

Debate takes inner-city students to new levels

Nelson Garcia 26 mins ago

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DENVER - Far from the athletic fields of Manual High School, Kahdijah James is engaged in what she calls a of the mind. She practices, she trains, she competes in a movement sweeping city schools across the nation.

"When I started in my ninth-grade year, I didn't really know what debate was," James, a sophomore at Manual, said.

James is part of the Manual High School debate team, one of seven teams that make the Denver Urban Debate league, now in its second year.

"It's really our mission to bring debate back to the public schools," Jessica Clark, executive director of the Denver Urban Debate League, said.

The Urban Debate League movement started in Atlanta in 1997. Since then, 24 cities across the United have started leagues. The purpose is to find ways to engage students in inner-city schools.

"Debate is teaching students how to think on the spot and respond at a moment's notice to any question," Charlie Smith, coach of Manual's debate team, said.

James does mouth exercises to make sure she can enunciate well and speak quickly. She does research on her debate topics so she has the most relevant and up-to-date information with which to argue. James and her partner form plans and strategies to counter the arguments their opponents might make.

"If I could do this in school, just debate, I would. It's still learning just in a different way," James said.

Smith says Urban Debate Leagues are changing the face of debate - literally. He says it is something that is not reserved for affluent, suburban schools anymore.

"They're becoming involved in an arena where for a long time that population of students was not involved at all," Smith said. "And, not only beating the odds, changing the odds."

Jessica Keyes is a junior at Manual High School. She sums up the change like this: "I'm an African-American woman and I have dreadlocks and I am 17 years old and I go to an inner city high school and debate is my passion," Keyes said.

It is a passion that is making a dent in school districts nationwide. A study published in the Journal of Negro Education found that urban debate participation helps students in low-performing schools, but it also raises their chances of graduation, literacy scores, and college and career readiness.

"We see a direct correlation between participation in urban debate programs and increase in grade point average, school attendance rates, graduation rates," Clark said.

The study found that among African-American male students, debaters were 70 percent more likely to graduate high school, three times less likely to drop out, 50 percent more likely to reach the ACT college-readiness benchmark for English, and 70 percent more likely to reach the ACT benchmark for reading than non-debaters, even after accounting for eighth grade achievement.

This research was conducted by Dr. Briana Mezuk of

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Virginia Commonwealth University, in cooperation with the University of Michigan, the Consortium of Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, and the Chicago Debate Commission.

Keyes says debate is saving kids from the street.

"We normally go after the students who aren't as good students and who want to drop out," Keyes said.

James says debate likely kept her out of trouble.

"If I wasn't in debate, I'll probably just be hanging outside doing things that are irrelevant," James said.

Now she is doing things she never expected to do.

"Debate has made me a more social person, I start to talk to people more," James said.

The DUDL will have its city championships on March 19 and 20 at the University of Denver's Sturm Hall. The winners will represent Denver at the National Championships in New York in April.

Smith says debate is not always about being the best.

"My motto is, if you're learning, you're winning," Smith said.

By that count, James and her classmates are already winners.

"I like how we're learning about things that we just wouldn't know about," James said. "Debate is going to take me far in life."

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