

DEBATE CAMPS: THEY AREN'T JUST FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ANYMORE

by **Scott Walker** and **Dr. Robert S. Littlefield**

Participation in debate activities is always a challenge for students. In order to get a head start, many find themselves using some of their summer vacation to gather evidence, discuss issues, and develop case ideas. Designed to meet a wide variety of needs, these institutes offer carefully developed content for high school students at beginning and advanced levels. One group with less opportunity for exposure to these institutes is the junior high/middle school debater. Levels of maturity, cognitive abilities and self confidence may be some reasons why junior high students have shied away from these institutes. But, summer debate institutes are one way to include the many junior high/middle school students in the debate pre-season.

In August, St. Anthony Middle School in Fargo, North Dakota, offered a debate camp to introduce potential team members in the seventh and eighth grades to the principles and practices of academic debate. The camp was a positive experience for the students. In order to understand why this debate camp for younger students proved to be a success, the underlying philosophy of the institute, selective activities, and the student and teacher reactions will be presented.

The underlying philosophy for this debate camp was probably similar to those of other institutes designed for high school students. An emphasis on individual attention and a strong focus on basic skills pervaded all aspects of the camp. This is certainly not all that unusual. Nor was it unusual that the teachers tried to do as much

as possible in a short amount of time. However, it was not the amount done that mattered. Quality of instruction was stressed more than gathering great quantities of evidence or writing complete cases. Because over half of the students who participated had no previous exposure to debate, the rationale for proceeding slowly and explaining clearly was appropriate and justified. The teachers emphasized the importance of viewing debate as a legitimate and worthwhile activity that would be benefit to them in other school-related context.

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Thus, the students learned why debate should deserve their continual time and effort as their schedules become busier. This variable of justifying debate's legitimacy as an activity may have been what separated this institutional philosophy from many others. Most institutes have predisposed audiences of students who are committed to debate. This camp did not have that luxury. There was no assumption that all participant would actually be on the debate team. As such, the teachers were also recruiters. Similarly, the idea of instructing true "novices" kept the camp's philosophy firmly on the basics, which included traditional speaker roles, argument construction, evidence identifica-

tion and selection, flow sheeting, organization, and cross examination. Full rounds of competition were not held because the students needed to know what debate was before they could be competitive. There were opportunities for speaking that tied the various skills and activities together.

With this philosophy in mind, the teachers developed strategies to help the younger students understand the basics of debate. The camp schedule provided both morning and afternoon sessions with lessons offered in one to two hour blocks of time. This enabled the concepts to be introduced and activities to follow that gave the students an opportunity to practice what they had learned. Relating debate terminology to the students' world, giving much individual attention in helping with evidence, and involving students in the cross-examination process proved to be the most productive and popular aspects of the institute for the students. The process of relating debate to the students' world was critical. The students were comfortable talking about issues they understood. The staff told several hypothetical stories requiring problems to be solved, terms to be defined, causes to be determined, and advantages or disadvantages to be drawn. After going through the process several times, the students were able to extrapolate their previous knowledge to more abstract debate terms. Discussing inherency, solvency, topicality, and harms correctly was exciting and refreshing for the staff, given the middle school status of the participants. The students enjoyed the success of

then being able to explain any issue in debate terminology. The camp staff worked to build on what was known to teach the unfamiliar aspects of academic debate. Once the students knew the terms of the resolution, they were able to find evidence and definitions to fit with those terms. Individual attention in this area was critical. The students needed guidance and reassurance about the quality of evidence they were finding. Once their self-confidence grew, they were anxious to build their own arguments and present them.

The process of finding evidence was a long but important one to learn. The students were given time to read articles on the topic and help determining what kinds of things would be considered as good evidence by judges or audiences. Articles dealing with general issues were read, provided, and discussed as a group. Individual attention was given to each student for extended periods of time as they marked, cut/copied the evidence and began simple organizational files. They worked individually but had the opportunity to ask to help. Constant reinforcement helped the students to pick up on the evidence identification process quickly.

Once evidence was found the students began constructing arguments in the form of sample blocks. They orally presented these to their peers and were asked questions about their evidence and line of analysis. The introduction of cross examination skills worked very well to solidify the argumentation process. Not only were the students able to construct their own arguments, they also found flaws and strong points in the arguments of the other students. Synthesizing the components of the debate process gave the students the opportunity to be successful and the needed experience and self-confidence to continue working independently.

According to comments

from the staff and participants, the camp was a positive experience. Students found the concepts challenging, the strategies and practices manageable, and the potential competition with other teams as stimulating and exciting. In the span of only three days, the students progressed about as far as they might have in a month of once-a-week after school coaching sessions. This was possible because the students worked for extended periods of time on skills they needed. Their success was also due to the support of the staff with an instructor to student ratio of one to three or four. Peer support also helped. Because most of the students were roughly at the same experience level, they learned together and support one another as they absorbed the parts of the debate process. The students wanted to be individually successful, but they also wanted to be a part of the group or team. The idea of self and group success also gave legitimacy to debate in the eyes of the students.

A supportive climate, based primarily upon the basics of debate and individual attention, prepared a group of students to begin participation in the debate activity. The students learned best by drawing upon their own experiences and enjoyed putting the various elements of debate together, presenting arguments, and questioning one another. The institute was short but beneficial and achieved its goal. The students learned that debate is an activity worth their time, and they learned a lot about debate itself in the process.

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