

Hale Radio Station (KNHC, C89.5)



Hale - KNHC Courtesy of C895/KNHC Archive

Nathan Hale High School is unique for its radio station, the only one operating at a Seattle Public School and, as of 2021, one of only seven high school radio stations in Washington. Students who participate in the Intro and Advanced Electronic Media courses gain experience in production, programming, podcasting, on-air presentation, and music selection.

KNHC 89.5 FM went on the air on January 25, 1971, as a 10-watt station directed by longtime Nathan Hale electronics teacher Lawrence Adams. According to *The Seattle Times*, “the genesis of the idea was more about hands-on practical experience than starting up any kind of public radio station. Adams had noticed that some kids tuned out when he started delving too deeply into the theory of electronics, and so this was simply a way to get them more engaged.”

Adams’s students already had built an experimental AM station, but Adams had loftier ambitions in the more complex world of FM broadcasting. At its launch, KNHC’s 10-watt FM signal “reached only a five-mile circle in north Seattle. Programming then was a mix of musical styles from folk to jazz, supplemented by student interviews with teachers.” The station’s power output grew rapidly, to 320 watts in 1972, to 1,500 watts in 1974, and to 5,000 watts by 1977 with the broadcast tower located on the roof of Wedgwood Elementary. In 2002, the station’s transmitter was moved to Cougar Mountain with a power of 8,500 watts reaching listeners from Everett to Tacoma.

In addition to Adams, broadcast engineer Jim Hatfield and program developer Gregg Neilson played key roles in getting KNHC up and running. Hatfield helped develop and expand curriculum for the program, helped build out the facilities in Room 219 in the Nathan Hale school building, and orchestrated the power increase to

320 watts in 1972. The first handful of student station managers—Phil Simmons, Steve Koski, Frank Mortimer, Mike Burdick, Keith Jackson, Lorna Brown, and Tim Shook—also provided invaluable perspective and direction.

Nathan Hale received funding from the Washington State Legislature in 1970 to cover some of its initial costs, and Adams knocked on doors at local businesses and radio stations asking for donations. Money and equipment—including a costly transmitter donated by KIXI Radio—poured in. At its launch, Adams said the station had about \$15,000 worth of equipment, mostly donated. In subsequent years, KNHC received federal grants, corporate underwriting, and funds from Seattle Public Schools. The program was part of a federally funded magnet-school initiative in mass communications that began in fall 1977 when the district started busing students to “magnet” schools with special programs or teaching methods. By 1988, the radio program was drawing dozens of students to Hale from all over the city.

In a 1980 course manual assembled by Adams, he writes that the KNHC facility “is a vocationally approved classroom designed to provide students with the opportunity to apply their electricity and electronics training in the development of entry-level employment skills while operating and maintaining a broadcast facility.” At the time, the student staff consisted of a station manager, program director, production director, special features director, continuity director, sports director, public-relations director, news director, music director, network director, traffic director, and remote engineer.

The program reached a crisis point in May 1981 when the district announced plans to shut down KNHC in August due to budget cuts. Shortly after the May announcement, however, the district and Seattle Central Community College agreed to let college radio students use the facilities at Nathan Hale as a laboratory 28 hours per week in exchange for financial support for KNHC. In 1986, the station held its first on-air drive, requesting operating funds from the listening community. Those drives continue to this day and have increased to two per year.



Hale - KNHC Courtesy of C895/KNHC Archive

Another potential crisis was averted in 1987 when an Administrative Law Judge for the Federal Communications Commission rejected a request that KNHC be required to share its frequency with the Jack Straw Memorial Foundation. The Jack Straw Foundation would have contributed money to cover KNHC's operating costs in exchange for KNHC's airtime when school was not in session. According to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the school district was "cool to those offers because it wants to keep KNHC a fulltime station that is a reflection of the broadcast industry, as well as a vocational program that contributes to desegregation at Nathan Hale High School." A month after the judge's ruling, KNHC began broadcasting 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In the 1990s KNHC renovated its studio and production facilities, began a student training program, launched its first website, and in 1997 began operating a digital music stream from its studios. In 1995, *Rolling Stone* magazine called KNHC the largest and most influential high school radio station of the roughly 50 stations around the country.

In 2003, the district reported that KNHC was attracting a weekly audience of about 115,000 listeners and was operating on an annual budget of \$350,000, of which the district provided about \$100,000 to cover salaries. In the same year, the *Village Voice* named KNHC the best high school radio station in the nation thanks to its streaming platform.

The format at KNHC—now popularly known as C-89—has changed over the years, but it has always been at the forefront of musical trends. The station had early success with soul and R&B music, and in 1982 it extended its "more funk than junk" programming from two days a week to seven days a week because of positive listener feedback. By 2000 the station was known for its high-energy dance music. In 2004, it became the only non-commercial radio station to join the *Billboard* Magazine Dance Radio Airplay panel.

In 2008, students at the station booked a little-known artist named Lady Gaga to play at the school's performing arts center. According to *The Seattle Times*, "400 people showed up . . . they witnessed a blooming star—before the Grammys, the arena concerts, and *Billboard* chart-topping singles."

Nathan Hale was modernized and expanded during a three-year period from 2008 to 2011 with funds from the BEX III levy approved by voters in 2007. The first phase included construction of a new 5,000 square foot space for KNHC, several professional sound-production studios with industry-standard equipment, and a radio/TV classroom in the same building as the school's new library. Private fundraising equipped the facility with state-of-the-art broadcast equipment. In 2015, the station received its first funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. By 2022, 80 percent of the radio station's cash operating funds came from listener and corporate donations, 8 percent from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and 12 percent from Seattle Public Schools.

The station is run [2023] by general manager H June Fox. Fox played a key role in securing the CPB funding and, in 2016, a portion of that funding was used to distribute one of the station's programs, *Café Chill*, to public radio stations nationwide. As of 2022, 53 stations carried the program on a weekly basis. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fox began working with Seattle Childrens' Hospital to write and air messages promoting mental health. Based on that relationship, the station launched a podcast series, *Coping 101*, with the purpose of destigmatizing mental illness from a teen's perspective. The podcasts are distributed on a multitude of platforms and available for air on other stations. As of January 2023, the podcasts had been downloaded more than 3,000 times and episodes had aired on more than a dozen stations across the country.

The high school's homepage includes an invitation to see the station first-hand: "C895, Seattle's Dance Music Radio Station is based here at Nathan Hale. We provide high-energy dance music to listeners throughout Puget Sound while providing career-connected learning opportunities for students. Listen on the radio at 89.5FM, online at c895.org, or through our mobile app. Come visit us in room 1204!"