

# The Value of Speech and Debate in the Middle School Years

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## Introduction

The middle school years constitute an important phase in children's development. During this time, children experience the turning point between childhood and adulthood and start to develop the ability to move beyond concrete reasoning to develop abstract decision-making capabilities, to understand their own identity and place in the world, and begin to reason with abstract concepts and ideas.

The educational needs of this age group are unique, and middle school academic programming should "respond to the unique educational and social needs of this age group; it should be based on content standards, habits of mind, and thinking skills; and promote collaborative teaching, learning, and assessment" (CCE, 2005). In this essay, we will explore how participation in a variety of National Speech & Debate Association middle school speaking and debating events supports these unique needs and works to enable middle school students to develop lifelong skills in a supportive



environment that is developmentally appropriate.

The first section of this essay provides a brief overview of the events. The second section articulates the benefits of participation in terms of the ability of different events to serve the unique educational needs of the students. The third section outlines some of the positive benefits of the tournament environment. We complete the essay with some final thoughts.

## The Events

*Public Forum Debate.* The format is a two-on-two competition, with two debaters representing the Pro and two debaters representing the Con. Each person in the debate delivers a four-minute constructive or rebuttal speech and then a two-minute summary or final focus speech. All debaters participate in "cross-fire" questioning and answering periods. Each month, debaters are exposed to a new topic. The February 2015 Public Forum resolution is, "Resolved: On balance, economic globalization benefits worldwide poverty reduction." The resolutions focus on questions of fact, value, or policy.

*Policy Debate.* The format is a two-on-two contest, with two debaters on one team representing the affirmative and two debaters on another team representing the negative. Each person in the debate delivers an eight-minute constructive speech, a five-minute rebuttal speech, asks questions for three minutes, and answers questions for three minutes. In Policy Debate, students debate a resolution for the

entire academic year, though they will debate subsets of the resolution, such as Law of the Sea ratification and Arctic energy development, in specific debates. The current Policy Debate resolution for 2014-15 is, “Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its non-military exploration and/or development of the Earth’s oceans.” The resolutions are always focused on questions of public policy.

*Lincoln-Douglas Debate.* Lincoln-Douglas Debate is a one-on-one format where each side delivers one constructive speech and at least one rebuttal speech. The January-February 2015 Lincoln-Douglas resolution is, “Resolved: Just governments ought to require that employers pay a living wage.” The topics last for two months and generally concern questions of value.

*Congressional Debate.* This style of debate simulates the U.S. legislative process. Referred to as Senators or Representatives, the student competitors generate a full agenda of bills and resolutions for debate. Competitors give speeches in support and in response to proposed bills and network to garner support. The topics for discussion vary by tournament, and competitors submit proposed bills ahead of time.

*Extemporaneous Speaking.* This is a limited preparation speaking event that relies upon research of current topics and individual analysis in response to a prompt given at the tournament. Students compile research materials on current events and topics that they and their coaches anticipate will be selected. Extemp is often considered the speaking event that is closest to debate in that participants develop research skills, prepare for a variety of topics, and construct speeches with limited preparation.

*Original Oratory.* In Original Oratory, students present a ten-minute speech on a topic of their choice. The speech can be intended

to inform or persuade and is prepared in advance. The speech should be well-researched and developed. Competitors balance content with delivery and style, and are encouraged to select topics that they care about. A prepared speech can be used for multiple competitions.

*Storytelling.* Students select a published story that meets a specified theme and then perform up to five minutes of the story. Participants prepare to tell their story to young children. Manuscripts are not allowed. Storytelling includes a full performance of the story, and competitors often use the full stage space to act out the story. Competitors prepare new stories for each tournament to meet the specified themes.

### Core Skills

Although there are a variety of events, there are fundamental skills that all students who participate in these events have the opportunity to develop, including public speaking and argumentation skills—the fundamental building blocks of speaking and debating. Through learning these skills, they will develop many other academic skills and have the opportunity to grow as individuals as they develop from children into adults.

There is a growing body of research that demonstrates participation in speaking and debating competition promotes a host of fundamental skills that lead to academic and personal success.

*Reasoning and decision-making skills.* The CCE (2005) argued that middle school teachers need to “ask students to grapple with open-ended questions based on meaningful work and to synthesize information so they can support their opinions with evidence.” This is important because middle school students are “capable of critical and complex thinking and develop these skills by using them.”

This type of reasoning and decision-making is exactly the skill set that competitive debate helps students to develop. In order to take any position in a debate, students must confront an open-ended question in the form of a resolution or motion and synthesize information from a variety of resources that they discover on their own to make a consistent argument that is supported by evidence.

This type of reasoning and decision-making skill is the foundation for critical thinking skills. Austin Freeley and David Steinberg (2005) contend, “since classical times, debate has been one of the best methods of learning and applying the principles of critical thinking” (p. 2). Other meta-studies including Allen, et. al. (1999), Colbert (1987), Barfield (1989), and testimonial research (Katsulas & Bauschard, 2000) reach similar conclusions.

Ideally, middle school academic opportunities will provide students with chances to “explore relationships and connections, and integrates information across disciplines” (CCE, 2005). Since speaking and debating research will require students to draw on content in economics, philosophy, and political science, middle school competition encourages students to make connections across these various fields to produce an argument. To succeed in competition, students will need to “explain, interpret, apply, analyze, synthesize, solve problems, and communicate information” effectively to a judge.

*Abstract reasoning and empathy.* It is important for middle school students to “listen to others and develop respect for divergent viewpoints” (CCE, 2005). Since debate requires students to address both sides of the topic, students are forced to confront and understand the perspective of the other. Development of this type of empathy is important for individuals

to accept the outcome of decisions regarding matters of importance to them and to be able to properly engage their opponent's arguments (within a contest debate or outside in the community).

At least one study (Rogers 2002, 2005) indicates there is evidence that debaters are more socially tolerant. This occurs because debaters have to develop arguments on both sides of an issue, leading students to develop empathy for the position of their opponent (Harrigan, 2008; Muir, 1993). Empirical research proves that debate involvement enhances beneficial argumentative skills, while reducing verbal aggression (Colbert 1993, 1994). Reflecting on the Open Society Institute's lengthy experience, Breger (1998) reports that "debate teaches students to command attention with words, provides students with an alternate outlet for day-to-day conflicts, and gives them a tool with which they can combat physical aggression" (p. 66–67).

*Presentation skills.* Students should have mastered common presentation skills by the time they finish middle school (Kendall, 2008). Debate competition facilitates the development of a number of public speaking skills. Participation in Public Forum Debate requires students to present information that they prepare in advance on important public policy controversies to inexperienced judges and to convince them that their side is best argued. Lincoln-Douglas Debate requires the same type of presentation but ordinarily on value topics. Original Oratory requires students to create a unique presentation that will move an audience emotionally. Extemp requires students to quickly assemble presentations on a variety of current events.

*Confidence.* It is important for middle school students to develop confidence and self-esteem (CCE, 2005). There is considerable evidence that competitive debate develops confidence and supports student empowerment. Debate participants

"often experience debate as a form of personal empowerment. This includes feelings of personal efficacy, educational engagement, and political agency" (O'Donnell, 2010, p. 51). It gives students confidence they need to interact with peers and authority figures. As Cori Dauber (1989) explains, debate teaches students that "they ought not be intimidated by the rhetoric of expertise" surrounding policy issues (p. 207). See also Bauschard (2014).

*Oral communication and advocacy.* The development of oral communication skills is an important part of any middle school curriculum (Henderson, n.d.). Oral communication, including the persuasion of legislators, judges, executive branch officials, and the public at large is the lifeblood of democracy. Debaters consistently rank improved oral communication skills as one of the top benefits of participation in debate (Huston, 1985; Lybbert, 1985; Matlon and Keele, 1984; Oliver, 1985; Williams, McGee, and Worth, 2001).

*Leadership training.* Today many middle school students are interested in developing leadership skills. Debate is a "premier training ground for...future leaders" (O'Donnell, 1998). In the U.S., many former debaters occupy strong leadership roles in society. These include Thomas Goldstein, cofounder of SCOTUSBLOG and a litigator who has argued more than 20 cases before the U.S. Supreme Court; Neal Katyal, the deputy solicitor general of the United States; John F. Kennedy Jr.; and numerous U.S. senators and representatives.

*Practical life skills.* Middle school students "need variety in their day and in what is asked of them... [They also] need increasing autonomy and responsibility as well as opportunities to demonstrate that they can behave responsibly" (CCE, 2005). Debate competitions provide this not only by introducing substantial active learning during the day but also by introducing an environment where students have to behave in a mature

manner between competitions, move about responsibly between rounds of debate, and interact with other adults and peers in a responsible manner. Tournament environments also provide a space with "abundant energy and interest that should be tapped instead of squelched" (CCE, 2005).

*Social interaction skills.* The expanded core curriculum has identified the importance of social interaction skills for middle school students. Well-developed social interaction skills are central to building relationships, establishing positive self-esteem, and for acceptance into society ("Social," 2012). While most students at this age know most common social rules, middle school is the time for them to recognize social challenges and problem-solve to resolve those difficulties. Participation in speech and debate provides the opportunity to engage in role-playing and discussion of scenarios, both of which may be especially helpful for developing strong social interaction skills. "Social skills can be refined by participating in activities such as drama, debate, and health classes" ("Social," 2012).

*Communication apprehension.* Many middle school students suffer from some level of communication apprehension (CA) or stage fright (Comadena & Prusank, 1998). CA is not limited to public speaking, however. We all experience different levels of apprehension in various communication settings, including public speaking, meetings, interpersonal, and groups. Left unattended, high levels of CA correlates with poorer academic performance as students disengage and withdraw. Studies have also documented that levels of apprehension increase as students progress from elementary to middle school. Throughout this progression, researchers have found that not only do higher levels of CA correlate with lower academic achievement, but also that lower

levels of CA correlate with higher academic achievement. For example, this study found that students with low CA had achievement scores that were 23% higher than students that were high in CA (Comadena & Prusank, 1998, p. 274). Participation in speech and debate, however, better prepares students for handling their apprehension. In a study conducted with at-risk middle school students in Atlanta, participation in a computer-assisted debate project resulted in lower levels of apprehension in all forms of communication, including interpersonal, group, and public speaking (Winkler, 2007, p. 797-8).

### Additional Benefits

In addition to skills development, participation in speech and debate also offers a number of other benefits.

*Significance beyond the classroom.* The CCE (2005) argues that activities middle school students participate in should have significance beyond the classroom. Participation in speech and debate is certainly an activity that has that significance. Students speak and debate about issues relevant to their local and national communities, attempt to persuade judges and other students in the debate of their point of view, and may often need to confront questions of their own identity when issues related to race and gender are introduced into the debates.

*A safe and trusting environment.* The CCE (2005) reports that middle school students “are willing to take risks if they believe they are in a safe and trusting environment.” Debate competitions offer such an environment because students engage in individual rounds of competition in a classroom against specific opponents with a single judge who provides constructive feedback to the students. This “safe space” makes it possible for participants to test their skills and grow as speakers and debaters without all of the risks associated

with participating in a greater public space.

### Student Development and a Variety of Events

Different speech and debate events also serve the developmental needs of different students as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Storytelling supports the growth of concrete memorization and basic presentation skills. Extemp builds on these basic developmental skills by requiring students to organize arguments and supporting information into a presentation for an audience. Lincoln-Douglas Debate requires that application of argumentation and more abstract reasoning skills during an on-the-fly, give-and-take process. Public Forum Debate utilizes that same process but requires students to do it while working with a partner. Policy Debate requires all of that plus the ability to manage a large quantity of information and work with a partner throughout the entire process.

Participating in speech and debate during middle school years is arguably the most important because they “are highly formative for behavior patterns in education and health that have enduring, lifelong significance” (CCE, 2005). Since speaking, argumentation, and reasoning skills are considered foundational for any academic and career success, it is important that students develop these skills when they are young.

### Conclusion

The middle school years are highly formative and provide the building blocks for essential skills that will enable students to succeed in high school, college, and later in life. Deanna Kuhn’s research on the use of debate in middle school classrooms confirms just how important the practice of debate is for preparing students for academic success. Kuhn, Professor of Psychology at Columbia University, compared two sets of

students in a public middle school in Harlem. Both sets of students took a twice-weekly philosophy class from sixth through eighth grades. One group was provided with a traditional classroom, with a textbook and teacher-led discussion. A second experimental group participated in online debates, with four new topics introduced each year. The students in this experimental group were assigned to sides on the topics, and were encouraged to research their sides and anticipate the arguments that their opponents might make. At the end of each year, both groups of students were given writing prompts, and the experimental group demonstrated just what participation in debate has to offer.

By the end of the third year, “nearly 80 percent of the students in the experimental group were writing essays that identified and weighed opposing views in an argument. Less than 30 percent of the students in the comparison group were doing so” (Burns, 2012).

With their debate experience, students in the experimental group demonstrated an ability to recognize divergent opinions, critically engage opposing views, and think about how opposing positions could be weighed and reconciled. It is difficult to imagine a parent or teacher who wouldn’t want the same for their child or student. ✨

(For article references, see next page.)



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