VHSL leadership passed Emergency Legislation in October 2025 that reverted Girls Wrestling to a de facto 'emerging' era competition format — with no public explanation. VHSL implementation went even beyond this discriminatory Emergency Legislation.
- In the 2025–26 season, VHSL awarded Boys Wrestling six full sets of team and individual honors across the six Boys Wrestling Classes. Girls Wrestling received zero.
- Virginia is now one of only three U.S. states not to fully sanction Girls Wrestling, after having been the 47th state to recognize the sport at all.

I GIRLS WRESTLING'S PATH TO SANCTIONED STATUS (2022–2025)

Girls Wrestling did not stumble into official recognition — Girls Wrestling earned it by the book. Over three seasons, the sport methodically met and exceeded VHSL's own criteria for advancement from 'emerging' to 'sanctioned' status.

A. VHSL's 'Emerging' Sport Framework

VHSL rules provide a structured pathway for new sports to achieve sanctioned status. Under Rule 54-1-1, a sport has three years to meet existing state criteria to be recognized as a VHSL state event.¹ Under Rule 55-1-1, a sport may be sanctioned in a given Class when **fifty percent plus one** of the schools within that Class sponsor the sport in the same season.² The Executive Committee retains authority to provide state-level events for activities that do not independently meet those criteria. When a single Class sponsors a sport but does not meet the threshold, it will combine with the next highest classification which sponsors a state championship.³

VHSL schools are divided into six Classes.⁴ To reach sanctioned status in a particular Class, Girls Wrestling needed to cross the following school-count participation threshold:

Class	Total Schools	Threshold (50%+1)
Class 1	56	29 schools
Class 2	50	26 schools
Class 3	54	28 schools
Class 4	53	27 schools
Class 5	49	25 schools
Class 6	57	29 schools

B. Girls Wrestling Granted 'Emerging' Status in September 2022

On September 21, 2022, the VHSL Executive Committee voted **35–0** to categorize Girls Wrestling as an 'emerging sport' for a three-year period beginning with the 2022–2023 season.⁵ During the emerging era, individual girls were eligible for VHSL-recognized individual state placements but were not eligible for individual regional placements, or any team-level recognition.⁶ School Districts and Schools were also expressly prohibited from providing medals and trophies to regional placement-winning teams and individuals.⁷ Parents and athletes publicly complained about the lack of parity with Boys Wrestling, but VHSL stated at the time that differential treatment was due to Girls Wrestling's 'emerging' status.⁸

C. Girls Wrestling Exceeded the Threshold for 'Sanctioned' Status

Girls Wrestling participation levels during the three-year 'emerging' period exceeded the threshold to qualify for VHSL-sanctioned status regardless of which dataset is used — media reports, NFHS publications, VHSL Executive Committee materials, or official VHSL participation figures. Critically, **Girls Wrestling met the 50%+1 threshold in five of six Classes after just the second emerging season** in 2023–2024 — one full season before the emerging period even concluded. While VHSL did not publish official participation figures for the final 2024–2025 emerging season, NFHS data shows aggregate school participation grew from 181 to 206 schools, plainly demonstrating Girls Wrestling met the qualifying threshold, as VHSL itself would recognize a few months after the final emerging season.⁹

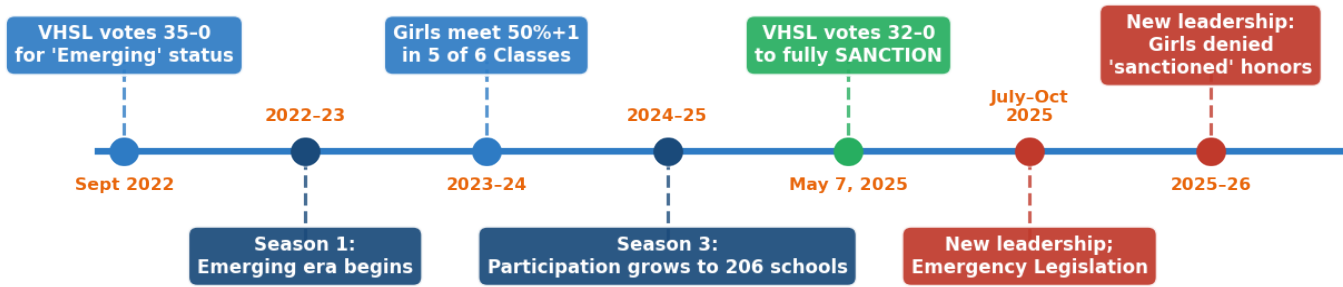


Figure 1. Key milestones in the history of VHSL Girls Wrestling, 2022–2026.

II VHSL VOTES UNANIMOUSLY TO SANCTION GIRLS WRESTLING (MAY 2025)

On **May 7, 2025**, VHSL's Executive Committee voted **32–0** to approve Girls Wrestling as an official VHSL sport.¹⁰ At the same meeting, VHSL voted to 'reset the clock' for eSports, another emerging activity that had not qualified for sanctioned status¹¹ — a stark contrast to Girls Wrestling's clear qualification on the merits. This Executive Committee vote constituted an official action of VHSL.¹²

A. The Post-Season Structure Adopted in May 2025

VHSL's Executive Committee adopted a proposal by then-Asst. Director Chris Robinson that would culminate in two state tournaments (Classes 1–3 and Classes 4–6) held at the same time and place as the Boys Wrestling tournaments.¹³ Media reports and VHSL communications uniformly confirmed this structure:

The Virginian-Pilot¹⁴

"Girls Wrestling will get its own team state tournaments next school year after the Virginia High School League's Executive Committee voted Wednesday to sanction the sport and its championships. Girls Wrestling was previously classified as an 'emerging sport,' Mike McCall, the VHSL's Director of Communications, wrote in an email Wednesday. The VHSL held its first Girls State Open Wrestling Championships for individuals in 2023. The new state tournaments — one for Classes 1–3 and another for Classes 4–6 — will feature 16-team brackets. The inaugural Class 1–3 tournament will be held at Salem Civic Center, and the first Class 4–6 tournament will be held at the Virginia Beach Sports Center."

The Daily Progress¹⁵

"The nature of our job is to create opportunities,' VHSL assistant director of athletics Chris Robinson told The Daily Progress. 'And in this instance, we were able to create an opportunity for our female student-athletes. The surge in numbers of female wrestlers made the decision very easy for the committee."

The Roanoke Times¹⁶

"When winners of the Zone 1 Qualifier girls wrestling tournament were denied medals this past February in Bristol, Grayson County High School coach Jay Coman offered to buy hardware himself and send it to the proper recipients. There was confusion and frustration about the event, which forced the Virginia High School League to issue a clarifying statement. Girls wrestling was classified as an 'emerging sport,' not an official one, so providing medals was not necessary. That policy is now a thing of the past, as the VHSL executive committee voted Wednesday to sanction girls wrestling as an official sport."

WTKR¹⁷

"After dipping its toe into the water, girls wrestling is getting the full VHSL treatment. The Virginia High School League voted to fully sanction girls wrestling as an official varsity sport in the commonwealth this week beginning with the 2025-2026 school year. The activity will have its own team state tournaments next winter. ... Virginia Beach Sports Center will host next year's girls state championships for Classes 4–6. Classes 1–3 will hold their championship meet in Salem."

Virginia became the **47th state** to sanction Girls Wrestling.¹⁶ As Grayson County coach Jay Coman noted in coverage of the vote: *'We're way behind the curve on that. Tennessee has had girls sanctioned wrestling and girls division tournaments for years. I think Virginia was way behind on this.'* Additional media coverage of the vote appeared in WAVY¹⁸ and the Eastern Shore Report.¹⁹

III VHSL REVERSES COURSE — EMERGENCY LEGISLATION (OCTOBER 2025)

Following the unanimous vote to sanction Girls Wrestling in May 2025, VHSL underwent significant leadership changes. **Ty Gafford** became the new VHSL Executive Director on July 1, 2025, replacing the retiring Billy Haun.²⁰ **Eric Phillips** replaced Chris Robinson as the VHSL Asst. Director with responsibility over wrestling on October 6, 2025.²¹

A. The October 2025 Emergency Legislation

On **October 23, 2025**, VHSL's membership passed an Executive Committee-endorsed piece of 'Emergency Legislation'²² amending Rule 88 — the rule governing both Boys Wrestling and Girls Wrestling — to insert new language specific to Girls Wrestling under Rule 88-4-4.²³ The legislation made three critical changes to Girls Wrestling's post-season:

1

Individual-Only Qualifying

Stipulated that 'Girls wrestling qualifying will remain on an individual basis,' which was interpreted by VHSL staff to prevent Girls Wrestling teams from competing for a team championship or team placement at the State Tournament.

2

Zone-Based System Reinstated

Reinstalled the zone-based competition system that had existed during the emerging era, meaning Girls Wrestling would continue as a single statewide consolidated pool of competitors rather than competing by separate Classes as VHSL rules specify.

3

Separated from Boys Wrestling

Separated the Girls Wrestling state tournament's location and date from the Boys Wrestling state tournament, reversing the co-location that had been adopted in May 2025.

B. VHSL Can Have No Reasonable Explanation for the Emergency Legislation

- The Emergency Legislation was not accompanied by any publicly available proposal or explanation.
- VHSL received a report on August 27, 2025 that Girls Wrestling would see the biggest national participation increases of any sport — undermining any participation-based rationale.²⁴
- VHSL passed the Emergency Legislation before pre-season hydration tests for Girls Wrestling (held in early November 2025), meaning it could not have known the actual 2025–26 participation levels at the time.
- Unlike the May 2025 sanctioning vote, for which it sought and received public praise, VHSL issued no press release or other broadly distributed public notice about the Emergency Legislation.
- No provision of VHSL rules that applied to Girls Wrestling as a newly sanctioned sport authorized the reimposition of emerging-era competition limitations.

C. Staff Practices Beyond the Emergency Legislation

Even setting aside the Emergency Legislation itself, VHSL staff continued to treat Girls Wrestling as an 'emerging' sport through administrative practices not required by any rule: refusing recognition for individual regional placements; denying team championships and placements at the regional level; and affirmatively prohibiting school districts and schools from providing medals and trophies to regional placement-winning teams and individuals — all emerging-era competition limitations that VHSL had no rule-based authority to continue imposing on a 'sanctioned' sport.

IV GIRLS WRESTLING VS. BOYS WRESTLING: A DOUBLE STANDARD

VHSL structured post-season competition for Girls Wrestling's first official season in 2025–2026 in a manner that was indistinguishable from the prior seasons under the 'emerging' regime, inconsistent with VHSL rules, and vastly different from VHSL's treatment of Boys Wrestling.

A. VHSL Rules Required Equal Treatment

Under VHSL rules, all sanctioned sports and their participants are afforded competitive honors and opportunities.

VHSL Rule	What the Rule Requires	Girls Wrestling Status
Rule 141-1-1(1)	Top 3 teams at each sanctioned sport's state competition receive team trophies	ONLY sanctioned sport with no team trophies at state
Rule 145-1-1	Regional VHSL authorities must adopt award programs for regional competition winners	ONLY sanctioned sport with no individual or team awards at regionals
Rule 55-1-2	Each sanctioned sport competes by separate Class unless threshold is not met	ONLY sanctioned sport to compete in a single consolidated pool statewide

Girls Wrestling was the only sanctioned sport ineligible for team state championships and placements, team regional championships and placements, individual regional placements and honors, and even school-provided medals and trophies.

B. VHSL Treated Boys Wrestling and Girls Wrestling Differently Without Justification

Both Boys Wrestling and Girls Wrestling were officially 'sanctioned' sports during the 2025–2026 season. Yet VHSL extended fundamentally different treatment to the two sports across every meaningful competitive dimension.

GIRLS WRESTLING	Honor / Award	BOYS WRESTLING
X DENIED	Team State Championship	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	Team State Placements	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	Team Regional Championship	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	Individual All-Regional Honors	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	Individual Regional Championships	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	Individual Regional Placements	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)
X DENIED	School-Provided Medals & Trophies	✓ AWARDED (All 6 Classes)

Figure 2. Competitive opportunities awarded to Boys Wrestling vs. Girls Wrestling in 2025–26.

Girls competing in Girls Wrestling during the 2025–2026 season were categorically ineligible for team state championships and placements, team regional championships and placements, individual regional placements and honors, and even School- or School District-provided medals and trophies as a result of VHSL's policies and practices. VHSL did not impose any of those restrictions on competitive opportunities and honors for boys who participated in Boys Wrestling. Not only that, VHSL awarded each of these competitive opportunities and honors to boys in each of its six Classes. In other words, 2025–2026 was even worse than the boys getting six times what the girls received: the boys received six sets of competitive opportunities and honors, while the girls received zero.

VHSL staff have suggested informally that Girls Wrestling was denied competitive opportunities and honors extended to Boys Wrestling due to their lack of participation. Data does not support this rationale.

Boys Wrestling participation levels for 2023–2024 — the most recent season with VHSL official Class-specific statistics — were as follows: Class 1 had 482 boys (32 schools); Class 2 had 762 boys (40 schools); Class 3 had 1,247 boys (53 schools); Class 4 had 1,315 boys (52 schools); Class 5 had 1,483 boys (47 schools); and Class 6 had 2,419 boys (58 schools).²⁶ The latest figures are likely consistent with these numbers, as Boys Wrestling participation has not changed markedly year-over-year.²⁷

Girls Wrestling participation levels were at new highs in the 2025–2026 season. VHSL has not yet published official figures, but Asst. Director Eric Phillips told the media that 'girls wrestling participation in Virginia has increased by more than 400 competitors this season compared to the previous one.'²⁸ Depending on whether the baseline used for calculating this figure is VHSL staff materials or VHSL official statistics reported to NFHS, this means that somewhere between 1,031+ and 1,313+ girls participated in Girls Wrestling during the 2025–2026 season.²⁹ Other datasets indicate that Girls Wrestling participation levels could have been even higher.³⁰ Based on official statistics, then, Girls Wrestling is roughly 2 to 3 times larger than Boys Wrestling Class 1, 1.5 to 2 times larger than Boys Wrestling Class 2, and roughly the same size as Boys Wrestling Class 3, Boys Wrestling Class 4, and Boys Wrestling Class 5 in terms of the number of athletes who participate.

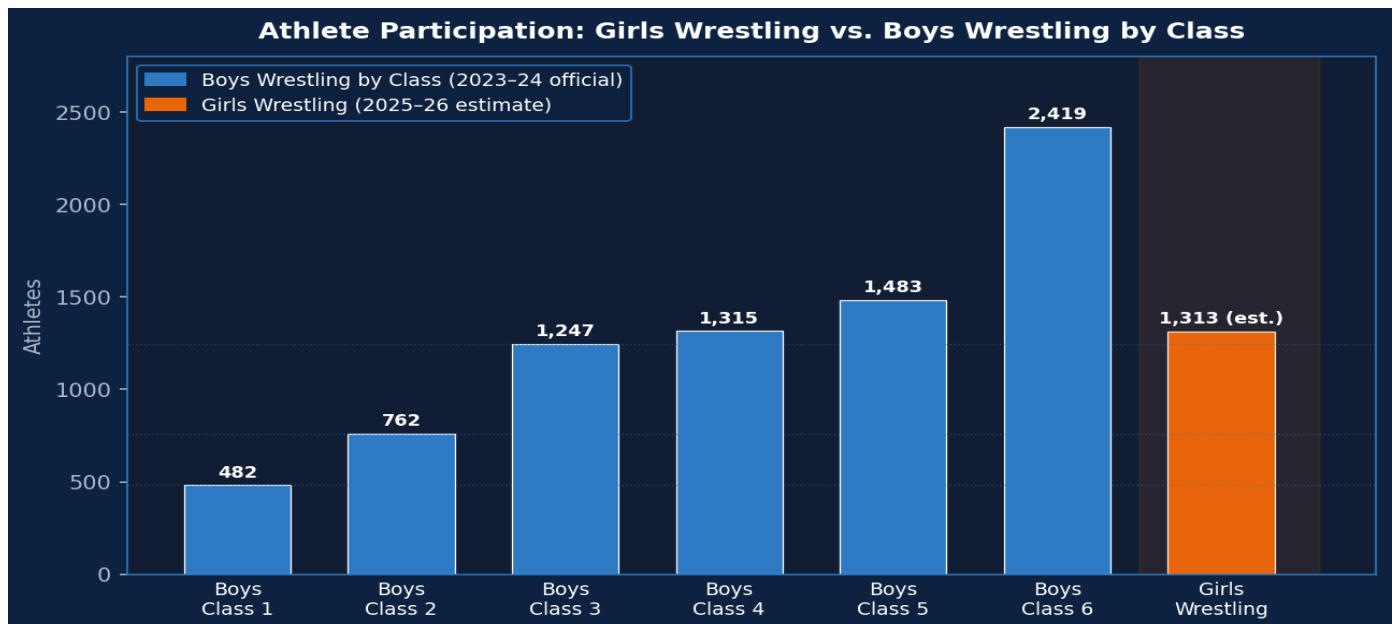


Figure 3. Athlete participation comparison. Girls Wrestling's athlete pool equals or exceeds multiple Boys Wrestling Classes.

Girls Wrestling's participation pool exceeded or equaled that of multiple Classes of Boys Wrestling during the 2025–2026 season. VHSL's differential treatment of Girls Wrestling relative to each Class of Boys Wrestling therefore cannot be reasonably based on participation levels by individual athletes. If Girls Wrestling was not afforded numerous competitive opportunities and honors, it is not clear why Boys Wrestling Class 1, Boys Wrestling Class 2, Boys Wrestling Class 3,

Boys Wrestling Class 4, and Boys Wrestling Class 5 were each given separate opportunities and honors of their own.

Additionally, according to VHSL's official tournament listings on TrackWrestling, zero schools in Boys Wrestling Classes 1, 3, 4, and 5 qualified full teams for their VHSL state tournaments, and Boys Wrestling Classes 2 and 6 each had only one school qualify a full team.

Wrestling Division	Schools with Full Teams at State Tournament
Boys Wrestling Class 1	0
Boys Wrestling Class 2	1
Boys Wrestling Class 3	0
Boys Wrestling Class 4	0
Boys Wrestling Class 5	0
Boys Wrestling Class 6	1
Girls Wrestling	N/A (team competition denied)

Furthermore, **every single weight class at the Girls Wrestling state tournament featured a full bracket of 16 competitors**, whereas Boys Wrestling Classes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 each had weight classes without a full complement of 16 competitors — yet VHSL still awarded those Boys Wrestling champions their honors.

The Girls Wrestling state tournament was heavily attended, with the full slate of 192 wrestlers and over 1,000 spectators from across the state reportedly on hand.³¹

V VIRGINIA IS OUT OF STEP WITH THE NATION

47th
Virginia's rank when Girls Wrestling was sanctioned

3
States not fully sanctioning Girls Wrestling today (MS, VT, VA)

12
Years Tennessee has had full Girls Wrestling championships (since 2014–15)

Figure 4. National context for Girls Wrestling sanctioning.

Virginia was the **47th state** to recognize Girls Wrestling as a sport — already far behind the national curve at the time of the May 2025 sanctioning vote.³² With VHSL's October 2025 Emergency Legislation and the resulting de facto downgrade, Virginia has now joined **Mississippi and Vermont** as one of only three states that do not fully sanction Girls Wrestling.³²

State	Girls Wrestling Status	Team Championships Since
Tennessee	Fully Sanctioned	2014–15 season (12 years)
Maryland	Fully Sanctioned	2023–24 season
Virginia	Sanctioned in name only	None
Mississippi	Not sanctioned	None
Vermont	Not sanctioned	None

A. Neighboring States Have Moved Forward

Tennessee sanctioned Girls Wrestling in the 2014–2015 school year and has recognized both team and individual championships and placements for the past 12 seasons.³³ Maryland crowned its first Girls Wrestling team state champion in 2023–2024.³⁴ Virginia, by contrast, has yet to hold a single fully organized Girls Wrestling state championship, after already unanimously voting to do so nearly a year ago.

B. VHSL Now Seeks to Further Restrict Girls Wrestling

Despite the recent and ongoing unequal treatment of Girls Wrestling, VHSL is now proposing to use the sport's 'sanctioned' status as a basis to *reduce* competitive opportunities. A proposed rule change would cap the total number of Girls Wrestling competitions in a season, because — as VHSL's agenda materials state — 'Now that girls' wrestling is sanctioned, [the] rule change would give them the same number of matches as (coed) wrestling. As it stands now, the girls are allowed to participate in more tournaments than coed.'³⁵ In other words, VHSL invokes 'sanctioned' status to take away from Girls Wrestling, but declines to use it to give Girls Wrestling the benefits that sanctioned status is supposed to provide.

Girls Wrestling did not receive an undeserved favor when VHSL unanimously voted to sanction it. Girls Wrestling qualified and exceeded the sanction standard set forth by VHSL's own rules. The roughly 1,300 girls who competed in 2025–2026 deserved the full benefits of that sanctioned status — benefits that every Boys Wrestling class received as a matter of course.

SOURCES

1. [VHSL Handbook, Rule 54-1-1 — Emerging Sports Procedure](#)
2. [VHSL Handbook, Rule 55-1-1 — Sport Sanctioning Standard](#)
3. [VHSL Handbook, Rule 55-1-2 — Class Combination Format](#)
4. [VHSL Alignment Table \(Classification of Member Schools\)](#)
5. [VHSL Meeting Minutes, Sept. 21, 2022](#)
6. [FloWrestling: '2025 VHSL Virginia High School Girls Wrestling State Championship Schedule' \(Feb. 26, 2025\)](#)
7. [The Roanoke Times: 'Timesland coaches laud VHSL sanctioning of girls wrestling' \(May 8, 2025\)](#)
8. [The Roar: 'The VHSL vs. Girls Wrestling': The Sentinel \(reporting on parent and athlete complaints following 2024-25 season\)](#)
9. [NFHS: 2024-2025 High School Athletics Participation Survey](#)
10. [VHSL Meeting Minutes, May 7, 2025 \(Executive Committee vote, 32-0\)](#)
11. [InsideNova: VHSL Executive Committee meeting coverage, May 2025 \(eSports reset\)](#)
12. [VHSL Handbook, Rule 12-4-1 — Executive Committee Actions](#)
13. [VHSL Emerging Sport Sanctioning Presentation \(May 2025\); VHSL Executive Committee State Tournament Sites for 2025-26](#)
18. [WAVY: 'Girls Wrestling is now an officially sanctioned sport of the Virginia High School League' \(May 2025\)](#)
19. [Eastern Shore Post: 'Virginia Sanctions Varsity Girls Wrestling' \(Dec. 9, 2025\) \(quoting VHSL spokesman Mike McCall\)](#)
20. [WHSV: 'VHSL names Ty Gafford next executive director' \(Mar. 19, 2025\)](#)
21. [WHSV: VHSL Asst. Director for Wrestling appointment — Eric Phillips \(Oct. 6, 2025\)](#)
22. [VHSL Membership Meeting Agenda Minutes, Oct. 23, 2025 \(Emergency Legislation on Girls Wrestling\)](#)
23. [VHSL Handbook, Rule 88-4-4 — Girls Wrestling \(as amended by Oct. 2025 Emergency Legislation\)](#)
24. [VHSL Meeting Minutes, Aug. 27, 2025 \(NFHS participation projection report\)](#)
26. [VHSL: 2023-2024 Official Participation Numbers by Sport and Classification](#)
27. [NFHS: 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 High School Athletics Participation Surveys](#)
28. [Richmond Times-Dispatch: VHSL Girls Wrestling 2025-26 season coverage \(quoting Asst. Director Eric Phillips on 400+ participant increase\)](#)
29. VHSL staff's presentation to the VHSL Executive Committee indicated that 631 girls participated in the 2024-2025 season. No source is cited by VHSL staff, so it is uncertain why there is a discrepancy between these VHSL statistics and the other figures. [[VHSL Emerging Sport Sanctioning Presentation \(May 2025\)](#)]. The NFHS official figure, which is sourced from VHSL, said that 913 girls (206 schools) participated in the 2024-2025 season. [[NFHS 2024-2025](#)]. See also 'Virginia Women's Wrestling' Facebook Page (indicating that Girls Wrestling grew to 1,243 girls participating in 2025-2026). [[Virginia Women's Wrestling FB](#)].
30. Based on statistics compiled in TrackWrestling, a prominent wrestling software program, it appears that Girls Wrestling in Virginia may have grown to 1,612 girls in the 2025-2026 season, though this figure needs to be further verified.
31. [Richmond Times-Dispatch: 'Local girls wrestling programs shine at VHSL state championships' \(Mar. 4, 2026\)](#)

14. [The Virginian-Pilot: 'Virginia High School League votes to fully sanction girls wrestling' \(May 7, 2025\)](#)
15. [The Daily Progress: 'VHSL Executive Committee votes to make girls wrestling an officially sanctioned sport' \(May 7, 2025\)](#)
16. [The Roanoke Times: 'Timesland coaches laud VHSL sanctioning of girls wrestling' \(May 8, 2025\)](#)
17. [WTKR: 'VHSL votes to officially sanction girls wrestling' \(May 10, 2025\)](#)
32. [The Roanoke Times: 'Timesland coaches laud VHSL sanctioning of girls wrestling' \(May 8, 2025\) — Virginia identified as 47th state; four non-sanctioning states listed at the time of publication \(Delaware has since sanctioned Girls Wrestling\)](#)
33. [TSSAA \(Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association\): Girls Wrestling championship history — sanctioned from 2014-15 season](#)
34. [FloWrestling: '2025 VHSL Virginia Girls Wrestling State Championship Results and Brackets' \(Feb. 28, 2025\) — Maryland team championship](#)
35. [VHSL Membership Meeting Agenda \(proposed rule change to cap Girls Wrestling season competitions\)](#)