

## Program's Success Not in Debate

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The transition from eighth grade to high school is tumultuous time for many students, as Hannah Nesser experienced when she entered St. Paul Central High School in the fall of 2008.

“The first day of freshman year was overwhelming,” she recalls. “I remember fighting my way through crowds . . . and wondering how I could fit in to it all.”

Transitional strains can affect all aspects of a student’s life. Finding an outlet to aid one’s educational, social, and emotional development is crucial. Hannah found this outlet in debate. “Debate helped me find my place . . . to debate is an incredible shared experience,” she says.

National and Minnesota studies confirm that Hannah’s interaction with debate is not unusual. In fact, participation in policy debate has been demonstrated to improve student performance, keep students in school and on track for graduation, and increase student approval of school.

Hannah is a member of the Minnesota Urban Debate League (MNUDL), one of many Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) across the country. The MNUDL fosters debate programs in middle and high schools throughout the Twin Cities, while providing a large amount of their services to low-income and minority students (75% and 65% respectively).

Studies on both the Chicago Debate League and North High School demonstrate that public school students performed better in school than they otherwise would have when they participated in debate. The studies also found that debate has helped close the achievement gap by developing critical thinking, research, and analytical skills.

Hannah’s testimony reveals why debate may have a unique ability to help students. She explains the competitive nature of debate gives the academically oriented activity a far-reaching appeal. Further, debate’s orientation around healthy competition incentivizes self-motivated learning.

The Chicago study, which examined ten years of data, found that African American male debaters had GPAs seven tenths of a letter grade higher than they would have without participating in debate. The Minneapolis study found that students who debated for more than one year performed more than a full level grade higher than control groups. It is important to note that these benefits increase as the debater’s participation increases. This fact makes the case that strong, engaging debate programs ought to be encouraged much more than marginal ones.

Young people are significantly more likely to be successful if they do not drop out of high school, and manage to graduate. This increases future employment opportunities and gives one the ability to seek higher degrees. Drop out/graduation rates are one factor creating Minnesota’s high achievement gap.

Debate, however, offers an exciting tool for policy makers to increase graduation rates. The Chicago study found that “the proportion of African American males who graduated was nearly 70% greater among debaters relative to non-debaters,” and that debaters were three times less likely to drop out.

Further, the study found that African Americans who debated were twice as likely to score at or above the college readiness benchmark on the English ACT. Minnesota has found great success through the MNUDL in these areas as well. According to the MNUDL one hundred percent of participants have graduated on time, and in the past two years every single participant has been accepted into college.

Partnerships with institutions of higher education play an important role in the debate community. For example, the University of Minnesota hosts several tournaments a year, and Augsburg College has played a crucial role in the activities of the MNUDL, as its host. Further, Augsburg recognizes the strengths of MNUDL participants and offers a full scholarship to MNUDL debaters who debate for four years, have at least a 3.25 GPA, a 21 on the ACT, and are Pell-Grant eligible.

The MNUDL has thus far managed significant accomplishments while relying almost entirely on private funding. Since its creation in 2004, the MNUDL has extended services to 23 schools in the metro area and worked with thousands of students. The addition of public funds would allow the MNUDL to greatly expand its reach to schools that want and need them.

Debate has proven to be a worthy investment in the past and ought to be considered by policymakers. In order to maintain the MNUDL’s long-term viability, school districts should work with it to make sure it possesses sufficient resources. In the future, when Minnesota has a brighter budget forecast, the state government should set aside committed funds in order to promote debate programs in the Twin Cities through the MNUDL and across the state.



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