

Room for debate

The New York City Urban Debate League gives students a voice — and a lot more

BY SHNIEKA L. JOHNSON

The New York City Urban Debate League is for all ages, and welcomes children from second to 12th grade. The art of debate showcases the academic benefits of extracurricular activities, and adds to children's skills in writing, reading, speaking and listening. Each of these skills is important for academic achievement, especially under the New York State Common Core Standards, and increases their ability to take notes, collaborate, question, organize and research. Programs such as debate are also proven to influence children's interests in college, career, and civic success — making them more likely to vote, volunteer for a campaign, or run for public office.

The positive benefits of

debating for children are numerous. Young debaters often earn better grades than their peers and have higher attendance rates in school. They are also more likely to be college and career ready — which is a goal of the New York State Common Core. Students organically work on their ability to think critically and problem solve, research, write, communicate, collaborate and think creatively. Students that participate in debate are seemingly more prepared than their peers to perform well on standardized tests in the areas of English, reading, math and science. Graduation rates and college attendance rates are also notable for young debaters — around 90 percent of graduate high school on time and go on to attend college.

Most recently, New York City debaters swept nearly all the divisions of the State Championships. Public high school Brooklyn Tech swept Novice, Junior Varsity, and Varsity Policy Debate Divisions! The team included Dante DeBlasio and Samuel Eluto, who were undefeated and placed first for Varsity Policy Debate.

Want a program in your child's school? The city's debate leagues are free for all public schools and are Common Core aligned. There is outreach for each school by master debate coaches as well as year-round teacher professional development, resource availability, and online support. The mission is to support debate education programs. The programming is offered every week. There are championships in

both the fall and the spring. I spoke to New York City Urban Debate League executive director, Erik Fogel to learn more about the benefits of debate.

Shnieka Johnson: How long has the program been around?

Erik Fogel: We were founded in September 2011 because less than one percent of the city's Title I low-income schools and students had access to debate.

SJ: What is the demo-

graphic of the participants?

EF: The majority of our students are Hispanic Americans and African Americans, about 80 percent Hispanic and African Americans, and 20 percent Asian Americans, European Americans. Ages are elementary to high school, with majority being middle school, so I'd say roughly ages 7 to 20 years old.

SJ: What life skills does debate lend itself to?

EF: Debate is the most rigorous academic program since Ancient Greece. It teaches students public speaking, critical thinking, reading, writing, questioning, researching and every other academic skill. It also teaches every academic subject — from philosophy to economics to international affairs to ethnic studies. Students basically receive a college education through debate. And so it's the best preparation for college, career and civic success.

SJ: How can parents get their kids involved?

EF: Parents can ask their school to start a debate team. All our programs are free for New York City public schools. Additionally, we offer a debate club that meets nearly every Saturday.

SJ: How do you start a program at a local school if they do not have one?

EF: We train teachers with outreach, workshops, curriculum, and lessons on being a debate coach. We have a program director who visits schools to support teams. We also have workshops and additional training every Saturday through the school year and then summer debate institutes available for teachers all throughout the summer.

What do you want parents to know about this initiative?

EF: Everyone can be a great debater. All students should have access to the best debate education opportunities to learn college-level skills, learn about the world around them, and learn the skills to advocate and change the world around them.

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(Top) Students, left, Dante DeBlasio and Samuel Eluto (second from right) celebrate a win with teachers James Bathurst and Adam Stevens. (Right) Starr Arroyo, Stephanie Nyame, Yaira Brito, Erik Fogel (teacher), Ashley Meija of the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice celebrate a win.

