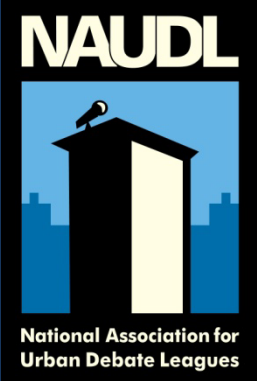


URBAN DEBATE LEAGUE CASE STATEMENT

A Evidence-Based, Field-Tested Approach



The National Association for Urban Debate Leagues
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INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing domestic issues facing America today is the failure of urban public school students to achieve academic excellence. Youth with great intelligence, creativity, and potential who grow up in economically disadvantaged families and attend under-resourced urban public schools too often go unchallenged and unprepared for college and careers. Social and economic barriers, along with low expectations, impede young people's aspirations to become successful, engaged adults. One highly successful intervention to address these challenges is academic debate. As President Obama recognized in his September 8, 2009 remarks to the nation's students,

“Maybe you could be a mayor or a Senator or a Supreme Court Justice, but you might not know that until you join student government or the debate team.”

Urban Debate: Local Leagues and the National Association (NAUDL)

Over the past decade, Urban Debate Leagues have facilitated access to academic debate for urban students. The National Association for Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) works to bridge the achievement gap by building academic debate programs as sustainable public-private partnerships between urban school districts and private support organizations led by local leaders. Since 1997, 40,000 students from 500 urban public secondary schools in districts with approximately 87% minority and 78% low-income student populations have participated in Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs).

The NAUDL seeks to increase the participation of urban students in debate, guided by the belief that debate is a uniquely valuable educational opportunity for students. Research finds debate participation predicts improved educational outcomes for participants on such metrics as on-time graduation and drop-out rates, secondary literacy, and college readiness (e.g., high school GPA and ACT scores). More generally, debate serves fundamental goals of urban school systems by raising expectations, rewarding rigor, and engaging students as autonomous learners.

IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

An emerging body of rigorous empirical research demonstrates the effectiveness of Urban Debate Leagues for improving the educational outcomes that educators and policy-makers emphasize most.

On-Time Graduation and Drop-Out Rates

In the knowledge economy, graduating from high school is more important than ever. Americans without high school diplomas face a greater risk of unemployment and earn lower wages when they do find employment.¹ Yet each year, millions of students drop out of high school. Students from historically disadvantaged groups (particularly Latinos and African Americans) have little more than a 50% chance of graduating with a high school diploma, and graduation rates for these populations

¹ Christopher B. Swanson, *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youths are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (The Urban Institute Education Policy Center, 2004).

from urban school districts lag 15% to 18% behind their more privileged peers.² Worse, even those who do graduate often are not adequately prepared to succeed in college and careers.

Urban debate has been proven to improve this situation. UDLs across the country report graduation rates at or near 100% for their participants. Further, debate participants have been found to be 70% more likely to graduate on time and three times less likely to drop out than similarly situated non-debating peers³.

Secondary Literacy

Securing secondary literacy skills for urban students is a fundamental educational challenge. Secondary literacy skills may be defined in contrast to basic literacy. Basic literacy emphasizes comprehension, while secondary literacy – the skills students should learn at the secondary level – emphasizes critical engagement with texts. Secondary literacy is crucial to success in college and the workplace. An ACT study released in 2006 demonstrates that student learning is inhibited across the curriculum when students have not mastered secondary reading.⁴ A variety of knowledge economy careers also demand a mastery of secondary literacy; employers say 40% of high school graduates – to say nothing of those who do not graduate – lack these essential skills.⁵

Academic debate focuses on exactly these secondary skills – reading for important details, identifying causal and comparative relationships in texts, and evaluating and drawing conclusions from evidence – and in an environment which both empowers and motivates students. Students are empowered by the shift in their locus of control; no longer are they empty vessels to be filled or tabula rasa to be written upon by teachers, but masters of their own learning, writing their own narratives and curricula. Further, academic debate is a competition, and everyone likes to win.

Preparing for debate entails hundreds of hours independently reading non-fiction texts and writing arguments. Debaters research beyond textbooks to engage scholarly sources such as academic journals, policy briefs, government documents, nonfiction books, internet media, and other sophisticated texts with concomitant new vocabulary and comprehension challenges. Competition motivates students to master readings on issues such as national security, education, health care, economics, energy and environmental policy, philosophy, and many other topics seldom if ever seen in an urban high school classroom.

Debate meets students where they are, but challenges them to improve. Debaters begin their competitive careers building basic vocabulary, decoding skills, and fluency as they work with teammates, teachers, college students, and community mentors. But to excel at debate, students must gain command of higher-order skills such as analysis, interpretation, and critical engagement. Through practice and competition, students demonstrate proficiency (and receive contemporaneous feedback when proficiency is lacking) at such skills as assessing an author's intent, identifying logical and factual flaws in writing, and evaluating points of contention between multiple written sources.

² Christopher B. Swanson, *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001* (The Urban Institute Education Policy Center, 2004).

³ Mezuk, B., *Urban debate and high school educational outcomes for African American males: The case of the Chicago Debate League*, J. of NEGRO EDU. Forthcoming. (Oct. 2009).

⁴ ACT, *Reading Between the Lines* (2006).

⁵ National Assessment of Educational Progress, *2002 Year-at-a-Glance* (2002).
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003451>

Fundamentally, debaters also master the abstract literacy skills sought in the workplace, such as the ability to transfer knowledge by applying lessons from texts to new situations, evaluate the reliability and credibility of different sources, search for and synthesize information, discern the biases and validity of multiple perspectives, and follow the flow of information across multiple modalities.

An emerging body of research on urban debate confirms these benefits. A research team at the University of Missouri–Kansas City demonstrated that urban debaters improved their literacy scores 25% more than a comparison group after just one year of participation. Importantly, these gains reflect an intervention with secondary students in high school, for whom literacy scores would otherwise remain stagnant. With debate, schools can fill a crucial gap and provide students with the reading skills they need to be college and work ready. The most recent research has found African-American boys who participate in debate are 70% more likely than their similarly-situated non-participating peers to reach the ACT Benchmark for Reading.⁶

College Readiness

UDLs send more than 75% of their students to four-year colleges, with some league’s reporting college matriculation rates above 90%. Once in college, urban debaters possess the skills and confidence to succeed, having already gained experience in working independently, researching in libraries, and seeking out new and supporting information with limited guidance. Studies by ACT⁷ and Achieve⁸ have both found the ability to use evidence effectively at the core of what college professors cite as essential college readiness skills. Again, this skill is the core of policy debate. Moreover, the most recent research demonstrates that Urban Debate participants pull ahead of their similar-situated peers on indicators of college readiness such as GPA and ACT benchmarks.

Additionally, urban debate participants benefit from college partnerships and connections that provide access to campus facilities and student mentors, who provide tangible evidence that peers can and do enroll and succeed in college. Debaters often compete and research on college campuses, receive coaching assistance from college students, and debate in front of college recruiters. All these activities raise the expectations debaters have of their own abilities and provide the insight that college is within their reach. Indeed, urban debaters have received tens of millions of tuition and scholarship dollars.

ACHIEVING URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEM GOALS

Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

Academic debate enjoys wide support from teachers and administrators because it helps urban school systems achieve their goals for secondary instruction by raising expectations overall and closing learning gaps. Urban debate embodies the three R’s of successful schools because it entails *rigorous* intellectual work, creates *relationships* that connect students to a network of peers and mentors, and provides *relevant* learning opportunities.

⁶ Mezuk, *supra* note 3, at ??.

⁷ ACT, *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?* (2006).

⁸ American Diploma Project, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts* (Achieve, 2004).

Debate engages students with high standards and *rigor*, and equips students to meet these standards. UDL participation shifts the locus of control for students to regulate their own learning. Students move beyond predetermined curricula to use creativity to generate and apply new knowledge. Debaters research, write, and develop strategies; practice and compete; and must defend their positions in competition. As the season progresses, students research new strategies to gain an advantage over the competition, who in turn must write new responses. The process of confronting new arguments, much like encountering unexpected texts on exams or in advanced coursework, prepares students to respond to novel intellectual challenges with flexibility and confidence.

Urban Debate Leagues create exceptional *relationships* and school-based communities where students feel recognized and cared for by mentors and fellow engaged students. Debaters must work together and learn to know and adapt to each other's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers and coaches develop relationships with students that enable them to feel accepted and confident as learners. Debaters also receive mentoring from college students, recruiters, and community member volunteers who provide valuable feedback, perspective, and connections.

Relevant, real world learning creates the conditions for in-depth education, by allowing students to explore topics which directly and obviously impact many of their lives and communities (e.g., the 2009/10 resolution concerns poverty). Competitions motivate and recognize hard work where it is due, in an atmosphere of friendly competition, fun, and celebration. Tournaments, unlike standardized tests, orient activity and demand performance in a manner students deem relevant to their lives.

Data from six UDLs show that in one year of participation, debaters increased their GPAs an average of 8% to 10%. The Atlanta UDL has documented a 50% reduction in disciplinary referrals among at-risk middle school participants in urban debate. In a survey of urban debaters in Minneapolis/St. Paul, 100% reported they were unlikely to engage in negative risk behaviors such as early pregnancy or drug or alcohol use, and 100% report increased interest in classes. Due to this interest, 80% of debaters reported no attendance problems, compared to only 49% among the comparison group. Most recently, research has shown urban debate participants have average GPAs twenty percent (20%) of a letter grade higher than similarly situated peers (with the effect an even great 50% among the subgroup of African-American males).⁹

Debate's high standards and rigor carry over from team to classroom. Students who ask critical questions and bring outside knowledge and concepts to bear in classroom discussions can sometimes encourage teachers to raise their own expectations and provide greater challenges for students. Debate instills the sense in both teachers and students that academic excellence is to be expected from urban students who may not otherwise be engaged by the traditional classrooms. Success at debate can thus seismically shift the entire culture of teaching and learning.

Student Habits Conducive to Learning

Although urban students face challenging social barriers to achievement, studies have shown these barriers to be surmountable. Multiple studies have found that *discipline* and *effort* are the key

⁹ Mezuk, *supra* note 3.

predictors of achievement, even after controlling for race and socioeconomic factors.¹⁰ These studies isolate a set of student habits indicative of readiness for college and adulthood, and debate fosters precisely these habits.

First, high-achieving students demonstrate discipline and effort in their work, especially in undertaking long-term projects. Participation in debate builds this discipline by setting clear expectations and student responsibility, corresponding to competitive incentives for high-quality work; debaters have full responsibility and credit for their wins and losses. Dedicated teachers and supportive team mates provide enabling scaffolding so that students can meet these expectations. Finally, debate-related projects span months and demand sustained effort and attention to detail. Through careful planning, diligence, and accountability to team mates, student effort throughout the year often culminates in recognition in such forms as city and state championships and scholarships.

Second, to improve academic performance, students must spend time doing *focused, independent* work on *college-level* assignments.¹¹ Too often, students merely survive a forest of worksheets – passed out one day, collected the next. In contrast, the nature of debate teams encourages students to research and write arguments and policies on their own, in order to discuss their work and strategies in practice. Debaters undertake college-level tasks such as independent library research and group strategy sessions. Since extensive preparation is so critical to winning debate rounds, students are motivated to step up their independent work in order to have more productive practices with their teammates.

Third, an emerging body of research suggests that it is crucial for students to work on tasks with *sustained concentration* free of distractions.¹² Debate provides a strong motivation for students to concentrate on studying specific topics or strategies. When students lose to another team’s prepared arguments, they work on their own and with their teammates to explore the literature on these arguments in order to craft and refine answers. Debaters produce hundreds, even thousands, of pages of evidence on these topics. The motivation of being prepared to win in a rematch often motivates students to shut out distractions such as TV or e-mail – distractions that research has found to be detrimental to productive learning.¹³

Finally, students need opportunities to *self-correct* their work in response to feedback, and studies show students increase achievement and motivation when they have such opportunities.¹⁴ Debaters enjoy opportunities for feedback from other debaters, coaches, and judges at tournaments. Urban debaters recognize that rewriting arguments in response to this feedback is critical to their success, and learn to seek out feedback as they develop ideas.

¹⁰ A.L. Duckworth and M.E.P. Seligman, “Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents,” *Psychological Science* 16 (2005): 939-944; S.B. Robbins et al., “Unraveling the Differential Effects of Motivational and Skills, Social, and Self-Management Measures From Traditional Predictors of College Outcomes,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2006): 98, 598-616; L. Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

¹¹ E.A. Plant et al., “Why Study Time Does Not Predict Grade Point Average across College Students: Implications of Deliberate Practice for Academic Performance,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (2005): 30, 96-116.

¹² A Ericsson, *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Christine Rosen, “The Myth of Multitasking,” *New Atlantis*, Spring 2008.

¹³ S.T. Iqbal, and E. Horvitz, “Disruption and Recovery of Computing Tasks,” *CHI* (2007).

¹⁴ C. Sansone, and J.M. Harackiewicz, eds., *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation*, (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000); B.J. Zimmerman et al., Enhancing Self-Reflection and Mathematics Achievement of At-Risk Students at an Urban Technical College (Poster, U.S. Dept. of Education Institute for Educational Sciences Conference, Washington D.C., 2007).

Teenagers develop many habits during out-of-school hours, where they decide how to allocate their free time, learn to conduct themselves socially, and form lasting ideas about how to compose a satisfying, meaningful life. After school, more than any other time, urban youth develop interests and passions, come to appreciate what they find rewarding and worthwhile, learn to delay gratification, and set their eyes on dreams and ambitions that inspire their later life. Debate makes a difference during this crucial time, setting the stage for habits that improve learning throughout life.

Engaging Students

Focusing on fostering effective student habits represents a novel approach to investing resources, expertise, and time. Efforts to improve public education in recent years have tended to prioritize structural issues such as school and class size and curricular scope and sequence. Despite these efforts, students too often feel locked out of the educational process that unfolds in classrooms. Given the overwhelming challenges facing urban students, UDLs can complement and supplement structural solutions. Urban debate seeks to transform individual student learning and skills, with the belief that students with self-esteem, motivation, scholastic habits, and academic skills will best capitalize on the structural investments made in school systems.

Even the best-run urban school can be powerless, in a typical seven-hour day, to overcome the influence of social forces that dominate the nine or ten waking hours of non-school time.¹⁵ Research shows that public school students learn as rapidly as their private school counterparts in the classroom; where they fall behind is in the non-school hours. Unconstructive out of school time is linked with lower social competence, grades, and achievement test scores. Out of school time is when students form career and college-relevant identities, including clarifying aspirations and developing habits about how to use free time and conduct themselves.

Urban debate shifts the nature of out-of-school time. The fun and competitiveness of debate ignites a fire for students around a genuinely academic activity. The result is that students spend non-school hours doing school-related work that so many otherwise typically resist.

Debate competition represents serious play, a process in which students engage in expert-like practices of advanced knowledge work using digital tools, non-fiction text resources, and communication technologies. To gain a competitive edge, students must master the critical skill of creatively appropriating a range of tools and information resources to address authentic learning needs.

This process helps urban schools fulfill their missions by preparing and motivating students for the learning that takes place in school. In gaining the habits of delayed gratification and deliberate learning, students are equipped to make effective use of the full range of educational opportunities available to them. In the classroom, debaters become vocal leaders who direct their own learning and improve that of those around them by engaging their peers in academic inquiry, demonstrating to the entire school the potential for debate to transform schools.

¹⁵ Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, <http://www.fightcrime.org/>

CONCLUSION

In sum, the NAUDL approach builds the capacity of both students and schools to attain high standards while empowering teachers and students to serve as leaders in their schools and communities. Educators and decision-makers have the evidence necessary to move forward to implement and broaden access to UDLs as an intervention that:

- (1) extends learning opportunities throughout the school day, week, and year;
- (2) improves secondary literacy;
- (3) prepares and motivates students to excel at academic pursuits; and
- (4) is based in empirical evidence.

In sum, the NAUDL approach builds the capacity of students, teachers, and schools to achieve the high standards demanded of them while empowering participants to serve as leaders in their schools and communities.

As such, it embodies an integrated policy approach aimed at ensuring that students who demonstrate the greatest need reap the benefits of urban school improvement.