

# 2025 Football Helmet Safety Recommendations

Prepared for WSRMP by:

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## **2025 FOOTBALL HELMET SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Acquisition, inventory, fit, care and maintenance, reconditioning and recertification, replacement, and emerging technologies

*By: Emma O. Gillespie and Naomi Ahsan*

This document aims to provide guidance to WSRMP member districts regarding football helmet requirements and best practices for student athletes. The most important requirements are that football helmets must be: (1) certified by the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI) to meet the current standard of the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE); (2) reconditioned and re-certified at least every other year by a NOCSAE-licensed member of the National Athletic Equipment Reconditioners Association (NAERA); and (3) replaced when rejected by the reconditioner, 5 years from the date of manufacturing, or at the end of the manufacturer's useful life policy (whichever comes first).

- I. Acquisition:** Districts should consider the following when purchasing football helmets.

**Requirements under NOCSAE standards**

- a. Football helmets must be certified by a third party, the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI)—not by the helmet manufacturer—as meeting the NOCSAE standard. A list of all football helmet models which meet the NOCSAE standards is available from SEI at

[https://www.seinet.org/search.htm#sections=NOCSAE\\_collapse3,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_collapse31,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17\\_collapse31\\_2,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmet\\_collapse31\\_22](https://www.seinet.org/search.htm#sections=NOCSAE_collapse3,NOCSAE_Football_collapse31,NOCSAE_Football_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17_collapse31_2,NOCSAE_Football_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17_NOCSAEFootballHelmet_collapse31_22).

- b. New helmets must bear this permanent seal on the exterior of the shell:



- c. Helmets must be permanently and legibly labeled with:
1. The name of the manufacturer.
  2. The model designation.
  3. The size.
  4. The month and year of manufacture.
  5. A warning if the headgear is not to be recertified.
  6. If intended to be recertified, the recertification interval.
  7. A label that warns the user that no helmet can protect against all possible impacts and the protective device must be fitted and attached properly in accordance with the manufacturer's fitting instructions
  8. A label that warns the user that the helmet can be damaged by accidental, incidental, or intentional contact with common substances (for example, certain solvents, cleaners, hair treatments, etc.) and that this damage may or may not be visible to the user. This label should also list any recommended cleaning agents or

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procedures, or both.

9. A warning on the shell exterior with this or similar language: NO HELMET CAN PREVENT ALL HEAD OR ANY NECK INJURIES A PLAYER MIGHT RECEIVE WHILE PARTICIPATING IN FOOTBALL. HELMETS CANNOT PREVENT CONCUSSION/BRAIN INJURY. SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE BEFORE RETURNING TO PLAY IF YOU SUSPECT ANY INJURY. DO NOT USE THIS HELMET TO BUTT, RAM OR SPEAR AN OPPOSING PLAYER. THIS IS IN VIOLATION OF THE FOOTBALL RULES AND SUCH USE CAN RESULT IN SEVERE HEAD OR NECK INJURIES, PARALYSIS OR DEATH TO YOU AND POSSIBLE INJURY TO YOUR OPPONENT.

### **Recommendations in addition to meeting NOCSAE requirements**

- d. **Parent/guardian purchase of football helmets:** It is recommended that school districts purchase all football helmets to be used by their athletes. Most districts do not allow parents to purchase football helmets. If districts do permit parents/guardians to purchase football helmets for their students, these guidelines are recommended:
  - i. Parents will notify the district of the helmet of their choice, certified by SEI, and, if not purchased new from the manufacturer, certified by a licensed reconditioner to meet NOCSAE standards. Parents will provide the district with the funds for the district to directly purchase the helmet for the athlete. Handling of these funds must comply with all current financial regulations and guidelines.
  - ii. Though it is not recommended, if districts allow parents to directly purchase a helmet (rather than purchase the helmet through the school), districts should only accept helmets that are in their original unopened packaging and should verify that the helmet has been certified by SEI to meet NOCSAE standards prior to use.
  - iii. The helmet must meet or exceed the NOCSAE safety standards.
  - iv. The helmet will be inventoried the same as the district's equipment (see Section II below).
  - v. The helmet will remain in the district's possession and control throughout the student's playing career (but may be returned to the student at the end of the student's playing career).
  - vi. The helmet will undergo the same care and maintenance as the district's equipment (see Section III below).
  - vii. The helmet will undergo the same reconditioning and recertification as the district's equipment (see Section IV below).
  - viii. Students will not be permitted to take privately purchased helmets home or for

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use during the off-season (e.g. for summer camps, combines, etc.).

- ix. Only helmets approved by the district may be used, and the district reserves the right to reject a helmet for any reason. If a parent/guardian-purchased helmet is rejected, the district will provide a school-issued helmet or the student's parent/guardian may purchase a new approved helmet for use.

**e. Donations and discounts:**

- i. Donated funds: Helmets purchased with monetary donations and grants should meet the same NOCSAE safety standard as helmets purchased by district funds.
- ii. Donated helmets: It is not recommended that Districts accept used donated football helmets. However, if districts choose to accept donated helmets, the helmets must meet the same NOCSAE safety standards as the District's equipment and should be reconditioned and recertified by a licensed provider prior to use.
- iii. Discounts: If a discount is being offered by a vendor or manufacturer, districts should verify that the helmet is not being put out of production for safety reasons, that the manufacturer is not going out of business, and the date of manufacturing (see Section I.c above).

**II. Inventory:** Districts should establish a system to track each helmet in their possession.

- a. **Serial number:** Each helmet should be marked with a permanent serial number for record keeping.
- b. **Record keeping:** Records should be maintained documenting the complete history of each piece of equipment by corresponding serial number, including, at a minimum: manufacture date; to whom each helmet was issued throughout its use; reconditioning and recertification dates; and final disposal.
- c. **No outside use:** Students should not be permitted to take helmets home or for use during the off-season (e.g. for summer camps, combines, etc.).

**III. Fit:** Proper fit of the football helmet is critical to its utility as protective equipment.

- a. **Training on helmet and shoulder pad fitting:** The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) requires that all middle school and high school football coaches complete approved helmet and shoulder pad fitting training every two years. Only trained district staff should be allowed to fit football helmets. Do not allow students to fit their own helmets. The WIAA has created a video to demonstrate proper fitting of a football helmet at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBZbR7GBduU>.

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- b. **Size:** Helmet sizes may vary from brand to brand and with different models. Staff who are fitting football helmets for students should review the applicable manufacturer's instructions and sizing charts.
  - c. **Fit:** The front helmet pad should cover the athlete's head from the middle of his forehead to the back of his head. The helmet should not sit too high or low. To check, make sure the ear holes line up with the athlete's ears. The chin strap should be centered under the athlete's chin and fit snugly. A football helmet should feel snug with no spaces between the pads and the athlete's head. The helmet should not slide on the head with the chin strap in place. If the helmet can be removed while the chin strap is in place, then the fit is too loose. Review and follow manufacturer's instructions for proper helmet fitting for each type of helmet. Some helmets have unique fitting systems or use air bladder systems that require inflation with a special needle to avoid puncturing the air bladders.

#### **IV. Care and maintenance:**

- a. **Manufacturer information:** Adhere to manufacturer warranty requirements, instructions, and information. Use only manufacturer-approved parts for replacement.
- b. **Inspection:** Inspect helmets for damage before each season and regularly throughout the season. For air bladder-equipped helmets, check for proper inflation.
- c. **Damage:** Do not allow students to use a helmet that is cracked, broken, or has any missing or loose parts or padding.
- d. **Cleaning:** Do not soak any part of the helmet, put it close to high heat, or use strong cleaners. Helmets should be cleaned often inside and out with warm water and mild detergent only.
- e. **Protection:** Do not let anyone sit or lean on the helmet.
- f. **Storage:** Do not store a football helmet in a car or in a room that may get too hot or too cold. Helmets should be stored in a temperature-controlled environment away from direct sunlight.
- g. **Alteration:** Do not alter helmet unless specified by manufacturer or recommended by reconditioner.
- h. **Decoration:** Do not decorate helmet (e.g. paint or stickers) without checking with the manufacturer regarding whether the safety of the helmet will be affected.

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### V. Reconditioning and recertification:

- a. **Reconditioning and recertification:** *Reconditioning* is the inspection, cleaning, sanitizing, repair/restoration of athletic equipment to the original performance standard. *Recertification* is the testing and proper labeling of athletic equipment that has previously met the NOCSAE standard.
- b. Helmets should be reconditioned and recertified at least every other year by a NOCSAE-licensed member of NAERA prior to the football season.
- c. Recertified helmets should bear the same seal pictured in Section I above. If this seal is not clearly legible, helmets that are recertified shall bear this permanent seal on the exterior, identifying the year of recertification (and may also identify the recertifying organization's information):



- d. Recertified helmets must be marked with the name of the recertifying firm and the year of recertification, as seen in the seal above.
- e. On the interior or the exterior of the shell, the recertified helmet must bear a permanent label reading, "This helmet has been recertified according to procedures established to meet the NOCSAE Standard."
- f. For helmets reconditioned during 2024, from which mandatory warning labels have started to separate or be lost, NAERA has issued guidance that this does not void the certification or recertification. Districts should contact their reconditioner to replace the missing label.

### VI. Replacement of helmets: Football helmets should be destroyed, discarded, and replaced as soon as any one of the following occurs (whichever occurs first):

- a. **Not recertified:** The helmet is not recertified by the reconditioner.
- b. **5 years old:** More than 5 years have passed from the date of the helmet's manufacturing.
- c. **End of useful life:** The end of the manufacturer's useful life policy or mandatory retirement age (if such a policy exists).

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### VII. Youth helmets: Helmets for players below the high school level now have a separate standard.

- a. NOCSAE has established a new youth football helmet standard, effective March 1, 2027. It aims to address players below the high school level and their unique risk exposures, which involve different patterns of head impacts based on the age, size, speed, and coordination of youth football players. For example, youth football players fall to the ground more often than older football players, and their heads are proportionately larger compared to their bodies.

- b. A list of all football helmet models meeting the NOCSAE standards, including youth helmet models, is available from SEI at:

[https://www.seinet.org/search.htm#sections=NOCSAE\\_collapse3,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_collapse31,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17\\_collapse31\\_2,NOCSAE\\_Football\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17\\_NOCSAEFootballHelmet\\_collapse31\\_22](https://www.seinet.org/search.htm#sections=NOCSAE_collapse3,NOCSAE_Football_collapse31,NOCSAE_Football_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17_collapse31_2,NOCSAE_Football_NOCSAEFootballHelmetND002-17_NOCSAEFootballHelmet_collapse31_22)

- c. New youth helmets must bear a seal as seen below:



- d. Youth helmets must be permanently and legibly labeled with all the items listed in (c) of Section I above, as well as "Youth" on the exterior of the helmet.
- e. Manufacturers shall define what level of play or age or other restrictions apply to the "Youth" designation.

### VIII. Emerging technologies:

- a. In September 2024, the WIAA named Guardian Sports its Official Football Safety Partner. Guardian Sports manufactures the Guardian cap, a padded, soft-shell layer worn on the outside of football helmets to reduce the force of any impact to the head and skull. These are permitted by NFHS rules for use by school football players during both practices and games.
  - i. It is possible use of the Guardian cap would void the SEI certification of compliance with NOCSAE standards. School districts should take this into account before using Guardian caps with district-owned helmets. NOCSAE's official position is that the addition of a Guardian cap to a helmet that was

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certified (i.e., laboratory tested) without the cap creates a new untested model, for which the SEI has the right to declare its certification void. Guardian Sports reports that it ordered laboratory testing of several helmet models from manufacturers Schutt, Riddell, Rawlings, Xenith, and Cascade, together with the Guardian cap, and all helmets tested passed the requirements for recertification. However, it appears that Guardian did not officially obtain an SEI certification with this testing; there are currently no models inclusive of the Guardian cap on SEI's list of certified models.

- b. The next frontiers in football helmet technology include the integration of sensors measuring impact forces in real time, 3D-printing helmets for a custom fit of an individual player's head, liquid shock absorbers, augmented reality displays, and interior padding, in addition to flexible outer shells. NOCSAE and the CDC advise that no football helmet can completely prevent all head injuries and concussions. NOCSAE has stated that adding another product to a football helmet changes the helmet model, requiring a new model name to be created, and a separate certification testing process to begin for that new model. The use of products such as skull caps, headbands, mouth guards, ear inserts or other items that are not attached or incorporated in some way into the helmet, do not amount to a new helmet model when used.

**IX. Additional resources and references:** These websites may provide additional helpful information:

- **NOCSAE - Football equipment standards:** <http://nocsae.org/standards/football/>
- **NOCSAE – News and updated guidance:** <http://nocsae.org/media-newsroom/>
- **NAERA – Licensed members:** <http://naera.net/members/>
- **NFHS – Football rulebook:** <https://www.nfhs.org/activities-sports/football/>
- **WIAA – Helmet fitting video:** <http://www.wiaa.com/ardisplay.aspx?ID=1297>
- **SEI – List of helmet models meeting NOCSAE standards:**  
<https://www.seinet.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/Football%20Helmets.pdf>
- **CDC Heads up – Helmet safety:** <http://www.cdc.gov/headsup/helmets/>
- **Why doesn't the Cap have the NOCSAE certification? By Guardian Sports:**  
<https://guardiansports.com/faq-items/why-doesnt-the-guardian-cap-have-the-nocsae-certification-sticker/>