

Closing the Academic Divide

THROUGH DEBATE

The competitive, student-centered nature of debate gives learners a reason and opportunity to struggle with complicated text in a manner that speaks to their interests.



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Urban youth with great potential often go unrecognized in public schools. When they cease to feel engaged in the classroom, students may drop out, give up, or resort to self-destructive behaviors. Underserved urban youth in particular often grow up without the skills they need to succeed in college and to compete in today's economy.

In Rhode Island's urban core and in Boston, however, many young people are being empowered by debate leagues and related enrichment activities that reverse the negative trends.

Understanding Debate

For more than 100 years, competitive academic debate has been an effective training ground for many policymakers, business executives, legal professionals, and change makers. Yet until the late 1990s, debate training was accessible only to students attending elite institutions and wealthy public schools.

Meanwhile, the achievement gap in the country has been growing. One response has been Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs), which received Open Society seed funding in 1997 and today are supported by public-private partnerships in 19 city school districts nationwide. The UDLs bring life-changing academic debate to students who stand to benefit most—those dropping out of high school for lack of interest, those failing college for lack of preparation, and those who most need to find their voices.

New data from UDLs in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Baltimore speak to the transformative potential of academic debate. The data are encouraging:

- **Debate boosts graduation rates.** Students who joined a debate team were 42 percent more likely to graduate from high school.¹ Among African American males—statistically the most at-risk and lowest-performing population on traditional indicators—debaters were 70 percent more likely to graduate and three times less likely to drop out than nondebating peers.²
- **Debate increases college readiness.** Debaters scored higher than

nondebaters on all sections of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. Debaters overall were 50 percent more likely to reach the English benchmark than nondebating students. African American male debaters were 70 percent more likely to reach the reading benchmark and twice as likely to reach the English benchmark as peers.

- **Debate improves academic outcomes.** After one year of debate, 11th graders' ability to read for accuracy increased more than three grade levels, and their ability to read for fluency and comprehension increased more than two grade levels.³ Students who debated 25 or more rounds during high school had 12th grade GPAs (grade point averages) that were .20 points higher than students who debated fewer than five rounds. African American males who debated in 25 or more rounds had 12th grade GPAs that were .49 points higher than those debating in fewer than five rounds.

The Common Core State Standards challenge students to think like debaters.

The skill sets developed through academic debate—critical thinking, argument synthesis, critical reading, writing, and analysis—are at the forefront of national education reform. As of this writing, 45 states (including all of New England) and three U.S. territories have adopted the Common Core State Standards to address the inadequacies of what is essentially a 19th century education model.

The guiding principle holds that for students to be successful in and beyond high school, the school experience must progress from



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one where teachers stand in front of the room conveying information to one where students actively engage in critical reading, writing, speaking, and thinking across content areas. In short, the Common Core State Standards challenge students to think like debaters.

The Math, English Language Arts, and College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards all underscore the importance of critical-argument skills in learning. The portrait of “students who are college and career ready” laid out at the start of the English Language Arts Standards highlights a vision of high school graduates capable of informed discussion. College and career-ready students can “construct effective arguments ... discern a speaker’s key points ... and ask relevant questions.” They can “read purposefully and listen attentively,” can “adapt their communication in relation to audience,” and can “use relevant evidence when supporting their own points ... making their reasoning clear.”⁴ Likewise, the Standards for Mathematical Practice describe students who can “justify their conclusions [and] communicate them to others,” who can absorb “the arguments of others, decide whether they make sense, and ... clarify or improve the arguments.”⁵

As schools recognize that they cannot do it alone, plans for transformation through leveraging resources and the expertise of teachers, parents, community members, nonprofits, businesses, and the students themselves are taking shape.

Innovations

In New England, two innovative approaches are expanding the urban debate model.

In Boston

The Evidence-Based Argumentation (EBA) initiative developed in Boston helps schools make the fundamental changes in teaching and learning that 21st century success requires. The Boston Debate League trains teachers as catalysts for schoolwide and districtwide transformation. Although still a pilot in 13 high schools, teachers and principals agree that EBA gives educators the tools to create student-centered classrooms where learners can improve their reading, writing, speaking, and listening while covering essential course con-



tent. Significantly, participants report that EBA is fun—a motivating factor for all concerned.

EBA brings the thriving national movement, mostly an after-school debate program, into the classroom. Many struggling students who have not found their current education relevant, are unmotivated, or are on the verge of dropping out are becoming interested in the debate challenge. And challenges make a difference, as suggested by a Gates Foundation study of high school dropouts in which more than 60 percent pointed to a lack of challenge in their classes.⁶

The competitive, student-centered nature of debate gives learners a reason to struggle with complicated text in a manner that speaks to their interests and invites their opinions. In tandem with its robust after-school debate league, EBA in Boston has the potential to transform a teacher's practice and a school's culture.

In Rhode Island

The Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) model adopted by the Rhode Island Urban Debate League (RIUDL) and growing nationwide similarly addresses the need for a fundamental shift in pedagogical framework. The ELO model recognizes that learning is not limited to the classroom or traditional modes of content delivery. ELO students can earn high school credit for after-school and summer learning activities, internships, independent studies in alternative settings, classes on college campuses, and more.⁷

Thanks to a partnership with the Providence After School Alliance (PASA), Providence Public Schools, Central Falls School District, and Woonsocket Public Schools, students at participating schools can use academic debate to earn high school credit for Common Core State Standards. But to do so, they are held to specific benchmarks and participation standards. Through their demonstrated commitment to the debate program, ELO students serve as leaders on their teams and in the RIUDL overall.

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The future is full of exciting possibility for student debate. Imagine a classroom with several students earning credit on the after-school debate team, combined with a teacher committed to challenging all students to manipulate texts and produce creative arguments every day. Further imagine the impact on an entire school if every classroom had such engaged students—and on the district itself if every school had such classrooms. The question for the Boston Debate League and the Rhode Island Urban Debate League is not whether urban debate can make a difference. We know it can. The question is how to get more students involved.

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Endnotes

- 1 Susannah Anderson and Briana Mezuk, "Participating in a Policy Debate Program and Academic Achievement among At-Risk Adolescents in an Urban Public School District: 1997-2007," *Journal of Adolescence* (May 2012).
- 2 Briana Mezuk, "Urban Debate and High School Educational Outcomes for African American Males: The Case of the Chicago Urban Debate League," *Journal of Negro Education* (2009).
- 3 Carol Winkler and Lyshandra Holmes, "Assessment Report: Milwaukee Debate League Year One" (report, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, 2007).
- 4 National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, "Students Who Are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language," *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.
- 5 National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, "Standards for Mathematics Practice," *Common Core State Standards for Mathematics* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.
- 6 John Bridgeland, John Dilulio Jr., and Karen Burke Morison, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" (report, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, Washington, March 2006), <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf>.
- 7 Anne Bowles and Betsy Brand, *Learning around the Clock: Benefits of Expanded Learning Opportunities for Older Youth* (Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, March 2009), http://www.niyp.org/projects/AYPF_ELOs_w-cvr.pdf.