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Debate League: All Pros, No Con

Erika Samuels

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(Image: NYC DOE/MSQI)

Earlier this month, I had the honor to serve as a volunteer judge for the [Middle School Quality Initiative \(MSQI\)](#) Debate Championship. This initiative, a partnership between MSQI and the [New York City Urban Debate League](#), provides students with an opportunity to compete in a series of four tournaments each year. Middle-schoolers from 18 MSQI schools across the city met at Silberman School of Social Work in East Harlem to construct, defend and summarize their assigned positions.

The rigorous art of debate dates back to ancient Greece and promotes a deeper understanding of complex ideas through research, reading, writing, listening, note-taking and thoughtful dialogue. The resolution topics require students to learn about current events in various realms, including economics, geography, history, law and philosophy. As if students weren't learning enough through debate, the MSQI syllabus also incorporates vocabulary words that are frequently found in college textbooks.

The academic benefits of participating in competitive debate are well [documented](#), but I find the sociological implications to be even more compelling. Students are tasked with understanding – and deliberating – the grand problems and controversies of our generation. They learn how to articulate their thoughts and advocate for change by molding public opinion to support a given course of action. These skills are an invaluable part of government affairs, negotiations and citizenship, especially in our current age of information.

The resolution for the session I attended was "The United States Federal Government should provide amnesty to all undocumented immigrants." It was truly amazing to see an intelligent and very diverse group of students argue for and against a controversial statement that has remained unresolved by politicians and professionals to this day. I was very impressed with the dedication and tenacity of these students; they came up with some great arguments and were able to defend them with citations and pointed counterarguments. In many cases, they were more convincing (and respectful!) than the legislators I've seen on TV. MSQI students are not afraid to address the tough questions that our society grapples with, including: "Doctors should be allowed to assist terminally ill patients with suicide," "The benefits of nuclear power outweigh the potential risks," and "Professional athletes deserve multi-million dollar salaries."

Jonathan Foy, principal of Eagle Academy for Young Men in the Bronx, elaborated on the program. "Part of what our school is about is creating leaders that have the answers to our country's problems," he says, "and debate is a huge part of cultivating that in our young people."

For more information and student perspectives, please check out [this video!](#)

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