



Making the Case for Student Debate Leagues

*Boston youths hone skills in public speaking, critical thinking,
and communication* By CARALEE ADAMS

Debate judges Yerim Lee, Sharon Lee, and Andrew Abrego take notes as students from Josiah Quincy Upper School and Neighborhood House Charter School square off in a championship qualifying debate in Boston.



JOEL BENJAMIN

ON A FRIDAY in February, the ingredients for fluffernutters—peanut butter, marshmallow fluff, and sliced bread—are set out on a table during debate practice at Boston Green Academy. The teachers know that food is a draw for the high school students—as is a chance to learn from a college student with debate experience just before their weekend competition.

“Because it’s tournament day, we’re going to do something extra fun to warm up your brains,” said Jared Aimone, a

sophomore at Boston College who volunteers with the debate team at this grade 6–12 charter school in the Brighton neighborhood of Boston. “You’ve noticed in rounds that you can’t write as fast as people talk. I’m going to play a song, and you try to write down everything that you hear—and the only person that has to be able to read what you write is you.”

As Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” plays, students listen closely and scribble all the items they catch from the rapid-fire lyrics. The winner lists 55, but everyone gets a candy bar for

trying. Aimone, 20, explains how shorthand and using arrows to track the flow of affirmative and negative points during a debate can give competitors an edge.

Effective notetaking, critical thinking, and public speaking are among the skills that students can improve through participating in debate—an activity that research shows can boost academic performance. A new study by Beth Schueler of the University of Virginia and Katherine Larned of Harvard found that students who participated in policy debate as an extracurricular activity in Boston Public Schools tended to do better in middle school, high school, and beyond as compared to non-debating peers (see “Resolved: Debate Programs Boost Literacy and College Enrollment,” *research*, p. 52).

Debating had a positive impact on English language arts scores—equivalent to two-thirds of a year of typical 9th-grade learning. The improvement in performance was largest for the lowest-achieving students. Debate participation also translated into increased high-school graduation rates and enrollment in four-year colleges and universities.

Involving students in policy debate is one of the most impactful academic interventions for secondary school students, according

to the study, which between 2007 and 2017 followed about 3,500 students who were part of the Boston Debate League (BDL). The nonprofit supports debate teams in Boston Public Schools, which have a large concentration of low-income students of color and don’t have the resources to field debate teams on their own. BDL is one of 20 urban debate leagues in the United States, located in such cities as Miami, Chicago, and New York.

Inclusive Debate Culture

The Boston program, which has novice, junior varsity, and varsity divisions, plus teams that debate in Spanish, is designed to be welcoming to all. Some participants are not native English speakers, some have special needs, and many are not on grade level academically.

“Our goal is to be inclusive to all because we believe debate is for everyone,” said Roger Nix, director of the after-school debate program at BDL, noting that only about 10 percent of students seek out the activity on their own, so there is a big push to educate and recruit. “A lot of people have this big fear about what debate is, and we try to demystify that. It’s a chance to learn more about issues that are important in the world, share your opinions, and



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Policy debate teams are guided by coaches who are often debate league alumni, experienced college debaters, or both. Students from Boston Green Academy, with coaches Elise Green and Erica Watson, listen to mentor Jared Aimone share note-taking tips at debate practice.



BOSTON DEBATE LEAGUE

Boston Latin Academy student Rinji Sherpa delivers a speech while teammate Adriana Carvajal finds evidence to support his arguments during a live debate.

actually have people listen to you and give you feedback.”

The league creates an easy on-ramp. There is no cost to students, and those with jobs or other activities can participate as they are able. It’s one of the few spaces where students from different grades can interact in an extracurricular academic club. There is positive peer pressure, with upper-class students encouraging younger students. The small-team structure allows students to receive attention from a caring

them to attend one day—for many, becoming the first in their families to do so.

Students find a connection to the larger community beyond their neighborhoods when they join about 170 others from across the city for the two-day competition. They are dressed casually in jeans and pajama bottoms, and some wear matching hooded sweatshirts printed with the name of their school’s debate team. Just past the check-in table, there are pans of rice, beans, and chicken for an early supper. Providing free food throughout the event is another way BDL tries to remove barriers to participation and promote camaraderie.

Students chat with one another as they find seats in a large room with a table bearing trophies that will be awarded when the competition concludes the following afternoon. Over the din of teenage conversation, the event kicks off with a recognition of graduating seniors from each of the 22 high schools represented. Brandon Ren, winner of the \$1,000 Senior Speaker contest, approaches the podium to give a testimonial about the impact of debate, while the crowd applauds and shouts, “We love you, Brandon!”

Brandon tells the audience that, as a first-generation son of Chinese immigrants, he was raised to believe good kids stayed quiet and didn’t challenge the status quo. He says he joined debate in 7th grade and that the experience taught him to think in new ways, expand his vocabulary, articulate complex ideas, and formulate persuasive arguments.

“The Boston Debate League became my sanctuary. A place where I could express myself freely, engage in spirited

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adult coach in a nurturing environment.

Debate “has the potential to transform students, their school communities, and the wider community,” said Kim Willingham, the executive director of BDL, which started in 2005 and serves about 700 students each year in its after-school debate program. “Once you’re a debater, I think you approach everything differently. You listen to learn, not necessarily to respond. I think it makes you more compassionate.”

New Possibilities

Near Boston Common and the Massachusetts Statehouse, teenagers stream into the Suffolk University Law School building on Friday afternoon for the last high school tournament of the regular debate season. With its massive columns and marble atrium, the building has an academic feel, which suits BDL’s strategy of exposing kids to college environments and inspiring

dialogue, and discover a strength in my convictions,” says Brandon, an 18-year-old senior at Boston Latin Academy in Dorchester, the city’s largest neighborhood. “With each debate round I found my voice growing stronger, my confidence going higher, and my fears diminishing. . . . No longer confined by the shackles of silence, I seize every opportunity to speak my truth and advocate for change.”

Learning through Competition

Once the schedule is posted, Brandon and fellow debaters scatter throughout the law building for the first round of the tournament. They joke around as they enter the classrooms but turn serious once the debates begin. They compete in teams of two, with each session typically lasting 60 to 90 minutes. Every student gives an eight-minute opening speech, followed by three minutes of cross-examination and

a five-minute closing argument.

This form of debate focuses on one resolution for an entire season: this year's topic concerns income inequality. Depending on the division, the students present information either from packets provided by the league or from their own research. They deepen their knowledge and perspectives on a range of federal economic policies, because they are required to argue both sides of the cases.

Varsity debaters Taygen Richards and Sybille Delice from Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, located across the Charles River in Cambridge, read from their laptops research they gathered about a plan to address income inequality: reparations for slavery. In this division, competitors try to squeeze in as much information as possible in their allotted time, which means mastering speed talking and attentive listening.

Sybille's voice crescendos as she makes her argument in favor of compensating descendants of enslaved Black Americans for their ancestors' forced labor, for Jim Crow segregation, and for discriminatory practices that Sybille emphasizes have "robbed" them of the opportunity to build wealth. When the judge's timer beeps, she stops mid-sentence. The questioning begins immediately.

The opposing team asks who will get reparations, and if there

is a point when someone isn't "Black enough" to qualify.

Not missing a beat, Taygen responds, "There is no such thing as not being Black enough. They are still a descendant. . . . If in their bloodline they have been affected by slavery in some way, they are considered a minority community in terms of race and being a person of color. They would get reparations."

Taygen, who is African American, said that during such intense moments in a competition, it's hard not to get emotional. "One side of my head was like, 'No, they did not just say that.' And the other side was, 'Keep talking,'" said the 17-year-old junior whose three years in debate have taught her to stay focused and choose her words carefully. "No matter where you go in your life, you need to speak in a way that people will hear you . . . asserting yourself professionally," said Taygen, who would like to study sociology and cognitive science in college.

Sybille, also 17, said she's improved her communication skills through debate, which she thinks will be useful in her chosen career field of biology. "A lot of people think that scientists are just in a lab," she said, "but you have to talk about your research in an effective way—and debate has helped me with that."

Students are developing critical thinking skills in debate, said BDL's Willingham. "They're learning how to question themselves, question the world, question other people's perspectives—and to



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BDL includes a Spanish-only division called Debate en Español. Everett High School, north of Boston, fields a Spanish-language team coached by Ruth Cardona-Suarez. Students Thalia Patino Molano and Tiffany Marquina Acosta were later crowned city champions.



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Aisha Mohamed, a novice-level debater with Josiah Quincy Upper School, delivers her opening speech at the tournament, reading from prepared evidence.

consider the evidence,” she said, adding that the process is steeped in “really thoughtful, compelling arguments.”

Feedback and Encouragement

In another classroom, Kamdyn Sweeting and Surayah Campbell compete in the novice division. The pace is slower here, as students flip through three-ring binders with laminated pages of prepared arguments to make their case for “baby bonds,” a proposed government policy that would provide children with a publicly funded trust account at birth. The coach gave star-

The pair was surprised to win a fifth-place medal at their first tournament; that encouraged them to stick with the club for the rest of the season, Surayah said.

“I tell students, ‘You’re going to have to learn to feel comfortable with public speaking,’” McCoy said. “‘Would you rather struggle now, in high school—or in college or on the job, when there’s more at stake?’ The struggle is inevitable, but I would prefer to be the one to help them through it.”

Meeting peers from across Boston at the tournaments helps seniors confront any insecurities they may have about their capabilities and fitting in after high school. “I definitely notice a self-esteem boost after they hang with other students,” McCoy said. “They are able to hold their own, and that carries over to them feeling more prepared entering college.”

Volunteer judges, including attorneys and BDL alumni, are assigned to oversee the debates. It’s a safe place to receive constructive criticism, says Alison Eggers, chair of the BDL board. “The

emphasis is on civil discourse, so it takes on a different quality than what we sometimes see in the media these days,” she said. “After the round, students get comments on their ballots that they can read and reflect on with their coaches and their teams, giving them layers of feedback.”

Moselle Burke, 25, joined debate at the invitation of his middle-school English teacher and competed for six years, advancing to the national debate circuit. Regularly volunteering at tournaments, he assesses the needs of each debater and tries to give actionable suggestions.

Receiving feedback from opponents and judges during a competition teaches students how to think critically about their own presentations without being too harsh on themselves.

shaped helium balloons to the seniors at the tournament, and Kamdyn has his attached to his purple hair. He and Surayah are new to debate this year as seniors at Neighborhood House Charter School in Dorchester, and both are college bound.

“I sought out debate because I’m so nervous. I stutter a lot, so it helps me get over that,” Surayah said. “I’m actually really scared every time I come to a tournament, but I like to see the fruits of my labor. It just reminds me that if I put my mind to something, I can do it.”

Ellen McCoy, the debate coach at Neighborhood House, said many kids have anxiety about public speaking, but Surayah and Kamdyn overcame it through hard work. “That fear fueled them to be hyper prepared. They would spend hours on scripting their constructive arguments,” she said. “During their cross-examinations, they used to be a little hesitant. You could barely hear them speak. Now they’re a lot more confident and assertive.”

“As a judge, I want to make sure that I am rewarding students for the really clever, creative, and intense work that they’ve done to learn about an argument or a policy topic,” Burke said. “And I want to make sure that the things that I tell debaters they can improve on are focused on developing the skills that I think debate should actually cultivate.”

Now an accountant in Boston, Burke said debate influences the way he makes sense of information, interprets arguments, understands evidence, and articulates his positions. Receiving feedback from opponents and judges during a competition teaches students how to think about their own presentations critically without being too harsh on themselves, he added.

In contrast to a classroom where one teacher may grade the work of 25 students, the debate setting is overseen by judges who listen to students in small groups. “[Students] get written and verbal feedback for every debate that is individualized to them and

their arguments to help them make direct improvements—and that happens four times in every tournament, 16 times in a year,” Nix said. “They are probably getting more feedback about their work in debate tournaments than a whole year of English class.”

Coaching with Care and Support

Midway through the tournament, coaches meet to share updates and advice. Nix begins with news of final events of the season, including a roller-skating party for students who are considered “engaged debaters.” They can earn hours toward that designation by attending practices and tournaments; high school students can serve as volunteer judges.

To recruit and retain student debaters, BDL partners with schools to give coaches a modest stipend and a budget to cover food, transportation, swag, and field trips.

Boston Green Academy has had an active debate team for more than a decade, thanks to support from BDL. “The world of debate does not usually reflect the community we serve,” said Head of School Matt Holzer. “We particularly seek out those

Garven. Just as the mock debate on universal basic income is about to begin, Then offers some advice: “Be really energetic. Let’s try to have more oomph in what we say.” After the rehearsal, Garven gives 7th grader Violet Kaney notes on her delivery: “I loved how at the end of sentences you would look up at the judge and emphasize those words. And it does make a big impact,” she said. “On your presentation, rather than reading everything as fast as you can, it’s more effective to find the most important pieces of information and slow down slightly.”

Transferable Skills and Knowledge

Debaters learn to advocate for themselves in the classroom, in college, and in the workplace, said BDL’s Willingham.

“We are really intentional about meeting them where they are,” she said. “We scaffold and provide evidence in ways that are accessible. . . . Sometimes it’s through debate that they learn, ‘Oh, I too can thrive.’ And that transfers into how they approach learning.”

Surayah and Kamdyn, the pair from Neighborhood House,

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who are not academic all-stars but who like to argue. We find it’s a very productive outlet. They become strong advocates and leaders who move our school in the right direction.”

Unlike a sports team, which typically expects players to attend every practice and game, BDL recognizes that many of their kids can’t make that kind of commitment. Some have jobs or take care of siblings and will try debate for a year. Others, like Brandon Ren, make it to high levels of competition and travel with the support of BDL. During the summer of 2023, he attended the Dartmouth Debate Institute, and, in April 2024, he participated in the Urban Debate National Championship at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Brandon and his debate partner, Alana Laforest, 16, a sophomore at Boston Latin, placed 11th among 37 teams.

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“It’s all about community—social and emotional support,” said Anastasia Kolokithas, co-coach of one of BDL’s Debate en Español teams at Everett High School in Everett, a northern suburb of Boston. Many of the issues touch on social justice and economics, she said, which, along with the small-group dynamic, fosters personal connections. Students “learn about how these topics affect their own lives, their family’s lives, and that opens a lot of avenues,” Kolokithas said.

At Boston Green, just three girls attend a February middle school practice—but the students said they like the individual attention they get from their two coaches, Jodi Then and Emily

said debate experience has had tangible payoffs. Surayah said she’s become a better writer, which has helped in her college application essays and acceptance to 13 schools as of April. Kamdyn said it’s improved his research skills. An added bonus: the two get extra credit in their Advanced Placement Language and Composition class for participating in debate.

For heritage language speakers (who speak Spanish at home with their families), being part of Debate en Español can improve their fluency and be empowering. Debating in Spanish in a more formal setting also exposes them to more academic vocabulary, Kolokithas said.

Violet Kaney from Boston Green said learning all the economic terms in this year’s policy-debate packet has helped her in school. She’s noticed that kids in debate, including her, are more likely to volunteer to read aloud in class, because they want to get practice with public speaking. Violet said that it was at summer debate camp, which BDL offers for free to students from its participating schools, where she talked to a teacher about becoming an attorney.

“Once you join something where you are really passionate, it helps you figure out who you want to be when you’re older,” said Violet, 13, who is interested in a career as a public defense lawyer. “I feel like it would be such an honor to help people who are struggling.”

When students’ debate positions are critiqued, they are forced to think quickly—answering cross-examination questions they haven’t seen in advance. BDL’s Nix said that this skill of thinking on one’s feet can translate into test taking. Through debate,

students gain the self-confidence to tackle a challenging essay question even if they aren't certain of the answer.

Christian Swift, a freshman at Fenway High School in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, said he likes the competitive aspect of debate and is committed to continuing because of the friends he's made on the team. The background knowledge he's learned from debate has been useful in school. "I feel like I'm

"It's a pretty big deal and well-earned," said Tristen Grannum, the middle school debate coach. "He not only leads the club, he makes sure everybody is at their best before tournaments and learns how to navigate the debate world."

Peer leadership is a key element of the BDL model. Teams elect captains, such as Brandon, and students are encouraged to be out front with recruiting. Policy debate is an extra academic commitment and can seem boring to some, Brandon said, but the team element makes it fun.

"I'm proud of how the students support each other," said Tyler Kirk, the Boston Latin high school debate coach. "The older students are really excited to help out the younger, novice students—passing on how it works."

Today's practice is all about reviewing the judges' ballots from the tournament. In his small group, Brandon listens to freshmen junior-varsity debater Adriana Carvajal, 14, and her partner, Rinji Sherpa, 15, explain their frustration in one round when their opponents failed to provide a card beforehand that cited outside evidence. Brandon advises them to firmly, but tactfully, bring that to the attention of a judge in the future.

Kirk chimes in: "Did you give them the best news about the judging situation? Since this was their last JV tournament, next year when they're on varsity, those judges are the best."

Adriana says: "I'm not doing varsity!"

Kirk: "You can do it. You can definitely do it. It's going to be great."

Adriana asks Brandon about the time commitment of varsity, what's involved in doing original research, and his goals after high school. Brandon does not plan to continue competing in college but does want to stay connected to his high school team and BDL as a volunteer alumni

judge. "I can help coach all of you guys next year going into varsity—just not in person," said Brandon, who may offer debate tutoring sessions online.

After a few more minutes of back-and-forth, Adriana softens her stance: "I think I'll try varsity, just more toward the end of next season."

While Adriana admits she's still a little scared, she said that she was persuaded by hearing about what it takes to move up a division from someone who has been there.

"I've come out of my shell," Adriana said. "I have my coaches and my other peers. I know what I'm doing more and how everything works. I feel more confident about next year."

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Senior Brandon Ren and sophomore Alana Laforest of Boston Latin Academy earned top speaker awards. Brandon plans to attend UMass Amherst next fall.

more aware of issues," he said. "Homelessness is a problem, for example. But thanks to debate, I know why it's a problem and how the problem could be fixed."

Reflecting with Peers

On the Monday following the weekend tournament, students in grades 6 to 12 gather for debate practice after school at Boston Latin Academy. They grab candy and granola bars from a box as they enter the classroom, charged with extra energy since they've learned that school will be closed tomorrow for a snow day.

It's a day of celebration for the high school team, which had several top finishers in the competition. Students and coaches applaud enthusiastically as these competitors are recognized. One of them is Brandon, who received his team's Legacy Award for leadership.