

DEBATE GUIDE: RESOURCE 17

Community Change Idea: Creating a Debate Team

Debate teams are a fun, interactive way to learn important life skills and also build strong friendships with people who love communicating about controversial issues. The academic and social benefits of debate teams are long-lasting and life-changing. They provide the opportunities for practice and mentorship that can help people utilize sophisticated collaboration and analytical skills that can open up doors in the future. They enable students to care deeply about social issues and become more civically interested and engaged.

At the same time, debate teams are also plagued with several problems that risk leading to inequity. For many students, parents, and educators, the perception of what it means to be a “good debater” is still limited by preconceived notions that you have to be outgoing and academically successful. This leads to the same kind of student being encouraged to join debate teams, and the lack of diversity is perpetuated when recruitment relies solely on student word-of-mouth and they recruit their friends. Depending on the number of outside competitions, the activity can be prohibitively expensive and burdensome on both time and financial resources, especially since debate teams rely heavily on parent volunteers. Debate team practices also must be designed intentionally to be inclusive and supportive of all students, as opposed to an overemphasis on winning and positioning some students as better than others. When starting up a debate team, keep diversity, equity, and inclusion front of mind to ensure that the opportunity to learn debate is available to all.

Get Interest and Buy In

- Talk to the administration to see if there is interest and support in starting a team.
- Gather people who are interested in starting the debate team, including at least one teacher, several families, and an initial group of student leaders.
- Create a planning committee to support the early stage.

Logistics

- Secure a room/space for practice sessions.
- Select dates/times for practices.
- Identify a faculty sponsor -- most tournaments require a credentialed teacher in attendance, so it is good to find this person from the beginning.
- Get necessary approvals to start the team, if any paperwork is required by the school.
- Get a lot of bulk snacks (or set up a system for potluck-style snacks).
- Secure materials, including paper, water, writing utensils.
- Determine goals for any initial outside tournaments to attend (i.e. how many to attend in the first year with how many students). The infrastructure required to attend tournaments can often seem daunting for a first-time team, but do not let it discourage you! Start small and slow and build up the team over time so not to burn anyone out, including yourself.
- Set the tournament calendar with the planning committee.

Recruitment

- Start as early as possible. Since the debate tournament season is usually October through March, you will be too late if you wait until October to recruit. Ideally, recruitment should happen at the very start of the school year, so planning should take place before the school year begins.
- Identify students and ask them personally. Be persistent and make a big deal about why they would be perfect for the team. Starting a team does not require a huge number of people: 8-10 students is actually quite ideal for a first-time team.
- Approach students from a wide range of ages (younger is better when the team is first starting out).
- Remember that many different kinds of people can be good debaters. You don't need to only approach the students with the best grades. Instead, think about who has strong opinions, an underrepresented voice, or someone who always captures people's attention (even if it is sometimes in a negative way). Think about students who are curious and interested in a range of issues.
- If possible, plan a tester session or short example workshop with easy, fun warm-ups and a silly SPAR debate to get students interested -- lunch is good for this session.
- Create flyers and coordinate with English/Language Arts and History teachers to help distribute them to interested students.
- Recruit possible coaches and assistant coaches, unless planning to be largely run by students and/or teachers.

Culture

- ❑ Encourage student leadership by creating student officer roles.
- ❑ Make a concerted effort to create an inclusive team environment. Break down cliques by creating buddy systems or planning social events to support team-building. Plan activities that encourage students to help one another.
- ❑ Together, create team rituals and traditions that everyone can appreciate. Establish a team identity through cheers, a nickname, motto, colors, and/or clothing gear/swag. Decorate the room, if that's possible.
- ❑ Early on, teach everyone how to give supportive and constructive feedback and establish community norms.
- ❑ Encourage different students to lead warm-up activities to enhance student ownership.

Programming

- ❑ Start off with fun activities to expose students to the basics of debate (i.e. "Take a Stand or SPAR debate).
- ❑ Teach the specific debate format(s) that the team will use.
- ❑ Incorporate deep-dive lessons with warm-ups, exercises, and drills to unpack key skills like argument structure, refutation, note-taking, limited preparation, teamwork, oral delivery, and synthesis.
- ❑ Include discussions to analyze different topics to familiarize students with unfamiliar topics and improve literacy and background knowledge;
- ❑ Make sure to spend enough time on practice rounds on a variety of topics, either in small groups or for the whole class, including feedback and peer coaching.
- ❑ To save time, create a large bank of debate topics that you can pull from.
- ❑ Gradually build up to attending outside tournaments when students are ready -- consider making the first tournament a field trip to observe only, if there is a risk that students might find tournaments intimidating.

Costs and Fundraising

- ❑ Debate team costs typically include: tournament registration, coach salaries, transportation and travel costs, membership fees to debate organizations, materials, and any clothing/gear.
- ❑ Create a fundraising committee to plan fundraising activities throughout the year. This might include more traditional school fundraising activities and digital fundraising methods as well as bigger undertakings like hosting a showcase or a tournament.

Tournaments

- ❑ For a first-time team, you will need to join a league, circuit, and/or a debate organizing body to access any tournaments. There is typically a national, state, and local level of membership, so make sure you find the appropriate memberships. Check out resources from the National Speech and Debate Association or search "debate league near me".
- ❑ Create accounts on the appropriate tournament sign-up sites (i.e. tabroom.com, joyoftournaments.com).
- ❑ Pay any annual fees to join a league. For a school in the SF Bay Area in California, for instance, this means fees to the National Speech and Debate Association, California High School Speech Association, and Golden Gate Speech Association.
- ❑ Register all student members and coaches on the appropriate site.
- ❑ Sign up for tournaments early. Many deadlines require schools to register several months in advance, unless they are small and local.
- ❑ Enter competitors and judges from the school list and pay any tournament fees.
- ❑ Secure volunteers to judge and drive to tournaments.
- ❑ Set expectations to prepare students and parents for the tournament experience, including the fact that most tournaments take all day and do not usually run on time.
- ❑ Prepare students with practice rounds or scrimmages so they feel ready.

Volunteer Needs

- ❑ Running a debate team relies on volunteers -- you cannot and should not do this alone! This can include volunteers who can:
 - ❑ Judge at tournaments (most important!)
 - ❑ Drive to tournaments
 - ❑ Plan and organize fundraisers
 - ❑ Facilitate finance needs, like maintaining the checkbook, making payments, and creating team budgets
 - ❑ Help coach or give feedback at practices
 - ❑ Organize admin needs, like sign-ups for tournaments
 - ❑ Help out at any tournaments hosted by the school
 - ❑ Help out with any graphic design needs, like with flyers, programs, or gear

