



# AT THE PODIUM:

## THE PROMISE OF URBAN DEBATE

**"DON'T RAISE YOUR VOICE, IMPROVE YOUR ARGUMENT."**

**—DESMOND TUTU**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*Participation in a competitive policy debate league fosters innumerable academic, social, and communicative competencies for urban high school students. More than simply allowing students to find their voice and spend time at the podium, debating builds social capital, improves academic achievement, school engagement, and college readiness, and simultaneously bridges the gap between academic and practical knowledge. Indeed, urban debate leagues have the potential to minimize some educational disparities which have existed as stable features secondary schooling in the United States by providing rigorous academic opportunities once absent from many urban districts across the nation.*

*Although policy debate has long been a fixture of American high schools, historically, the co-curricular activity has not been equally distributed across the educational landscape. Instead, many of the opportunities to participate in debate leagues were limited to elite schools servicing primarily middle and upper class students. During the 1980s, urban high schools began adopting competitive debate programs as a viable means of leveling the playing field and improving educational outcomes for their students. The introduction of debate organizations in to urban public schools serving primarily low income, minority students not only signaled a shift in thinking about the causes and consequences of educational disparity, but also represented a fundamental departure from the tradition ways in which struggling school districts could address school disengagement and sinking graduation rates.*

*While debate clearly helps students improve their public speaking skills, research also indicates that students who participate in urban debate leagues are significantly less likely to drop out of high school, more likely to graduate on time, and are more likely to be college ready.<sup>1</sup> In fact, urban debaters are more than three times more likely to graduate from high school than their non-debating counterparts. On all sections of the ACT, urban debaters outscore their non-debating counterparts, with the most notable gains seen in the English and reading sections of the ACT. Debate also improves academic achievement, irrespective of the GPA of the student prior to joining the program. That is, it is not simply that urban debate leagues attract only high achieving students. Rather, one of the benefits of participating in a debate league is demonstrably higher academic performance over time. Urban debate participants complete high school with an average cumulative GPA of 3.23, above the 3.0 GPA benchmark considered by academicians to be predictive of college readiness.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the average GPA of students who do not debate is 2.83, which is below the college readiness standard.*

*The promise of urban debate also resides in its ability to generate and reinforce many of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that employers and institutions of higher education emphasize. Debate cultivates key proficiencies such as effective written and oral communication, critical thinking, working in a collaborative environment, and civic awareness and participation.<sup>3</sup> The competitive nature of debate requires students to hone rhetorical skills in a fast paced environment, enriching their ability to problem solve and engage in autonomous learning.<sup>4</sup> Because debate crosses curricular boundaries, it similarly compels students to investigate the multitude of connections between the social, political, and environmental dimensions of society.<sup>5</sup> The intensive investigation and research urban debaters conduct places them at a distinct advantage in higher education environments and the workforce. Most remarkably, regardless of students' reasons for joining urban debate leagues, the academic and social advantages experienced by students continue long after they leave the podium to join the ranks of other former debaters as leaders in industry, education, law, medicine, and other disciplines.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Debate, once the exclusive domain of private schools, preparatory academies, and suburban schools serving predominantly middle and upper class students, holds a great deal of promise for improving academic outcomes in urban school districts. Although debate is nothing new in the educational landscape, its sphere of influence has grown to include struggling urban school districts once prevented from participating due to the cost and the exclusive nature of debate leagues.

While debate serves the purpose of providing structure to the out of school time of adolescents, policy debate is significantly different from other extra- or co-curricular activities insofar as the primary skills developed are not athletic, nor are they exclusively social like other clubs or activities.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the focus is on concrete skills that fundamentally overlap with academic skills and can improve academic performance. When combined with the social psychological and civic participation benefits, debate has the potential to impact the achievement gap and alter the life trajectories of urban students.

## **EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY & DEBATE**

Inequalities in the educational system are widely documented, with disparities by socioeconomic status (SES), race, ethnicity, geography, and gender existing as unfortunate, but somewhat stable features of primary and secondary schooling in the United States. While some recent gains have been made in the area of educational equality, and the gap had been narrowing, disparities by race and ethnicity, as well as by SES, persist. Between 1992 and 2013, the black-white achievement gap in reading, based on 12<sup>th</sup> grade national assessment data, grew larger, while the black-white score gap on math assessments remained largely unchanged.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of Education's most recent evaluation of the achievement gap based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicates that while 33% of white students were at or above "proficient" level in 2013, only 12% of Hispanic students and 7% of Black students achieved this benchmark on standardized tests. For reading, 47% of white students scored at or above the "proficient" level, while only 23% of their Hispanic counterparts and 16% of their Black counterparts achieved this designation.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the income achievement gap (comparing students in the 90<sup>th</sup> income percentile to those in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile) stands at twice the black-white achievement gap, and recent research suggests that instead of narrowing over the past 50 years, the gap is now considerably wider.<sup>9</sup>

While the most recent high school graduation data from 2012-2013, reported in 2015, shows that 81% of American high school students now graduate from high school on time, a more startling revelation that "among low-income students, 41 states are below the national average" and "most big cities with high concentrations of low-income students still have graduation rates in the 60s, with a few in the 50s."<sup>10</sup> Because urban schools, on average, serve more low income and minority students, many of these disparities are more pronounced and concentrated in large urban school districts. While those with the financial means can find high performing private schools or simply relocate to school districts with higher levels of academic achievement, many students are left behind to attend failing schools with few resources for academic enrichment.

The source of these disparities are diverse, but research demonstrates that although many of the causal factors for educational inequality exist at the structural level, school-based interventions can have a positive impact on academic outcomes. While policy initiatives and federal legislation have attempted to address the persistent inequalities, some schools and districts have turned to after school or co-curricular activities as a means of

promoting educational achievement. Only relatively recently have evaluation studies emerged that assess the role of rigorous policy debate as a means of improving academic achievement and promoting higher education to urban students. However, this research suggests that, particularly for urban students, participating in rigorous high school policy debate programs is associated with a substantially higher likelihood of high school graduation, meeting college readiness standards, and improved academic performance. Although debate is not a panacea that can ameliorate all of the educational inequalities that plague modern day public education, the rise of urban debate leagues allows students to engage in expanded learning opportunities that may offer substantially more than the traditional co-curricular activities available in urban school districts.

## **WHY DEBATE?**

Much of the promise debate holds for enriching the lives of students and advancing academic achievement resides in notion that “debate reinforces the same critical thinking and academic writing and language skills that are the focus of standardized reading and writing texts.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, many of the skills that employers and institutions of higher education seek out in applicants can be fostered and built via the practical application of traditional academic skills. However, policy debate goes beyond these traditional skills. Students who debate in high school learn the importance of working in teams, structuring arguments, speaking publicly, anticipating opposition, setting clearly defined goals, and evaluating research, all of which are invaluable skills in secondary and higher education settings, and the labor market more broadly. Debate is not only highly participatory and engaging, but also empowering to students as they find their voice and begin the acculturation process that eventuates in civic participation.

### **Debate as Participatory Education**

At its core, urban debate constitutes one form of autonomous learning, where students become familiar with research that attends to important social issues.<sup>12</sup> As critical consumers of competing stances, the research component of debate implores students to become analytical thinkers. As opposed to merely regurgitating facts and figures, policy debate requires not only intellectual curiosity, but also dialectical thinking.<sup>13</sup> Because it requires students to evaluate arguments and facts, and consider multiple approaches to the same issue before reconciling opposing viewpoints, students are active learners, contributing to the creation of their knowledge set.

Confronted by a wealth of information and specious arguments with seemingly endless support, creating thoughtful scholars and 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners requires approaches that fall outside of the confines of traditional classroom learning. Debate represents one of the clearest ways in which to empower youth, while simultaneously encouraging civic participation and awareness of social issues. According to Warner and Brusckie (2001), students who debate become empowered because they are immersed in an academic setting that is performance based, competitive, and interscholastic.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, debate students learn by doing, in a context where they must think swiftly and respond to arguments and critiques, which improves engagement.<sup>15</sup> The extended learning time and promotion of engagement with academic material related to social policy and current social issues offers student debaters a more hands on approach to learning that may be absent in the traditional classroom.<sup>16</sup>

As a form of participatory education, debate also reinforces democratic participation, contributing to a more informed and active citizenry.<sup>17</sup> Given the profound impact of civic engagement on the populace, and the potential contributions that today’s students can make on social inequality in the future, building participatory learning communities like debate leagues demonstrate the power of youth civic engagement. Armed with a sense of

purpose, young debaters learn about the interconnected nature of politics and the social world.<sup>18</sup> It is not simply that debaters are forced to examine national and global issues, but rather that they begin to connect these larger social, structural, and political issues with their own lives. It is in these connections that 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and future leaders are formed, as students apply these skills and traits to the world around them.

## **Academic Gains**

Perhaps the most compelling argument to advance debate leagues as a means of promoting educational equality in urban school districts is related to the academic impact of participation. Urban debate contributes to academic gains not only in terms of overall GPA during high school, but also college readiness. Participation in urban debate has a positive impact on all sections of the ACT, even when controlling for self-selection in to debate leagues.<sup>19</sup> Research suggests that students who participate in debate are 70% more likely to graduate from high school.<sup>20</sup> In addition to higher graduation rates, urban debate participants also complete high school with a higher overall GPA. Debaters in one study showed an average cumulative GPA of 3.23, well above the 3.0 GPA benchmark considered by academicians to be predictive of college readiness; in contrast, the average GPA of students who did not debate was 2.83, which is below the college readiness standard.<sup>21</sup> However, it is not simply the case that debate attracts only high performing students. Instead, data reveal that the impact of debate is cumulative for both high and low risk students; as students participate, complete more rounds, and gain competitive wins, their academic achievement improves. Even among high risk students, the association of debate with improved academic outcomes remains strong, suggesting that it is an effective means to foster engagement among students who are at risk for dropping out of high school.<sup>22</sup>

The mechanisms whereby debate enhances academic achievement are directly related to the core competencies that debate promotes. Policy debate, which is interscholastic in nature, requires the interpretation of intricate non-fiction text, the development of informed written and oral arguments, active listening and evaluation, the defense of research-based claims, peer collaboration, and time management, both during public speaking and the assembly of a case.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the communicative elements of debate, written and oral, allow students to hone skills that they may normally not have time to dedicate attention to during the standard school day. Moreover, participation in debate and forensics leagues enhances communication skills simply because students practice these skills repeatedly and are able to get immediate feedback on their performance.<sup>24</sup> This form of skill building similarly enriches critical thinking skills; in fact, “researchers over the past four decades have come to the same general conclusions. Critical thinking ability is significantly improved by courses in argumentation and debate and by debate experience.”<sup>25</sup> And, while educators across the nation have lamented the lack of critical thinking skills among modern day students, debate offers a new pedagogical format that allows students to dissent and question everything.<sup>26</sup>

## **Professional and Social Development**

Urban debate leagues help structure out of school time for youths while contributing to their sense of self efficacy and advocacy within their own community.<sup>27</sup> While all after school activities provide students with structured activities, thus minimizing their opportunities for engaging in non-productive or delinquent activities, debate also helps students develop prosocially.<sup>28</sup> Although the communicative competencies developed via debate are typically linked to improved academic performance, effective communication also benefits students in terms of

*“If it is a disgrace to a man when he cannot defend himself in a bodily way, it would be absurd not to think him disgraced when he cannot defend himself with reason in a speech.” — Aristotle*

their interpersonal relationships more generally. Becoming efficient and effective at communicating thoughts and ideas serves students in almost every aspect of their lives.<sup>29</sup>

Win or lose, students who participate in debate can also boost students' self esteem.<sup>30</sup> More than simply being part of something, debate helps students build a sense of self and self sufficiency.<sup>31</sup> This is buttressed by a growth in confidence among debaters, as they become assertive and self assured when speaking and interacting with others.<sup>32</sup> Even in highly contentious situations, debaters become problem solvers, with the tools to engage others in meaningful ways.

Policy debate can also contribute to a level of maturity, and as Fine (2001) points out, "with their concern for ideas and public policy, debaters seem well poised to move into adulthood."<sup>33</sup> In other words, much of the work that debaters do to prepare themselves for competition, including the donning of dress clothing, preparation of argument, and responding to argumentation, aids in the transition to adulthood. Debating requires patience, attentiveness to others, and thoughtful reflection. While much of the organization of debating is adversarial and competitive in nature, debate nonetheless nurtures a respect for others and tolerance. Debate leagues expose students to other cultures, races, schools, and at the most basic level new ideas. Even if those ideas are the subject of fierce debate, students leave the experience with a different world view.<sup>34</sup>

Because policy debaters work in teams, debate offers obvious benefits in terms of peer relationships. Furthermore, student debaters are immersed in a world of successful professionals, collegiate debaters, and teachers. These positive role models not only offer students academic forms of support, but also social support.<sup>35</sup> Particularly among African American males, debate leagues demonstrate a meaningful way to break down barriers, contributing to higher academic aspirations and the development of social capital that may be entirely absent in distressed urban areas.<sup>36</sup>

## **CHALLENGES**

The relegation of debate to specific contexts or groups of students, such as those designated as "gifted and talented" has severely limited the potential of debate to reach diverse American students.<sup>37</sup> While that is changing with the development of urban debate leagues across the country, many students are still unable to take their place at the podium. According to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, sustainable urban debate leagues require the support of the school system and the surrounding community. The urban debate movement itself is also highly dependent on engaged teachers who are willing to not only recruit students, but coach, mentor, and teach courses that build the types of skills that debate requires.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, one of the primary challenges of instituting policy debate programs in urban school districts, especially those that serve predominantly low income, minority students, has been the operating cost associated with debate leagues. Mobilizing leadership and stakeholders who are willing to invest in students and furnish the types of opportunities that research suggests can impact their academic achievement, self-sufficiency, college readiness, and world view requires a commitment on the part of students, schools, foundations, universities, and communities.

## CONCLUSION

The promise of urban debate rests in the personal, professional, social, and academic benefits it offers participants. But debate culture extend beyond the time that students spend debating. The legacy of debate appears long after their time at the podium is over. Armed with the confidence and leadership skills necessary to be successful in higher education and beyond, debaters build soft and hard skills that apply to almost every context they will encounter in life. Improved academic achievement, school engagement, enhanced performance on standardized tests, and an increased likelihood of college readiness are just some of the many academic benefits of participating in debate. Thus, the democratization of debate leagues and expansion of opportunities for participation can help level the playing field and help minimize many of the educational inequalities that plague American public education. More than 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars, students who debate are compelled to develop a broader world view that is attuned to the sociopolitical and historical context of social issues. In turn, this supports critical involvement in a participatory democracy. But beyond this, and perhaps most importantly, for many students from distressed communities, debate offers the prospect of finding their voice and participating in a collegial activity that can serve as a pathway to educational and career opportunities.

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