HOW TO COACH PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

Of all of the debate events, parliamentary debate is closest to the kinds of debates many teachers have in their classrooms on a regular basis. Parliamentary debate teaches students how to debate on a wide variety of topics, and encourages general research in order to speak about issues in an informed manner. However, parliamentary debate can be an intimidating event to coach, particularly for beginning coaches who can be overwhelmed by the potential array of topics students may have to debate.

The key to coaching students to success in parliamentary debate is having an organized strategy for squad preparation and research. This means that you will need to help students learn public speaking, argumentation, and case construction and refutation skills. Students will also need a basic knowledge of current events and their related issues.

The basic steps to coaching parliamentary debate are as follows:

1. Understand the basic mechanics of parliamentary debate
   The specifics and mechanics of how parliamentary debate works are also in this handbook, but the best way to understand this is to ask other coaches. Parliamentary debate has few rules, so it is easy to figure out the rules and conventions of the event. Once you understand how the format works, you’ll be better able to teach and coach your debaters.

2. Analyze the types and functions of different kinds of topics
   In parliamentary debate, students will debate many different kinds of topics. The topic is also known as the motion for debate. Some topics suggest specific policy changes, such as “The United States should ban the death penalty,” or “This House would restrict free trade.” Other topics ask students to compare values in conflict, such as “In this case, individual liberty is more important than homeland security.” Still other topics deal with facts or issues in controversy, such as “The recent tax cut is likely to help the U.S. economy.” All of these topics serve a similar function in debates – in each case, the proposition team must construct a case that provides a proof of the motion for debate. Understanding how to make cases for different kinds of topics will help you assist your students in learning parliamentary debate.

3. Assist students in developing polished and persuasive public speaking skills
   To succeed in parliamentary debate, students need to develop sophisticated public speaking skills. As a coach, you’ll need to work with students to help them feel comfortable
delivering speeches in debates. This will dramatically increase their chances of success in parliamentary debate. Your students will benefit greatly from participating in individual events such as impromptu or extemporaneous speaking.

4. Organize students to conduct and share research on important topics

Successful parliamentary debate programs encourage students to research issues on their own and as part of a squad. Set reasonable goals for your team and try to have students prepare on a specific set of issues before each tournament. This preparation can be cumulative, so that before long your squad’s preparation will span an impressive range of issues and concepts. Some coaches make the mistake of putting competition off until their students are totally prepared to debate all possible topics. However, your students will never be fully prepared to debate all possible topics. Consider the following tips for organizing squad research:

- Assign students to read a daily newspaper and keep notes on current events as they develop;
- Organize students into small groups of 2 or 3 to research and report on specific issues. These students can then prepare issue briefs to share with other students on the squad;
- Require each student to read and report on a periodical such as Time or Newsweek or other periodicals received by students at home or by your school library. Students could also report on a non-local newspaper – for example, The New York Times is available for free online at www.nytimes.com;
- Begin regular squad meetings with a “roll call” of current events. This “roll call” could consist of having students discuss, briefly, the major issues and facts surrounding the current events of the day;
- Require each student to keep a notebook for parliamentary debate that contains issue briefs, case outlines, and notes from squad meetings and other discussions. Explain to students that this record-keeping system will help them organize effectively and prepare efficiently during preparation time before each debate.

5. Build a library of information on important topics

Once you have begun the research process with your students, it will be useful to build a squad “library” of information on important topics to help them prepare for parliamentary debating. This “library” might include articles, books, and printouts from the Web organized by topic. The kinds of large issue files used in extemporaneous speaking preparation are not very useful for preparation in parliamentary debate. This is because preparation time is more limited and because students are not only preparing for their side of a topic. They are also anticipating arguments that will be made by the other side and coming up with answers to those arguments. If students use all their preparation time reading articles on their topic, they will be ineffective in their debates. You should encourage students to use the “library” before tournaments to summarize and transcribe relevant information into issue briefs and case outlines for their debate notebooks.

6. Refine students’ case-building and refutation abilities

To participate meaningfully in parliamentary debate, students need to develop two basic argument skills: case-building and refutation. Target your squad meetings and practices
to help students develop these skills. If students can construct arguments and cases on a broad variety of issues, they will develop skills that will help them on both the proposition and the opposition sides. Similarly, if they understand basic refutation and how to answer an argument, they will augment their success in parliamentary debate as well as in class. Consult the guide to case construction in this handbook for more ideas about how to teach case-building and argument construction.

7. Familiarize yourself and students with basic concepts from other debate formats

Parliamentary debate borrows some concepts from other debate formats. This is mostly because many debaters who participate in debate formats such as cross-examination (or “policy”) debate and Lincoln-Douglas debate also compete in parliamentary debate. In addition, coaches who coach other formats often bring in concepts from those formats. It will help you and your debaters to have at least a cursory familiarity with some of the vocabulary words associated with those debate formats so that your students do not feel “outgunned” by students with experience in other formats. For example, students may find it useful to learn concepts such as “significance” and “solvency” from the cross-examination format. They may also find it useful to learn concepts such as “value” and “criteria” from the Lincoln-Douglas format. There is a glossary of these terms included in this packet.

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