



(From l.) Anthony Rivera, Jonathan Avila, Samuel Rodriguez and Abu Spahane, the debate team at the Bronx School of Law, Government and Justice, practicing for the state championships in April. Below, other debaters do their vocal exercises. Photos by Richard Harbus

THE GREAT DEBATORS

Boro teams are on a roll, aiming for state title

BY CORINNE LESTCH
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THE MIDDLE and high school debate teams at the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice in Concourse Village are enjoying a winning streak, recently beating rivals Bronx High School of Science and Stuyvesant High School in a city-wide competition.

The debaters are headed to the state championship in April, and will soon compete to qualify in the national championships held in June in Pennsylvania.

These kids successfully discuss everything from philosophy to poor grades.

They incorporate Spanish, slam poetry and rap in their arguments, which throws off other teams and transforms the debate into a kind of performance.

"Debate can sometimes be exclusionary," said freshman debater Geordano Liriano, 15. "So to break barriers, instead of just talking fast and reading cards, we'll bring in new forms of evidence like songs and poetry that allow us to speak of different things."

Liriano, of Dominican descent, and his partner, junior Betty Mahmud, are two stars of the team. To prepare for a round, they wax philosophical about all manner of subjects: racism, dehumanization, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

"It gives you this rush you can't get any-



where else," said Mahmud, 17, the daughter of West African immigrants. "The fact that we can stand there and read extremely fast and get the words out is really exciting."

At a recent practice after school, Liriano and Mahmud prepped for a tournament to be held this weekend at Harvard University.

It was hard to hear over the din of more than 20 kids speed-reading backwards from cards.

Coach Erik Fogel, affectionately called "Fogel" by his students, zipped around the room, checking on teams and offering advice.

"This is the most incredible educational opportunity," Fogel said, while a student

standing nearby adjusted Fogel's upturned collar.

"Once our kids are in, they'll use a lot of street smarts, Bronx smarts — and that's intimidating to other schools."

The skinny, good-natured 32-year-old teacher said he stayed so late at the school recently — prepping for debates, of course — that he got locked inside the building and had to sleep there.

Though they spend weeks researching a policy topic to develop an argument, the essence of the team's strategy may as well be the credo, "knowledge is power."

"We need to understand our relationship to the world before we can do our policy," said Liriano.