

## 6. Public Debates

The policy debate rounds that your students participate in at tournaments are often highly technical and complex, which makes them fun, interesting, and educational for properly trained participants. Unfortunately, these qualities make them not very inviting or even coherent to the uninitiated. Parents, principals, and other supporters of the team are likely to be very interested in seeing students engaged in debate, but may find the average tournament round to be overwhelming.

Public debates are a way for students to showcase their skills in an audience-friendly forum and discuss issues of immediate importance to them and their communities. They can be a valuable tool for forging partnerships with new organizations, exposing the benefits of debate to a wider audience, recruiting new team members, and maybe even effecting political change.



The best way to plan, organize, and execute a public debate depends on which of these goals it is intended to advance. The one thing that all public debates have in common, however, is that it takes time and energy to produce a success. Allowing plenty of time to prepare for them and sharing responsibilities across a wide spectrum of individuals (coaches, students, parents, partner organizations, etc.) is the best way to make the many necessary tasks manageable.

This chapter will discuss how the goal or goals of a public debate determine its elements: structure, time, location, topic, participants, and audience.



## Public Debates Designed to Forge Partnerships

Supporters of a debate program will most likely want to be involved in some way. Unfortunately, if they aren't qualified or available to judge, a schedule dominated by debate tournaments doesn't give them many opportunities to offer their help in a meaningful way. If a debate squad hosts a public debate supporters can be invited to participate as moderators, speakers, hosts, or audience members. By partnering with a local interest group, debaters get the chance to meet, interact, and learn from real world policy advocates. Plus, these partners are more likely to become vocal supporters of the team if they feel they have played an active role in the team's activities.

### Structure and Format

If the main purpose of the public debate is to give partner organizations an opportunity to interact with students, then the debate should be structured to maximize their involvement. This could be accomplished in a number of debate formats:

**Students vs. Experts.** Students pit their superior debating skills against members of a local interest group who will most likely have superior knowledge of the topic.

**Students/Experts vs. Students/Experts.** Members of two interest groups with opposing agendas, for example pro-immigration and anti-immigration, team up with students. Generally, the experts from each team should present the first speech that lays out their team's basic case, and the last speech that ties up everything that has happened in the round and makes a final appeal. The students can best showcase their debating skills by refuting each other's arguments in the speeches in the middle of the round, relying on the facts presented by their expert partners to support their claims.

**Experts vs. Experts (Student Panel).** Two or more guest speakers with opposing views present opening arguments, are questioned by a panel of students, and then present closing arguments. The audience could be encouraged to ask questions as well.

**Students vs. Students (Expert Panel).** Students present opening arguments, are questioned by a panel of experts, and then present closing arguments. Again, audience questions could be solicited as well. This format works best when the partnership organization or debate co-sponsors are not an advocacy organization. Instead, they use their knowledge of the topic to focus the arguments of the student debaters and encourage them to delve more deeply into the issues.



## **Time and Location**

This should be determined largely by the organization(s) the team is working with. The more high profile the guest speakers, the further in advance they will need to be booked. Given the amount of preparation students may need to do for this sort of event, it may be best to schedule it before or after the team's competitive season so that it won't conflict with time they spend preparing for tournaments.

## **Topic**

When the primary purpose of the public debate is to work with a particular organization, the broad topic area (i.e. crime, education, immigration, etc.) should be one with which that group is concerned.

While they should certainly be invited to assist in narrowing the topic to a specific resolution, there are other things to consider as well. A controversial question will probably attract a larger audience, but if it is too personal or emotional it could actually turn people off to the team. The debate will have more of an impact if the topic is one on which audience members are not likely to hold immutable opinions. For example, the question of whether abortion ought to be legal is one on which very few people are open to persuasion. A public debate could explore the same themes by discussing stem cell research, another controversial topic but one on which people are generally less informed and hence less intractable. A more complex topic also gives the guest experts from the co-sponsoring organization a chance to play a more critical role, as the information and evidence they can share will be of heightened importance.

## **Participants**

Members of the partner organization(s) should be as involved as possible at all levels of the debate. Depending on their interest, they could assist students in researching the topic and preparing their arguments or questions, give an informational talk before or after the debate, participate as speakers in the actual debate, or serve as moderators, panel members or judges.

Student participants should be chosen for how well they will reflect on the team. Anyone willing to put in the time and effort to prepare adequately would be a good candidate, but those who take a special interest in learning about the topic will probably be most appealing to the partner organization, as they will appreciate the opportunity to educate high school students about the issues that are important to them.



## Audience

Having a co-sponsor provides something of a built-in audience for a public debate. Most likely, the partner organization(s) will have mailing lists and other organized ways of communicating with their members and supporters that they can use to publicize their involvement with a debate team.

This audience can be supplemented by the debate team's supporters, who will likely be very impressed by the sight of students debating alongside public policy professionals. Coaches should extend personal invitations to principals, school administrators, and others to whom she wants to dramatize the educational value of debate. This is especially true for supporters who have expressed an interest in seeing a debate, as a public debate may be much more interesting and accessible to them than a round at a tournament.

This format of public debate is not the best for recruitment, however. While some students might be intrigued by the prospect of interacting with adult professionals, especially if they have name recognition, this format could actually reinforce stereotypes about debate that are keeping students away, for example that debate is only for especially smart students or that one must possess extensive knowledge of the topic area to join the team.



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## **Public Debates Designed to Widen Audiences**

Highly competitive and technical debate tournaments are not for everyone. Those who enjoy the activity enough to learn its ins and outs reap considerable rewards, but this is rarely more than a small fraction of the school community. Few parents, teachers, school administrators, and community supporters have the time or interest to learn enough about debate to truly appreciate its benefits. As their name suggests, public debates are designed for a wider audience than the relatively small number of people who can appreciate the average debate round. A debate team can organize and host a public debate to show off their skills in a highly audience-friendly format. This can be a great way to attract interest from supporters who might be confused by a traditional debate round.

### **Structure and Format**

The key here is simplicity. Each speech and the round as a whole should be relatively short, so that supporters with busy schedules will be able to see the entire thing from beginning to end, and those without debate experience will be able to follow the progression of the round with ease.

More important than the length and number of speeches, however, is their style. Debaters must avoid jargon, speed-talking, heavy reliance on evidence, and other conventions of policy debate that do not translate well into a public forum. This event should have a feel similar to televised presidential debates, which are geared towards a highly diverse audience, many of whom have only limited knowledge of the topics being discussed.

A portion of the debate can be reserved at the end for audience comments and questions.

### **Time and Location**

The event should be scheduled for a time and place that will be most convenient for the intended audience. If the debate is intended primarily for teachers, students, and administrators in the school community, then scheduling it immediately after school or even an assembly during regular hours would be most appropriate. If it is designed to appeal to parents and community supporters, then weekends and evenings are usually a better time.

### **Topic**

The topic, like the structure, must be something simple to understand and of interest to a variety of people who are not debate experts. This could be a pressing national controversy such as the death penalty or an issue of local concern. When appealing primarily to the school community, a debate topic concerning a new school policy could be appropriate. However, if the architect of the policy (such as the principal) is going to be present, she may not appreciate a debate in which students voice strong criticisms of it.



## **Participants**

Students should practice debating for a lay audience several times in order to get used to speaking at a conversational pace, avoiding jargon, and making use of the flowery rhetoric that many people expect from a public speaker.

Carefully consider using this event to give a variety of members of the team a chance to shine. Those who have not yet mastered the technicalities of policy debate necessary for success at tournaments won't have to worry about unlearning them and may appreciate a forum where their more natural style will be appreciated. This is an especially valuable opportunity to involve students who are frustrated with or just not all that interested in tournament debating. Public debates can expand the ways in which students can have meaningful involvement in the team's activities.

Finally, teachers and administrators may actually be more impressed to see a normally shy or academically challenged student speaking in public than to see an outgoing honors student with a 4.0 GPA. It may mean a lot to the student, as well, to be the subject of positive attention among her teachers for once.

## **Audience**

The intended audience is already known, so the key is how to attract as many of them as possible. Giving notice several weeks in advance will help supporters with busy schedules set aside the time to attend, as will choosing a convenient location and an interesting topic. The event can also attract new supporters if it is advertised via the school newspaper, PTA meetings, and even a listing in a community newspaper or newsletter. Such advertising should make clear that this event is intended to be both entertaining and educational for a broad audience that is interested in finding out what a high school debate team is all about. Flyers that encourage the audience to "come see your school's city champion debaters discuss..." typically succeed.



## **Public Debated Designed to Increase Recruitment**

When it comes to building student interest in a debate team and recruiting new members, there is no substitute for seeing the real thing. As much as potential recruits will want to know about the benefits of debate for their schoolwork, their personal development, and their college opportunities, they will also want to know what exactly they'll be doing and see their peers doing it. Many will not be willing to give up an entire Saturday to come observe at a tournament, and probably find the experience overwhelming anyway. Instead, teams can design a special public debate to introduce the activity.

### **Structure**

The format of this debate should mirror that of a tournament round, albeit one that would be interesting and accessible to a novice. Speeches might be shortened to fit the debate into a specific time period, say a class or after-school session.

An audience of potential recruits will be looking for a realistic portrayal of a debate round that will help them to decide whether the activity is right for them. While speed reading and jargon should be de-emphasized so as not to make it seem too inaccessible, teams should stick as closely as possible to the arguments and format that they would use in an actual round. That means teams of two, with each student giving one constructive and one rebuttal speech. If time allows, these should be eight and five minutes in length, just like in a regular round. It may be helpful if team members who are not debating give a quick summary of what happened in each speech, perhaps during prep time, to help the audience can keep up.

While the audience is captive, the team should take the opportunity before or after the round to talk about the benefits of debate and the structure of the team. After the demonstration, they should allow time for questions about how debate works or what will be required of team members. As much as possible, students on the team rather than the coach should handle this, as their peers will probably be receptive to such information when it comes from them compared to when it comes from a teacher.

### **Time and Location**

This is a great activity for an after-school Informational Meeting. It should take place immediately after last period, before prospective audience members have left the building. They are more likely to stick around to watch a debate than they are to go home and come back later in the evening. The event should be scheduled to avoid meetings of similar extra-curricular activities that interested students might already be involved in.



## **Topic**

For a more realistic debate, the topic should be drawn from the current year's resolution and involve actual arguments that the team commonly uses. On the other hand, it may be possible to increase attendance and broaden the appeal of debate by focusing instead on a topic that would be of interest to other students at the school, such as a controversial new school policy.

## **Participants**

This public debate should feature the students who are most passionate about the activity, usually those who have been on the team the longest. They will convey enthusiasm in their speeches and make debate seem more appealing. These may or may not be the members who have had the most competitive success.

If there is time and interest, coaches might want to give the audience a chance to give their opinions on the topic that was debated after the round. This is a good way to draw the potential recruits in and help them experience first-hand the fun and excitement of debate.

## **Audience**

The primary audience will be other students at the school. The coach should encourage both team members and her colleagues to talk up the event to friends and classmates as potential recruits will be most likely to come if asked by a friend or well-respected teacher. The team can also build hype by hanging fliers and making announcements on the intercom. Giving students notice is helpful, but they frequently do not plan their time well in advance so it is important to give frequent reminders in the final days before the event. Food is a must as there will be plenty of hungry students after school, and getting teachers to offer extra credit in their classes can be a draw as well.

## Public Debates Designed for Political Change

Many students join debate because they are interested in becoming policymakers later in life, and others choose to enter such careers as a result of their debate experience. However, debaters do not have to wait to begin using their skills to make a difference. Debate is a tool that can empower students to make their voices heard and start working for change in their communities right away. Public debates can be a very effective and satisfying way to raise awareness about an issue and communicate student opinion on matters that affect their lives.

### Structure and Format

This can vary greatly depending on the nature of the event and the intended audience. It is unlikely but not impossible that when the team is in agreement about their stance on a particular issue, they will have the opportunity to debate policymakers or members of interest groups who endorse the opposite stance. When a controversial proposal threatens to impact students' lives in an immediate and negative way (for example, if the school board is considering decreasing funding for or closing their school), they may be able to call attention to it by challenging its advocates to a public debate. Even if the challenge is not accepted, the offer itself might attract attention from local media and result in bad publicity for the relevant authorities.

Students should be careful what they wish for, though. If their challenge is accepted and they are not fully prepared to defend their position, they could end up doing more harm than good to their cause. Coaches must also take political sensitivities into account. While the goal is to ruffle feathers, pushing the issue too hard could potentially threaten jobs or get students into trouble at school. A less risky approach would be to arrange for a public debate on the issue and invite community members, local politicians, and the media to come hear what students have to say on both sides of the issue. This can be a powerful way to call attention to a problem or issue and get student input taken consideration.

If this is the route that the team takes, they must fairly represent both sides of the issue, even if they are in agreement that one is more correct than the other. The underlying philosophy of debate is that truth emerges from a rigorous clash of opposing viewpoints. Not only would a mock-up debate where one side is made to look overly weak or foolish not raise the quality of public discourse on the issue, it might also damage the reputation of the student debaters, their team, and the activity in general.





Finally, teams may be able to arrange for an impromptu discussion of an important issue in a public venue such as a park or marketplace. First, they need to find a location. They may need to get a permit or other special permission, or they may be able just to get up on a soapbox and start talking. In any event, they should first try to get as many other students as they can to come show support by building an audience or even speaking. Then, they just take turns speaking their minds to whoever stops to listen. Everyone should take turns speaking, and they can even encourage passers-by to get in on the action.

### **Time and Location**

The event should be scheduled for a public place in the community affected by the issue at hand. If the goal is to attract media attention, the team will need to choose a location where cameras and microphones can be setup with ease. They should choose a time when a large number of people will be gathered in their chosen location, such as lunchtime or weekend afternoons.

### **Topic**

The topic should be a general discussion of the pros and cons of the policy or issue at hand. The broader it is, the more opportunities there will be for students to voice their opinions, which is one of the central goals. Remember it is important that all sides of the issue should be represented fairly.

### **Participants**

Since the central purpose is to make student voices heard on issues that are important to them, every student should be given the opportunity to speak. Even those who are not members of the team can be invited to share their opinions. When there is a general consensus on an issue, it may be necessary for some students to represent the other side even if they don't believe in it themselves. The ability to see all sides of an issue, even those of one's opponent, is a valuable skill that students learn from debate. Given the challenge inherent in this task, the most experienced and accomplished debaters should be the ones to undertake it.

It is also worth trying to find genuine representatives of opposing views. If the policymakers advocating them cannot or will not fill this role themselves, teams should make an effort to find representatives of interest groups that share these positions. In an impromptu discussion in a public arena, this could mean simply turning over the floor to an opinionated passer-by who wishes to speak her mind. Students should be respectful of these speakers, even if they disagree vehemently with them.



## **Audience**

When the purpose of the public debate is to raise awareness and create change the audience should be as wide and diverse as possible. Send a press release to local media outlets and invite local policymakers to come hear students speak out. Also advertise the results of the debate (number of participants, for example) back at the school after it has occurred. Advertising may be of some help in attracting the attention of the community at large, but the best way is simply to draw in passers-by by choosing a popular location and delivering impassioned speeches that make people want to stop and listen. Debate was once a popular spectator sport in this country, and this kind of public debate is a way to tap into that legacy.