

Urban debate fires up Denver high schools
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Editor's note: mouse over pictures to see captions.

It's a mid-fall Thursday, summer-like temperatures steaming up teacher Charlie Smith's second-floor classroom in Denver's Manual High School. It's 5 p.m. but the clocks haven't fallen back yet, so it's still light outside and many of the 10 ninth and 10th graders are glancing wistfully out the window toward the yellowing treetops.

Smith, a social studies teacher, and English teacher Andrew Kearnl are trying to focus their charges' energy on the task at hand: preparing for the first Denver Urban Debate League practice tournament two days hence.

Some of the kids are hyped up and raring to go, pawing through their black plastic file cases for documents supporting the arguments they are about to practice. Others, though, have their heads down on the desks, or appear more interested in working through a bag of Doritos than on practicing an affirmative or negative position.

"Alright, listen up!" says Smith, a slender man in his 30s with a shaved head. He explains that all participants must have their paperwork to him by the end of the day or they won't be allowed to participate in the tournament, to be held at Martin Luther King Jr. Early College.

"Hey mister, I didn't fill that out," one boy says.

"My name's not mister," Smith says, handing the lad a copy of the form.

"I'm scared, Mr. Smith, I'm scared," says Jessica Keys, a 10th grader wearing enormous hoop earrings.

“Not me. I’m just nervous,” replies her debating partner, Jumayah Brown.

“If you're a little freaked out about Saturday, you should be. But you're going to tear it up and feel good about the day,” Smith says, flashing the girls a smile. “Speak with confidence – basically, it’s acting. Speak clearly, speak confidently. Do you think I know everything I'm talking about every day when I teach?”

“No!” the kids reply in unison.

“But do I act like it?”

“Yes!”

“There you go. Now tell me: Do you think it would be appropriate to get in a spat with someone from TJ (Thomas Jefferson High School) in front of a judge, even if they say something totally inappropriate to you?”

“No, just save it for the bus,” a girl suggests.

“No!” another girl shouts. “That would be ghetto!”

It is a scene of happy chaos. But it’s hard to imagine this somewhat disorganized and unfocused group will stand much of a chance when it comes time to compete on Saturday.

Early success

As it turns out, though, the practice tourney was a triumph for the Manual team. Flash forward four weeks. It’s now November 11, a Tuesday evening in Smith’s room. This time it’s dark outside, and unseasonably warm. The group of debaters is feasting on snack food, but at 5:05 p.m., the snacks disappear, the file boxes snap open, and work begins in earnest.



The first official tournament begins in three days – on Friday afternoon, and it is being held here at Manual.

The change in atmosphere from mid-October is striking. Perhaps it’s because Manual will be the “home team” and the kids want to make a good showing. Or maybe it’s because they got their feet wet during the practice tournament a few weeks back.

Or it could be because Jessica Keys and Jumayah Brown were the only

undefeated team in that four-school tourney, and Jessica won first place for being the best speaker.

Smith is fired up as well. He's pacing in front of the group, which has grown to 15 (12 African American kids, three Latino).

"Do NOT get nervous. This is the second tournament," Smith says. "There are five tournaments. I don't care how you do in these. You could lose every round between now and January and it doesn't matter. What do you do if you're getting your butt whipped?"

"Learn from it," freshman Theron Harrison says softly.

"What? I can't hear you," Smith says.

"LEARN FROM IT," Harrison repeats.

Smith has the group stand. Each kid places a pencil in his or her mouth to force careful pronunciation, and chants: "Debate is not about winning or losing. Debate is about improving. Here we come Chicago!" Chicago is the site of the National Urban Debate League championships next April 3-6.

"You all sound like you have rags in your mouths," Smith says. They repeat the chant at top volume and a little more clarity. Satisfied, Smith tells them to take their seats.

Over the next two hours, the group engages in a focused and efficient practice session. Veterans of the practice tournament offer counsel to the newbies – "Speak clearly and make eye contact with the judge." "Even if you feel like you're getting mad at somebody, stay calm." "Keep reminding yourself to talk louder."

Debate's profound impact

How, one might wonder, has debate, an extracurricular activity most commonly identified with the bookish and geeky, become a draw for kids from schools like Manual and MLK? The answer is multifaceted.



Debate seems to hold intrinsic fascination for urban teens, who may, at the outset of their debating careers, lack polished skills and subject matter knowledge, but are brimming with enthusiasm and passion in search of a productive outlet. In addition, urban debate has developed a sterling reputation over the past 20 years, augmented, no doubt, by the feel-good, 2007 Denzel Washington movie “The Great Debaters,” a laudatory piece on 60 Minutes, and reams of well-deserved positive publicity.

The urban debate movement has its origins in Atlanta, where an Emory University professor and two Atlanta high school principals launched a league in 1985. During the 1980s, urban debate also gained a foothold in Detroit and Philadelphia. Eventually it caught the attention of the George Soros-funded Open Society Institute, who funded it for several years, fueling its expansion to cities across the country.

Today, the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues oversees debate leagues in 18 U.S. cities. Denver joined this year. In all 311 urban high schools and 51 middle schools are involved. More than 37,000 urban students have competed in tournaments sponsored by Urban Debate Leagues.

The engagement of Denver students in the early stages of the league here mirrors what has happened in cities with a longer UDL history. And the results are impressive. According to the NAUDL, multiple studies have shown that:

- Literacy scores among debaters have increased by an average of 25 percent;
- High school graduation rates among regular participants are nearly 100 percent;
- Over 75 percent of urban debaters attend four-year colleges.
- Of those, city debate leagues report between 70 percent and 91 percent graduate. Baltimore, one of the oldest debate leagues, holds the 91 percent mark.

Denver coaches say the discipline of debate begins working transformational magic on students almost immediately. “I have seen a noticeable change since we started,” said David Shanks, MLK’s debate coach, moments before the November tournament began. “The students have gone from thinking of debate as arguing well to explaining, persuading, substantiating, using evidence, countering other people's evidence.”

Before the October practice tournament, Shanks said, the students could barely control their nervousness. “This time, they're saying 'we can win. We know what it takes to win.' It's not the unknown any more. They're probably not as good as they think they are, but that's OK.”

And to Manual’s Kearn, “debate has been one of the best experiences I've had as a teacher, in terms of student dedication and intrinsic motivation. The students find themselves getting excited about the academic material, although it is extremely challenging material for them to master. Most of them can discuss alternative energy better than most adults...I think meshing competition with academics is a model that a lot of classrooms could adopt.”

Jessica Clark, director of the Denver league, worked for the New York debate league for eight years before moving to Denver to launch the program here. Over time, she said, she has seen students blossom, particularly those who started out shy and withdrawn.

“When they see this is something they can be good at, I see a real and immediate increase in self-confidence and self-esteem,” Clark said. “They also get more outspoken. In fact, I heard about one girl at Manual whose parents told the coaches that she has gotten more argumentative at home since starting debate.”

Heart-pounding competition

On Friday evening, November 14, the Manual cafeteria buzzed with nervous energy as debate teams arrived by school bus from MLK, TJ and George Washington High School. The pitch and intensity of the voices echoing off the cafeteria walls was reminiscent of summer cicadas.

Rico Munn, co-chair of the Denver league’s advisory board, looked on from the doorway, a smile splitting his face. “ Debate was pretty much all I did for four years of college,” said Munn, whose day job consists of running the Colorado Department of Regulatory Affairs. “Once you start debating it gets deep in your bones.”

Throughout the year, Denver debaters will focus on the same resolution: “Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase alternative energy incentives in the United States.” The National Forensic League develops the annual resolution, and all debate leagues across the country, whether part of the urban network or not, debate this same resolution throughout the year.

Focusing on one resolution allows students to hone their research and argument strategies, said Clark, director of the Denver league. “I read somewhere that a policy debater in high school ends up doing more research in a year than a graduate student,” she said.

Clark stood in the center of the Manual cafeteria that November Friday and read off the first round pairings. Debaters would slog through two rounds Friday and four more rounds throughout Saturday, culminating in semi-finals and then a final round Saturday evening.

Jessica and Jumayah from Manual, undefeated in October's tournament, were matched against two girls from TJ, Asia Dorsey, 18, and Nandi Thompson, 17, both seniors. This was the TJ pair's first tournament, which had Jessica and Jumayah, sophomores, feeling confident. Had they known Asia and Nandi were seniors, it might have given them pause.



The two teams set up shop behind tables in room 304, facing the judge, Robert Margesson, director of debate at Regis University. He was dressed casually, in an oversized, black University of Texas t-shirt, black slacks and sneakers. Margesson has been involved in competitive debate for 16 years, the last four at Regis. But this was his first Urban Debate League tournament, and he was enthused.

I'm really glad that I may find some recruits from this community," he said. "It's great (the Manual team) is sophomores. I have a ton of scholarship money."

TJ drew the affirmative position. Nandi Thompson stood holding a sheaf of paper in her trembling hand. She had bright green yarn woven through her pulled-back hair. She read the argument quickly, head down, not once making eye contact with Margesson. At the Manual table, Jumayah, spiffy in her green JROTC uniform, and Jessica, in a pinstriped blouse and black skirt, pour over stacks of notes, looking for counter-arguments.

When Nandi finished, heaving a huge sigh of relief, Jumayah stood and conducted a brief cross-examination.

"I didn't really hear your solvency, so what is your plan?" she asked. The two girls did not look at one another, as if squeamish about this inherently confrontational moment.

But each team landed some cross examination zingers.

"You used the term prima facie in your argument," Asia said as she cross-examined Jessica. "What does prima facie mean?"

"I don't know, I didn't look it up," Jessica replied.

As the hour-long debate progressed, the two teams were forced to improvise, as they attempted to counter each other's arguments. If the first arguments were somewhat wooden as debaters read their scripts, subsequent arguments became fluid and more informal, and occasionally grammar and usage slipped.

Margesson sent the teams out into the hall and bent over his notes, writing furiously. In the hall, the four girls congratulated each other.

"That was a lot of fun," said Asia, who hopes to attend Barnard College or New York University next fall. "At first I was nervous, but then you get passionate."

"Yeah," her partner Nandi agreed. "Once you get through being nervous, you plow down." Nandi wants to go to the University of North Carolina next year.

Margesson called the teams back in, and, as is the practice with urban debate leagues, did not announce which team had won. Instead he gave each debater detailed feedback, positive and negative:

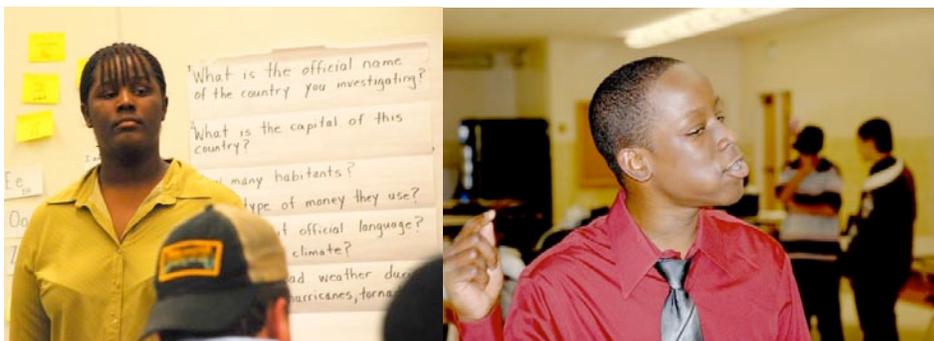
"Both your speeches were very passionate," he told one of the debaters. "You reason really well. You make a lot of the arguments, selling positions in a way I like to have them sold to me. But there was a lack of evidence. You're seeing the right positions, you're selling me the positions. Now you need to back them up. You seemed most comfortable answering the cross ex. And your rebuttal was very passionate."

Narrowed down

By Saturday evening, after six rounds of debating, the kids were whipped. They straggled into the cafeteria at 4:30 p.m. to learn who had made the semi-finals. A table full of snacks – crackers and granola bars and soft drinks – awaited them.

"Oooh, I'm tired," Jessica Keys said. "That floor looks really comfortable right now."

When Denver league director Clark announced the four semi-finalist teams, Jessica and Jumayah were not among them. But Asia and Nandi were, as was another Manual team – freshmen Theron and Teague Harrison, a brother and sister pairing.



The impending end of the tournament had the kids in a revved up emotional state. One girl, in her final preliminary

round, had been so nervous that she rolled a red pen back and forth in her hands, not noticing that it was leaking ink all over her palms. When she got to the cafeteria and someone remarked on her red-stained hands, she was so mortified that she left the school and walked to the corner bus stop to head home.

As it turned out, hers was one of the semi-finalist teams. But no one knew where she was, and it was time to start the round. Panicked coaches and students searched the school, to no avail. At the last minute, another student ran out to the bus stop and found her and she came back.

TJ's Asia and Nandi faced off against Manual's Theron and Teague. It was a spirited affair, with Theron offering vigorous cross-examination and Teague smoothly rolling out her arguments.

In the end, though, the TJ duo prevailed over Manual, only to be vanquished in the finals by Bethany Jones and Alex Martinez from MLK.

Still, Teague won first place as best speaker in the tournament, with Theron third and Jessica Keys fourth.

On the last day of school before Thanksgiving break, Teague and Jessica reflected back on their debating experience to date as they worked through their lunch in the boisterous cafeteria.

"I definitely know a lot about renewable energy now," Teague said. "At first, we relied on the debate league materials for research, but now we've started doing our own research, on the web, in books and magazines. I enjoy that."

Jessica said joining debate has transformed her attitude toward school. "I look forward to coming to school now," she said. "I know that I get to do something I really enjoy."

Qualifying for Chicago during the final Denver tournament in March is a top priority for both girls. But Jessica said for her, it's simple to pinpoint the best thing about debating:

"Adults have to listen to you."

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