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SCHOOL DESK

Debate pays dividends at IN-Tech

By Isabel Angell

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Adrian Fussell / The Riverdale Press

Students from IN-Tech Academy answer questions in a debate prep session during an after school class on Oct. 7.

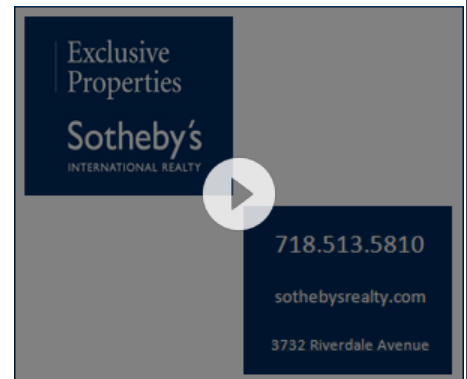
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On Oct. 7, IN-Tech Academy's middle school debate program was gearing up for its first competition of the season. Only in its second year, the program went from five students in January to 12 by their last competition in June, when they placed 15th out of 60 middle schools. This year, the program is starting the year off with 40 students.

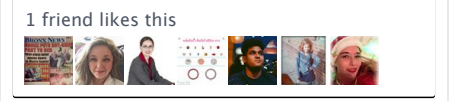
Eriselis Pizarro was part of last year's team. Now in eighth grade, she reflected on what the activity has meant for her.

"It has helped me since seventh grade in critical thinking, in how to listen, proving evidence, finding evidence, finding reliable sources — it has helped a lot," she said, adding that debate team boosted her confidence. "It makes you feel like you have a meaning, like you could do anything you want."

IN-Tech's debate team grew out of the Middle School Quality Initiative, a Department of Education (DOE) program designed to get students reading at grade level before they enter high school. Implemented in more than 100 schools, it incorporates tutoring, professional development and weekly themed literacy lessons in each class.



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As part of the initiative, students debate issues each week in their social science classes. James O’Toole, the assistant principal for IN-Tech’s middle school, explained that the debate team is a voluntary after-school program that builds on students’ literacy skills.

“It’s all about fluency. If children can speak the words, they can read the words. If they can read the words, they will then be able to write the words. It’s all about the four communication arts — listening, speaking, reading and writing — and how we attack that from every different direction,” he said.

Most importantly, participating in debate has been proven to boost students’ chances of success, according to a 10-year study in Chicago public schools. Scott Moore, who coordinates the MSQI debate program, said preliminary data from a controlled study show after-school debate students made more progress in their reading level than students who did not participate. Mr. Moore said the most pronounced results are among struggling students. His team is currently working on a paper to publish their findings.

Keywords

IN-Tech Academy, Middle School Quality Initiative, MSQI, debate, middle school debate, James O’Toole, Isabel Angell

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