

# CREATING CONFIDENT STUDENTS: THE ADVANTAGES OF THE NATIONAL JUNIOR FORENSIC LEAGUE

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*As middle school teachers and principals seek ways to improve the communication and leadership skills of their students, an examination of the National Junior Forensic League provides a positive option.*

The business of schools is providing an education for students. Within this context, principals and teachers search for ways to provide enrichment opportunities for their students. The result of their effort is a number of programs—co-curricular and extra-curricular—to enhance what is being offered in the classroom. A brief survey of these programs reveals that students have the opportunity to participate in athletic, as well as fine arts activities. However, many schools do not have structured programs to promote and sustain positive communication experiences.

Recently, the National Forensic League (NFL) – founded to honor students in grades nine through twelve for their communication activities and competitive experiences – established the National Junior Forensic League (NJFL) for students in middle and junior high schools. This article provides a justification for the NFJL by exploring the absence of communication programs in many schools and possible ways for principals and teachers to start and sustain a program to promote communication skills.

## **Communication is important for adolescents.**

Acquiring communication skills is very important for everyone, but particularly for adolescents. One reason for this is the need to communicate with adults in order to get what they want. Adults hold the keys to the kingdom for adolescents: Parents have control over the resources and home environment, whatever that might be; teachers are in the position of providing instruction on a range of necessary subjects during the majority of the calendar

year; employers have influence over the levels of responsibility shown by young people, and rewarded in a work environment; and the general public must be considered in the day-to-day routine of life. In all of these situations, effective communication is the key; and, helping students to begin improving their communication skills early in their school careers can promote confidence later on when children have to face situations where effective communication skills will be an asset. Most scholars and practitioners in the field recognize this importance.

Having access to speech training and communication activities, is not just for the upper middle class or students enrolled in elite private schools. Effective speech training is especially important for average public school students, who may want to become future leaders, managers, or organizers of community activities, but do not have access to parents or adult family members with the knowledge to guide them into the activities necessary for acquiring what Dr. Richard Brislin, a psychologist at the Institute of Culture and Communication at the University of Hawaii describes as “power skills.” Two of these skills are writing well and speaking effectively in public. Without parents or adult family members, who are themselves able to discuss issues effectively, negotiate difficult situations, or influence others persuasively, students must turn to their teachers and school environment for help—the only viable option they have for gaining access to information and skills necessary to help them communicate effectively.

Unfortunately, despite the significance of communication in their lives, many

students do not receive communication training, fear public speaking situations, and demonstrate avoidance behavior when asked to speak in front of a group of adults or their peers. For a number of reasons, including limited knowledge or information on the topic, lack of resources to fund new programs, perceived lack of interest by students and teachers in forensic activities, and competing curricular programming, some administrators have been reluctant to support communication activities. This has resulted in students not having the opportunity to develop their communication skills through a program specifically designed to assist in this development.

Principals and building supervisors are particularly influential in the development of programs to support communication activities for a number of reasons. Initially, even the most inclusive models of professional development have the principal or building supervisor providing leadership to their staff, while the teachers and professional staff members are empowered to actually craft the details of curricular or program reforms. If the principal shows support for a program, most staff members are at least willing to make an initial effort to consider the option. The willingness of teachers to consider innovative ideas and programs is supported in theory and in practice by the numerous programs that have moved forward due to the demonstrated support of the principal or building supervisor. The involvement of principals also is necessary because they can allocate resources to support the start-up and implementation costs. While communication activities may be relatively inexpensive, there are some costs that must be incurred. Prin-

cipals are uniquely empowered to help in this area. Finally, principals have the ability to interact regularly with principals, teachers, and leaders from other schools about their programs. If principals are advocates for communication skills training, it is more likely that other professionals will consider similar reforms at their schools.

Additionally, there are few established vehicles that enable children to get personal recognition for demonstrating effective communication skills in their academic or extra-curricular activities. For example, many middle and junior high school students belong to 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire, or other school-related clubs. In these organizations, they often have opportunities to speak in front of groups of adults and their peers. In addition, many co-curricular activities require students to work in groups and communicate in one-to-one situations. Absent from these activities in most situations is a recognition program in the schools for the progress students make with their communication skills.

Compounding this situation is the lack of legitimacy assigned to communication activities by parents. Legitimacy, in this case, is defined by what the parents have invested in the activity. For example, if parents must purchase athletic clothing and equipment in order for their child to participate in a sport, they are more likely to make sure that the child's needs are served and appropriate recognition is received for their child's efforts. Similarly, if music instruments or art supplies are purchased, parents believe they should be used and concerts performed. Taking this to its logical end, when parents and children must decide which events should be chosen when a conflict arises between competing activities, the activity in which the family has most heavily "invested" usually is chosen. So, when a school doesn't offer an academic program—such as one where students learn, practice, and are rewarded for their communication skills—parents are not even given the option of considering any kind of investment, and the children who could most benefit from such an opportunity lose out.

Thus, a two-headed problem plagues the middle and junior high student. On the one hand, there is pressure to communicate effectively; on the other, there is the fear and uncertainty associated with certain communication situations. Through it all, recognition programs often are lacking for

students who participate or excel with their communication skills. Clearly, the need for a communication program or activity to benefit all children is needed.

### **The NJFL is one option worth considering.**

What is the NJFL? The National Forensic League began the NJFL in 1995 to publicly recognize the communication activities of students in grades six through eight. Modeled after the NFL, the NJFL is an honor society for younger students; and students who are members earn points when they speak in different situations. Because schools have different approaches to providing communication experiences for their students, a flexible program for earning points in the NJFL was developed by a national committee of teachers and administrators.

In this context, students earn participation points in a number of ways, including: Reading the announcements at school, introducing a speaker or program at the school, being involved with a school radio station, or speaking in non-competitive situations. There are no restrictions on the number or type of communication activities that are accepted by the NJFL. In addition, for those schools with speech, debate, or declamation teams, or that have students who participate in oratorical contests sponsored by local civic organizations, students can earn points for their participation in rounds of competition.

In both situations, students earn points based upon their *level of involvement*, not the quality of their performance. This is especially important because the middle and junior high school students should have the opportunity to experience a wide range of activities, without the pressure to always win. When students are rewarded for their participation, they can experience the small successes that are so important and contribute to a healthy self-concept. Each time a student participates in a non-competitive communication activity, or in interscholastic speech, debate, or student congress activities, points are earned. This provides an on-going motivation for students to qualify for membership and continue to earn points. As the point total grows for each student, levels of accomplishment are met, new degrees are awarded, and seals of recognition are provided.

### **Why students like the NJFL**

As a matter of record, since its incep-

tion in 1995, nearly 300 schools nationwide have established local chapters and student memberships total nearly 3,000 according to records available at the NFL National Office. Once students become members, they receive a hand-lettered and sealed certificate, may order and wear the NJFL lapel pin, and earn points until they finish the eighth grade. There are a number of reasons why the NJFL has been popular in schools which have established local chapters.

Initially, the NJFL does not have to be an extra activity to insert into the existing curriculum. Because communication activities can be readily integrated into existing curricula, teachers find it easy to recognize and reward students who excel in communication skills. One reason why teachers who have adopted this program continue to like it stems from the availability of books and articles written to help them learn about and to integrate communication-related activities across the curriculum. Because the NJFL is designed to recognize all communication activities, teachers can count any school or community-based communication experiences in a student's point total. The NJFL seeks to promote participation. When all students can be recognized and rewarded—no matter what their ability levels—the result is a positive experience for all.

Similarly, the NJFL is user-friendly for teachers and school officials because students earn points for communication activities and competition. Since the teachers are the ones who decide what can be counted as a communication activity, it is easy for them to keep track of a student's points. The NJFL is designed to keep the control of the program in the hands of the local teachers or advisers. The NFL Office provides promotional materials, membership record keeping forms, and assistance. However, each school is allowed to establish its own level of activity.

Students like the NJFL because of the point-earning process that is involved. All students like to watch their point totals to grow; and, when the next highest degree is earned, a seal of accomplishment for that level of activity is awarded. In addition, for students who graduate from the eighth grade, special recognition is offered in the form of a diploma sticker. This on-going recognition helps to sustain a student's interest in the program. As a further incentive, teachers earn a percentage of their students' total points, allowing those who

teach and coach the opportunity for recognition for their own involvement with the NJFL.

An added benefit of the NJFL is the possibility for middle and junior high school students to transfer a percentage of their earned points (up to 10 percent) onto their membership application for the National Forensic League. This is a great incentive for younger students who look ahead to involvement in a high school activity and the effect of this connection can be significant, given the literature which suggests that the transition year between middle or junior high school and high school is especially influential in helping children feel comfortable and to fit into the high school environment more quickly.<sup>2</sup> By being able to affiliate with the NFL, a student begins to associate with a group of students who see effective communication and success as a paramount goal. Clearly, the NJFL can be one way to help middle and junior high students to become more confident communicators and student leaders.

### Some Considerations

Starting the NJFL is relatively easy, but there are a number of issues that, if considered at the onset, will help ensure the viability of an NJFL program. Initially, having a teacher or administrator who is interested in promoting communication activities is a must and will be very helpful when establishing a local NJFL chapter. Enthusiastic individuals always make a difference when attracting and working with young children. However, having a teacher with extensive communication experience is *not* a prerequisite for the NJFL and should not deter a school from pursuing this organization. The NFL office has an excellent staff, capable of assisting the beginning teacher or experienced coach in getting things started efficiently.

Similarly, although making a long-term commitment is not necessary, it will certainly be helpful if a school sets a multi-year commitment to the program. Trying something like the NFJL for one year does not give the teachers or students time to understand or implement the potential opportunities and benefits. Continuity and consistency usually are rewarded once people figure out what the NFJL is about and what it seeks to promote among its members. For this reason, administrators should establish a time-frame of more than one year.

Once a school has an NJFL chapter, the resources of the NFL become available.

The NFL library of audio and video tapes, on a wide range of subjects, is available to all member schools at no, or minimal charge. In addition, the chapter receives a monthly copy of *The Rostrum* published by the NFL. This magazine includes special articles on subjects of interest to coaches and teachers. One issue of the publication is dedicated to publicizing the activities of NJFL chapters, providing an excellent opportunity for a school to get recognition for its special efforts to promote communication. There are other promotional items available that can be ordered to provide special incentives for student members or teachers involved with the program.

### In Short

The National Junior Forensic League is an excellent way to provide recognition for students who practice effective communication in the classroom or public setting. Through a point system that rewards sustained effort, students are attracted and become committed to the NJFL. The outcome is a group of confident students, interested in the world around them and ready to engage others in the process of communication.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the importance of middle school programs to help students make the transition more easily from middle school to high school, see the April 2000 issue of the NASSP *Bulletin*.