

Q and A with the Founder of the New York City Urban Debate League

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I was amazed to discover recently that the [New York City Urban Debate League](#) – which brings debate to the elementary, middle and high schools of the New York City area – is only six years old. It sounds like a program that should have existed since the 1800s. So when I had a chance to chat with the [Executive Director \(and founder\) Erik Fogel](#), it seemed like a good thing to do.

Nick: Put me in the picture – tell me what the New York City Urban Debate League does.

Erik: Our mission at the New York Urban Debate League is to have a debate team at every school, and we believe that every student should be able to receive the best debate education opportunities.

Among the most critical problems in education today are the academic and civic achievement gaps. Our solution is to provide the best college, career, civic, communication and community opportunities through year-round academic debate. Each month we work with over 2000 students and 100 low income schools located in some of the poorest congressional districts in the United States. We support debate practices every day, debate centers every week, tournaments every weekend, workshops every month, debate camps all summer, and year-round support for any student and teacher.

Nick: That sounds like incredibly important and wonderful work. What kind of support and recognition are you getting?

Erik: We are one of the city's most award-winning curricular and extracurricular programs. We have received awards from the White House, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Presidential Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the National Institute for Museum and Library Services, and many others.

Nick: Why is debate so important? I mean, I'm already convinced, but convince our readers.

Erik: Why Debate? Debate teaches every academic skill and every academic subject. A great debater means a person who has the skills and confidence to lead, to speak up, to argue, to question, to read and write to right the wrongs, to know about the world around them, and to change the world around them.

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Nick: What about the academic benefits? Do debaters do better in school?

Erik: Our local (as well as the national urban debate league model) has been extensively studied over the years and study after study shows academic benefits. Debate improves academic performance (debaters earn higher grades than their peers, have higher attendance rates, and are more likely to test as college-ready in English, Reading, Math and Science).

Each semester that a student debates, his/her grades will improve.

And:

- Debate improves literacy
- Debate improves graduation rates (95%+ of debaters graduate on time)
- Debate improves the graduation rates of those with the highest risk of dropping out (72% of this population graduates)
- Debate prepares students for college (90%+ of debaters attend college)
- The *Journal of Negro Education* in 2009 found that debate is effective for young Black men in improving secondary literacy and overall academic outcomes
- Debate prepares students for 21st century careers (debate teaches critical thinking and problem solving, research, writing, communication, collaboration and creativity).
- Debate inspires political and civic engagement
- Debaters are more likely to vote, volunteer for a campaign, or run for office.

Nick: OK, I'm convinced! Tell me about some successful debaters, since it's so good for you!

Erik: Well, there have been over a dozen Presidents, the majority of Supreme Court Justices (including the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice, Sonya Sotomayor, and the first African American Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall), governors, mayors, civil rights, social and community activists. A survey by the National Speech and Debate Association shows that 64% of the Members of the United States Congress competed in debate or speech in school.

Nick: Impressive! How did you get started?

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Erik: In 2011, less than 1% of New York City schools had a debate team (less than 10 schools out of 1,800 schools in the largest school district of America) and less than 1% of NYC youth (about 100 students out of 1.1 million NYC public school students) had access to debate, because debate was limited to schools that could afford to pay for coaches, tournament registration fees, travel, hotels, etc.

Nick: That's hard to believe – that New York City was so under-represented in the 21st century.

Erik: It was an academic travesty. Ever since the Ancient Greeks, debate has been one of the most powerful academic programs to prepare students for college, career, and civic success. We were founded to change this. We were founded by all volunteer educators and debate coaches. We sold cupcakes our first two years to fund the debate league.

Our program is only six years old and most of our students are in high school or college. Many of our students have received full or partial scholarships to colleges because of their participation in debate.

Nick: Well, huge props to you for starting this essential and very cool program. In closing, tell us a little bit about your own story.

Erik: In middle school I was one of the shyest students and having a speech impediment did not help. I decided to join the debate club after school. I was hooked. I learned more in debate than all my high school, college, and graduate school classes combined.

When I became a teacher in 2002 in the South Bronx, the most tragic thing to me was the lack of after school debate programs. And so in 2002 I started the South Bronx's first competitive debate team. Our students won city, state and national titles including ranked as the number one team in the nation.

In 2011, I volunteered to help build a debate league for other schools on a budget of bake sales! We grew exponentially – the need was there! As a result we were honored by the White House as one of the top after school programs.

Today, we work with over 2000 students and 100 schools.

Nick: Thanks, congratulations on your success, and keep up the good work!

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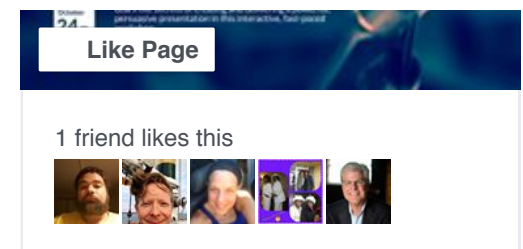
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