Traditionally, most learning occurs within the confines of the school building and the regular six hour school day. With the limitations this presents, educators need to look at alternate methods of achieving academic goals for all students. The Lakeland Central School District, a middle-class, suburban district in Westchester County, NY has successfully fostered enriched student learning opportunities outside the school day through the development of competitive Policy Debate, a form of controversy and argumentation.

The use of controversy and argumentation as an instructional approach offers students an opportunity to understand current and contemporary issues, think critically, and gain experience in problem solving and public speaking. Expanding learning through argument and controversy beyond the classroom affords students the opportunity to not only reinforce what they are learning in the classroom but also to dramatically expand their multi-disciplinary research and depth of understanding on particular subjects, to learn about important issues not covered by more standardized curricula, to engage in peer-to-peer cooperative learning and intentional learning endeavors, to receive immediate feedback from experienced judges, to advance in skill over their high school careers, to develop strong and influential social networks, and to build a strong personal connection with a coach/mentor.

**What is Competitive Policy Debate?**

Competitive policy debate is an activity that involves preparation and competition outside of the traditional school day. Debaters and coaches meet regularly after school to prepare for competitions and travel to tournaments hosted by high schools and universities within their locality, state, region, and even throughout the nation.

Students who engage in competitive Policy Debate prepare to debate a general resolution. Within the confines of the resolution, affirmative two-person teams will advocate specific policy proposals such as health care for illegal immigrants, broadband services for poor communities, expansion of food stamp programs, and Title I reform. Negative two-person teams work to counter both the general question asked by the resolution and the specific proposal advanced by the affirmative. Common negative arguments include cost and workability problems, contesting the need for the proposal in the first place, suggesting alternative proposals, and philosophical
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objections both to the proposal and the framing of the affirmative advocacy. Arguments for both sides are based on research that is drawn from popular news and magazine sources, freely available materials on the Internet, law reviews, scholarly journals, and books.

Debate squads are comprised of many two-person teams, each of whom will ordinarily engage in at least two debates on each side of the resolution at every tournament they attend. Each debate lasts an hour and half, with each member of the two-person team delivering an eight minute constructive speech and a five minute rebuttal speech. Each member also asks questions of the other side for three minutes and is responsible for answering questions asked by the other side for three minutes. At the conclusion of the debate, a decision is rendered by a judge and discussed with the debaters.

Moving Beyond the Classroom

Although some of the benefits of competitive Policy Debate, such as developing an understanding of current and contemporary issues, critical thinking, problem solving, and public speaking, can be captured in the classroom, developing debate as an after school and competitive weekend learning program affords opportunities for students to acquire significant additional skills. Students have the opportunity to engage with contemporary issues for an extended period of time, learn to work together as part of a large group, benefit from intellectual gains that spring from debating both sides of the resolution, are afforded extensive opportunities for developing speaking and refutation skills, master in-depth and reflexive research, and have the chance to compete against students with similar skills who come from different backgrounds.

Since the structured academic debate outside the classroom is competitive, students are driven to excel vis-à-vis their peers. This often results in students doing extensive amounts of preparation for their competitions, including research and argument development. The research that debaters engage in is extensive, yearlong, reflexive, and diverse. Some have estimated that the amount of research a nationally competitive high school debater does is equivalent to the amount of research needed to complete a master’s thesis (Parcher, 1998).

Since teams will debate many opponents multiple times throughout the year, the research and argument development needs to account for changes in their opponent’s arguments and work toward developing new ideas to keep the debates fresh. The diversity and quantity of arguments that can come into play in any given Policy Debate round also require debaters to organize, synthesize, and evaluate arguments that have been written by coaches and other members of the team for use in their debates. And since the debates often involve matters of public policy, scientific feasibility, and moral issues, the research is inherently interdisciplinary. As the season advances, debaters must continually adjust, adapt, develop, and often entirely revise their arguments if they wish to remain effective.

All of the topics that Policy debaters address, from limiting the use of weapons of mass destruction, to reducing aggressive detention practices, and providing social services to the poor, are pulled from the headlines dealing with the most controversial and timely issues of the day. In a world of standardized curriculums and testing, students may not otherwise have an opportunity to explore these relevant, contemporary issues in such depth.

Since many individual two-person teams make up a squad, where research and argument ideas are shared, debaters have self-interest in working together to develop ideas that will benefit the entire team. And since every squad is made up of many debaters who possess diverse levels of experience and skill, a debate squad is a great place for peer-to-peer modeling and cooperative learning.
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“Modern Policy Debate is a true practice in diversity, with students having the opportunity to debate in tournaments hosted in some of the most resource-challenged areas of our inner-cities to the most resource rich public and private secondary schools.”

Older debaters are commonly involved in the instruction of younger debaters and frequently judge younger students at the beginning-level competitions.

The fact that competitive debate requires students to argue both sides of a topic enables students to arrive at conclusions after “reflexive assessments of multiple perspectives” and better appreciate the validity of the opposing side’s argument (Muir, 1993). And since debaters are ultimately responsible for their own wins and losses, they are motivated to think critically, collaborate with their partners and coaches, to question the strength of their own arguments and arguments made by their opponents, and make connections among arguments in any given debate.

The structure of the tournaments provides many opportunities for students to develop their skills. In a single tournament hosted by the Lakeland Central School District last year, 400 students delivered more than 1,100 speeches in a two-day period! Since there are multiple tournaments over the course of a season and throughout one’s career, students have the opportunity to continue to develop and constantly be evaluated by individuals with substantial experience in debate and argumentation.

Tournaments afford students the opportunity to compete against peers with similar abilities and experience in debate. Tournaments also give debaters the opportunity to compete against students with similar interests as well as expose them to debaters with different socioeconomic, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

Modern Policy Debate is a true practice in diversity, with students having the opportunity to debate in tournaments hosted in some of the most resource-challenged areas of our inner-cities to the most resource rich public and private secondary schools. This provides students substantial opportunities to engage the controversies of the day with other students who are outside their normal peer group.

The student-to-coach relationship often takes on a mentor-protégé quality over time, providing yet another supportive, personalized learning experience for all students involved. Debate coaches assist students with the research process, formulating arguments, feedback on argumentation and public speaking technique, and work with students over the entire four-year course of their debate careers.

Sustaining Competitive Policy Debate

Although competitive Policy Debate experienced a decline from the late 1970s until the late 1990s, it is enjoying resurgence in many cities throughout the United States. This resurgence has been driven largely by growth of urban debate leagues that have been built around teaching students in low-income areas Policy Debate skills and providing weekend tournament opportunities for all those involved.

According to the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, since 1997, more than $11 million has been invested in urban debate leagues by school districts such as Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis,
Seattle, Newark, Kansas City, and Chicago. Recent newcomers include Boston, Dallas, Houston, Nashville, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Currently 311 urban high schools and 51 urban middle schools are part of the Urban Debate Network, and more than 37,000 urban public school students have competed in America’s urban debate league since 1997 (NAUDL, 2009).

Driven by their own personal experience, many wealthy and influential debate alums have leveraged millions of additional dollars to bring debate to some of the poorest schools in our nation. And research confirms what their experience has taught them, as studies demonstrate a strong correlation between participation in competitive Policy Debate and improved test scores (Collier, 2004). A recent study (Mezuk, 2009) analyzed data from 10 years of participation in Chicago’s urban debate league and found that debate participants were 70% more likely to graduate and three-times less likely to drop out as those who did not participate, even after accounting for eighth grade test scores and GPA.

The growth of these urban debate leagues has sustained and began to revitalize suburban Policy Debate. More schools with debate programs in urban areas means more local and regional tournaments in which suburban schools may compete—and more schools for them to compete against. In some areas, without these urban debate leagues, it would probably not have been possible to sustain regional Policy Debate.

More suburban and private schools need to make the commitment to competitive Policy Debate that their urban counterparts have made. Although starting a competitive Policy Debate team is not an easy task, it is an achievable and worthwhile goal. All of this obviously involves a commitment of new resources in difficult financial times, but prioritizing this investment is worth it. The Los Angeles City schools, facing millions in deficits and the fallout from the California state budget, have decided to invest thousands of dollars in competitive Policy Debate. Resources exist for priorities and students will participate if the opportunity is provided. Build it and they will come.

Conclusion

Providing competitive Policy Debate opportunities for students is not an easy endeavor and does require substantial leadership by principals and other administrators, the time commitment of a teacher, and the financial resources of the community. But rising test scores, the experience of many alums, and the commitment to our most financially strapped urban schools demonstrates the investment is well worth it. As New York University President Roger Sexton has noted, “Those four years in debate were the educational foundation of everything I did. And I don’t mean that in some simple form...I’m saying the finest education I got from any of the institutions I attended, the foundation of my mind that I got during those four years of competitive Policy Debate; that is, 90% of the intellectual capacity that I operate with today—Fordham for college, Fordham for the PhD, Harvard for law school—all of that is the other 10%.”

It’s worth the investment.

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References


