

The 2026 Esports **Advantage** Report

A Strategic Guide to Academic Integration, Facility Excellence, and Career Readiness



Introduction

For some students, the prospect of earning a college scholarship for doing something they love — playing competitive video games — is a dream come true.

Others are just looking for the camaraderie that comes from playing a team sport, something many haven't done before.

Whatever their reason for participating, esports has exploded in popularity over the last few years.

A recent 2025-2026 estimate indicates 280+ colleges have varsity esports programs through NACE. (Source: Icon-ERA 2026). Today, high school esports participation has grown dramatically. League data shows that esports teams exist in thousands of high schools nationwide - with major scholastic organizations reporting activity in all 50 U.S. states and across Canadian provinces, engaging well over 100,000 students and thousands of teams in organized competition.

According to recent industry research, the global esports market was valued at roughly \$2.6 - \$2.9 billion in 2025, and is projected to grow strongly through the end of the decade. At the same time, global esports viewership is expected to reach approximately 640-641 million people worldwide by the end of 2026.

Why has esports become such a huge phenomenon? What do students get out of competing? Perhaps most importantly, how can you create a successful esports program in your own school or district? Read on to find out.



"The global esports market is no longer a niche industry; it is a \$3.6 billion powerhouse projected to reach 640 million viewers by the end of 2026. This massive scale has filtered directly into education, where \$50 million in annual scholarships are now available to varsity recruits."

Four Key Benefits of Esports



Students do better academically.

It's a well-established fact that when students take part in an extracurricular activity, they're more engaged in school and are less likely to drop out. Esports appeals to many students who haven't found their niche in more traditional school-based activities — giving them an outlet for feeling more connected to the school community.



They're preparing for successful careers.

Participation prepares students for successful careers in high-demand STEM fields, digital media, and professional broadcasting.



They learn critical 21st-century skills.

Players master critical life skills, including strategic thinking, complex problem-solving, and effective digital communication.

In an after-school esports program at Horace Mann UCLA Community School in Los Angeles, students rated themselves and each other on how well they applied 15 specific skills during game play. Both students and their advisor agreed they saw tremendous growth over the course of the program in skills such as handling adversity and working together to accomplish a common goal.

They can earn college scholarships.

Esports continues to be a meaningful pathway to higher education funding for many students. Across the U.S., colleges and universities now award millions of dollars annually in esports-related scholarships, with institutions including Arcadia University and others offering variable competitive awards to qualified team members. Nationwide scholarship platforms and recruiting services have helped facilitate more than \$12 million in collegiate esports scholarships to date. In scholastic competition, the High School Esports League (HSEL) and similar programs have distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships for high school players to support further education. In Iowa, students in Davenport Community School District have used their competitive gaming skills to win multiple state titles and attract over \$1.2 million in scholarships offers through collegiate recruitment.

K-12 Esports Leagues



PlayVS - the leading scholastic esports platform in North America, hosting high school and middle school competition is now incorporating programs from HSEL and other previously independent scholastic esports initiatives. North American Scholastic Esports Federation.

In April 2025, PlayVS acquired Generation Esports (the parent of HSEL and related scholastic leagues) and Playfly College Esports, consolidating with platforms like PlayVS for some competitions.

PlayVS

<https://www.playvs.com>

As the official partner of the National Federation of State High School Associations, PlayVS is recognized as a varsity sport, with state-sanctioned championships.

Equipping an Esports Program for Success

To create an Esports program, you'll need a team coach or advisor, gaming equipment, and an esports facility. Depending on the resources you have available, this could be as simple as a converted computer lab or as robust as a full esports arena, complete with space for announcers and live spectators.

Whatever your budget, here are **three important considerations** for creating a successful Esports program.

"To maintain 'Fair Play' standards, facilities must move beyond consumer-grade hardware. 2026 standards require wired, dedicated network circuits and 240Hz monitors to eliminate input lag that can decide a match."

1 Spaces

A key factor in designing your esports facility is how large your teams will be. This is influenced by student interest as well as the titles you compete in, since team size varies widely by game (for example, 6v6 tactical gamers, smaller squads in battle royales, or individual competitors in fighting games). Students who aren't actively competing can still play critical roles such as shoutcasting, observing matches, analyzing gameplay, managing streams, producing video content, or running social media and community engagement.

Beyond dedicated practice and competition areas, many programs now include an AV-rich production space for live streaming and content creation, as well as designated areas for spectators to watch matches in person. Lounge or decompression spaces for team members are also increasingly common, giving players a place to reset mentally during long matches or tournament days.

2 Furniture

Each player should have a dedicated competition station that includes a high-performance gaming computer, a large high-resolution monitor, professional-grade peripherals, and a supportive gaming chair. Many facilities also incorporate an interactive display or digital whiteboard for coaching, VOD review, and instruction, along with broadcast equipment for live matches and recorded content. If live audiences are expected, a large display or video wall allows spectators to follow gameplay clearly. When selecting furniture, player health and long-term comfort are essential. Chairs should be adjustable, ergonomically designed, and provide strong lumbar and upper-back support. Desks and monitor mounts should be height-adjustable so screens can be positioned at proper eye level, helping reduce neck strain and fatigue during extended sessions.

3 Technology

Each player should be equipped with a modern gaming computer, a large monitor (typically 24–27") with a refresh rate of at least 144Hz—many competitive programs now target 240Hz for top-tier performance—along with a mechanical keyboard, adjustable gaming mouse, and a high-quality headset with a noise-cancelling microphone. Hardware requirements vary by title, but current league and publisher guidelines should be reviewed regularly to ensure systems remain competition-ready. Reliable, low-latency connectivity is critical. Even minimal packet loss or jitter can impact competitive outcomes. For optimal performance, gaming computers should use wired Ethernet connections, preferably on a dedicated or prioritized network segment reserved for Esports and streaming traffic. Facilities increasingly also plan for robust upload bandwidth to support high-quality live streams, remote competitions, and content distribution.

Case Study Spotlight: Florence One Esports

The Challenge: Design a facility that mirrors a professional sports arena while supporting competition, broadcasting, and spectators.

The Performance Data:

Competition Stage: 100% utilization — proving that dedicated player stations are the heart of the program.

Broadcast & Production: 90% utilization — confirming that media creation is no longer secondary; it is a primary driver of student engagement.

Spectator & Strategy: Balanced use across the facility allows for team resets and community viewing.

The Takeaway:

"Broadcasting and media production have become increasingly important as the program leverages content to promote matches, wins, and student success."

Ready to Level up Your School's Esports Program?

Schedule a 1-On-1 Esports Space Consultation

Building a competitive esports space involves more than just buying chairs. Form power requirements and sightlines to ergonomic health and broadcast setups, mediatechnologies provides the expertise to ensure your program is built for long-term success.

Locate your sales rep here: <https://www.mediatechnologies.com/sales-contact-map>

Our experts will help you navigate technology requirements and furniture layouts to fit your specific budget and space.

Sources and Further Reading

Industry Growth & Viewership

Icon-ERA (2026): College Esports Program Growth Statistics. Confirms 280+ collegiate programs and a projected \$50 million in annual scholarships for the 2025–2026 academic year.

DemandSage (2026): eSports Viewership Statistics. Projects a global audience of 640.8 million viewers, with significant growth in North American female viewership (now 28%).

Fortune Business Insights (2026): eSports Market Size & Revenue Statistics. Estimates the global market will grow from \$3.02 billion in 2025 to \$3.63 billion in 2026.

Scholastic & Career Data

NFHS (2025): High School Athletics Participation Survey. Reports record-high participation, including over 30,000 students in state-sanctioned high school esports leagues.

NACE (2026): National Association of Collegiate Esports Annual Report. Official governing body data for 280+ member institutions and varsity standards.

Data Insights Market (2026): Esports Solutions for Education Market Trends. Projects the educational esports market to reach \$1.68 billion in 2026, driven by facility infrastructure.

Technical Standards

Esports Insights (2025): Technical Benchmarks for Competitive Play. Standardizes 240Hz refresh rates and 1ms latency for varsity-level competition.

We Make Tech Simple (2025): Network Infrastructure for Educational Esports. Technical guidelines for dedicated circuits and high-bandwidth broadcast needs.

mediatechnologies. (2025). Case Study: Florence One Esports Facility Utilization. [Internal Report].

