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NY SCHOOLS

Teaching Young Students the Fine Art of Arguing

More Schools Offer Debating Instructions to Younger Students

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Middle schoolers Max Selendy, Alexander Gerstenhaber and Amari Bowman engage in a debate.
Mark Abramson for *The Wall Street Journal*

When parents learn that debate training is mandatory for all students at Speyer Legacy School—starting in kindergarten—they typically have one response.

"'Oh great, they're going to be arguing more,'" recounted Radley Glasser, the Manhattan private school's debate director.

But as any trained debater will tell you: Nothing is that simple.

Debate teams have long been staples of high schools and colleges across the country. But over the past decade, educators have been training increasingly younger students, from middle schoolers down to 5-year-olds.

The practice has prompted its own debate—among educators. Some tout benefits ranging from

emotional development to preparation for Common Core, a new set of education standards adopted by most states. Critics say traditional debate formats are too structured and competitive and that younger children, in particular, aren't ready.

Of course, the apple-juice-and-graham-cracker set isn't diving right into the finer points of debate rules and etiquette.

In a program begun this past year at Speyer Legacy that introduces debate and public speaking into every grade, Mr. Glasser says he coaches kindergarten students on eye contact and instructs them not to fidget or fiddle with their hands. He poses provocative questions like: What is the best farm animal? Which is the coolest dinosaur?

"They have really strong opinions about it, but usually they don't know why they think a T-Rex is the coolest," Mr. Glasser said.

Mr. Glasser says he asks the students if "coolest" equates to biggest? Most dangerous?

"They have to think about their opinions a bit more in a way they're not always challenged to," he said.

Another topic that polarized diminutive debaters at Speyer this year: whether the city mouse in Aesop's Fables was rude to the country mouse—or simply being honest about the tedium of a rural lifestyle.

Around the nation, efforts to train children in debate are increasingly aimed at preteens. Next year, the Middle School Public Debate Program, started by educators at Claremont McKenna College in California in 2002, will oversee 20 competitive leagues in 10 states and the District of Columbia, with eastern and western U.S. Championship events. More than 5,000 children will participate, according to program founder John Meany.

Organizers of the program's New York City branch anticipate that 20 middle schools will take part in leagues next year, involving 400 students from public, private and charter schools.

When the league started three years ago, just two New York schools participated in the first tournament.

And around the city, the debate-league movement is growing. The New York City Urban Debate League had 10 middle-school members in 2012, said executive director Erik Fogel. Now students from about 60 middle schools compete in its tournaments, which run through the summer, and 100 schools have joined with the organization to bring debate into classrooms.

The movement has raised questions among educators over whether younger children possess the research skills and analytical capacity for debate. Some wonder if the highly regimented, competitive format is helpful for young children or whether they might benefit from a more basic introduction to effective arguing.

"I'm much more interested in getting a broader range of students engaged in argumentation as a life

skill, not as some sort of competitive sport, game—particularly not developing little lawyers who take any position," said Deanna Kuhn, a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, who has developed a program to introduce middle-school students to arguing.



Max Selendy debates in a practice round at Speyer Legacy School. *Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal*

Still, more middle schools are embracing debate as a faster way to meet several key Common Core objectives, including teaching students to make evidence-based arguments and honing their analytical reasoning.

Supporters say it teaches emotional skills at a critical age, such as developing an ability to listen and understand other perspectives, and teaching students how to argue without making disagreements personal.

At Speyer, which specializes in gifted children, administrators were initially concerned that instructing younger students in debate might be "a crazy thing to do," Mr. Glasser said. But they are now committed to making it a permanent part of the curriculum, officials said.

"If I was told we have budget cuts [and] we have to take something off the curriculum, I would take math and science and history and English off before I took debate," said Paul Deards, head of Speyer's middle school.

"I think debate is an incredible kind of quick fix," he added. "I think it adds a lot of value for very, very little cost."

Middle-school students sometimes have a tendency to focus on their next comment, instead of

paying attention to their classmates' opinions, he said.

"To be really effective as a debater, you have to listen to every single point that the other person makes," Mr. Deards said.

On a recent afternoon, a group of rising fifth- through eighth-graders gathered at Speyer for debate camp. The format mirrored the league rules: three people to a team and a set list of topics, including the appropriate role of schools in regulating cyber bullying. Students prepared to argue both sides, then debriefed afterward.

Some stumbled through speeches, swaying nervously as they whispered their arguments. Others plunged into their oratory with the polish of a seasoned politician. Teammates scribbled notes furiously and flung up hands regularly for "points of information"—optional interruptions to challenge the speaker. Afterward, everyone shook hands.

Speyer student Drake Roth, 11, "wanted to be a train driver and now I'm sort of leaning toward politics or something with public speaking," he said.

He has bought and borrowed books on debating and researched techniques on the Internet. His top tips? Stay organized, memorize your speech and remember that speaking with confidence can make up for a weaker argument, he said.

He enjoyed arguing both sides, he said, "because that opens you up to more ideas that you probably didn't think about before."

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