



1. Starting The Team

In one sense, a teacher needs only two personal attributes to start and sustain a successful debate program: time and dedication. If she is willing to invest these assets into coaching, she will be able to provide her school's students with a valuable and enjoyable experience. Of course, there are a number of more concrete things she will need to use her time and dedication to acquire or accomplish, and these things are the topics of this chapter.

The Bare Necessities

The debate team will need a home – which is typically referred to as the “Team Room”. Often, the Team Room may be a classroom for after-school meetings. The Team Room should have a chalkboard or wipe-board and enough seats and desks for every member of the team. Ideally, there should be storage space in the Team Room as well. Policy debate teams quickly acquire a large amount of materials and information that they need to keep somewhere. If these materials end up in a closet or office that is not under the coach's control, it could easily disappear or be inaccessible when needed.

Computers and internet access are also very helpful. In the past ten years, internet-based research in debate has become a necessity. If there are no computers in the Team Room, the coach should attempt to secure access to a computer lab or a bank of computers in the library. Students may have access to computers at home and would be able to do some of their research there after school. The ability to find, process and evaluate information from the internet is one of the most valuable skills students will learn from debate. For this skill to be developed to the fullest, the coach should be on-hand at the start to guide her debaters.

Another essential resource is a printer. Students will need to print the documents and briefs they prepare from their research. The printer should be accessible in the same room as the computers, but this is not essential. If necessary, students could use the computers in a school lab or even at home, and then print in the Team Room. Storing the printer in the Team Room is the most convenient location.



Managing the Time Demands of Being a Coach

At a bare minimum, coaching requires the coach to stay after school at least once a week to hold a team meeting, and to attend a few weekend tournaments. Ambitious coaches may hold multiple practices per week, attend many tournaments, seek out other training opportunities, attend summer workshops, coordinate fundraisers, and host special events such as team dinners and public debates. Consider the following strategies for minimizing the time burden that their debate team imposes on them:

Limit student access. While a coach will want to be available to her debaters, she also needs to set limits. If she gives out your cell phone or home phone number, students will use it. They may also take it to mean that calling five minutes before a practice to say they aren't coming is acceptable. While there are worse problems to have than students who are so interested in debate that they want to stay after school every day to work on it, this is something that comes up on occasion. Communicate limits clearly and consistently to generate respect.

Seek assistance. Some leagues provide coaches with assistants from local university debate teams. Even in these leagues, many coaches still choose to recruit a fellow teacher to serve as an assistant coach. These assistants are a valuable resource, and the coach should learn to delegate some responsibilities to free up personal time.

Encourage student leadership. Encourage debaters do as much of the work as possible. Students who have been to summer debate institutes may well know more about debate than their coach, and if they are mature they can often be trusted to judge a JV practice round or take primary responsibility for teaching a given topic. While the coach should certainly play a role directing and coordinating the research and strategizing that her team does, it should not be her responsibility to cut evidence or write blocks. Instead, assign these tasks to students and offer guidance as necessary.

The individual debaters on the team will need to share evidence and briefs with each other. Therefore, one more useful resource for the debate team would be access to a photocopier. The photocopier does not have to be in the Team Room, but generally a successful debate team will need to use one frequently, so easy access is recommended. While some sharing may take place using the printer – printing multiple copies, one for each team – often a photocopier is a quicker and less expensive option.

Photocopiers, as well as printers, can require some additional supplies and maintenance. This means the coach must not only have access to a photocopier, but must know how to replace paper and toner/print cartridges and fix paper jams. Small, portable printers may be taken to tournaments and are often helpful in that role for last minute sharing and research. To keep photocopying costs down, coaches should make every effort to encourage students not to lose their evidence and other materials. That often means providing organizational supplies such as individual file folders, expanding file folders, and rubber storage bins. If students have multiple bins of evidence, carts or hand-trucks may be necessary to help them transport it.

Recruiting Team Members

Once the above structural resources are in place, the coach needs to find debaters to comprise their team. The first priority of building a debate team has to be recruitment. No other factor influences the long-term success of a debate team as much as student interest. Recruitment strategies have a direct bearing on the enthusiasm levels of your students.

The good news is there are several ways to recruit students to be on the debate team.

Most coaches hold an introductory meeting – we’ll call it the Informational Meeting – that allows them to tell interested students about the debate team. At the Informational Meeting find out which students want to take on the challenge and opportunity of being a member. Attrition rates from these meetings can be well over 50%, which means that to end up with a core group of 8-10 committed students, a coach should try to get 25 or more to come to this first meeting.



Obvious recruitment choices include students who are considered ‘talkative’ or who have displayed an interest in government or politics. It is important, however, not to overlook students who are shy about speaking or who struggle with their class work. Although it may take a personalized and concerted effort to recruit these students, they are typically the ones who have the most to gain from an activity like debate. Other teachers at your school may be willing and able to help you identify potential team members based on these criteria.



Recruitment Strategies

Fliers. To attract a large number of students to the informational meeting hand out and post fliers around the school touting the various benefits of debate: college scholarships, opportunities to travel, improvement in reading and other academic skills, the thrill of competition, and the joy of arguing!

Class presentations. Other teachers, especially those in English or Social Studies departments, may allow the prospective coach to make a brief presentation during their classes to tell their students about the team. If available, distribute a photocopy of a news article about other Urban Debate Leagues. There is a video of a *60 Minutes* segment on an Urban Debate League that could be shown to prospective students.

Other students. Coaches who already have a team in place (or a few early committed new members) and are looking to recruit more debaters should have their veterans give presentations and otherwise assist with recruitment. They will most likely be more effective at appealing to their peers than a teacher. Many students have reported that the single most important factor in their decision to join a debate team was that their friends were involved.

Food. Free food, such as cookies or fruit, is often a very appealing incentive for high school students, especially at the end of the day. Once you get them in the door with the food you will have to convince them with your arguments, though.

Extra credit. If the debate coach teaches a class that is related to debating (such as government, speech or even history) she may offer extra school credit to students who show up and participate meaningfully on the debate team.

Other teachers. Take the time to inform their colleagues about the value of debate, and the initiation of the new debate program. These other teachers should be recruited to recommend specific students for the team. The coach and/or existing team members should follow up directly with these students.



The Informational Meeting

One goal of the Informational Meeting is to outline the benefits of participation on the debate team to the recruits. These benefits include competition, opportunities to travel, positive effects on grades, and enhancing opportunities for college scholarships. The critical thinking skills of reasoning, listening and speaking are also obvious points to highlight, as is the development of inter-personal qualities of self-confidence and communication. Don't forget to make the point that arguing can be fun! To demonstrate their potential travel destinations the coach could hand out a tentative tournament schedule to demonstrate their potential travel destinations. Once the coach feels she has made some inroads on a few students, encourage them to recruit their friends to join the team as well.

As with most other important extra-curricular activities, being on the debate team is not all fun and games. It takes hard work to succeed. The self-discipline and work habits the students learn from participating in debate are another compelling reason for their involvement, but are probably not the most persuasive reasons to tell them at the start.

From the beginning, students should have a realistic expectation of the time commitment it takes to be an effective debater – just like it is a substantial time commitment to be successful in the marching band, academic teams or athletic squads. An important purpose of the Informational Meeting, therefore, should be to communicate to students exactly what participation on the team will entail and what will be expected of them. Avoid the temptation to downplay the 'costs' of debate, that is, the time, effort, and dedication it will require. Students who join the team with false expectations will be more difficult to retain once the true costs in terms of time become evident.

Setting Expectations

Clear communication of expectations to students is essential. Here are a few of the issues to resolve before the coach holds the Informational Meeting with the prospective student recruits:

Practices. How many weekly practices will be held, and how many must they attend?

Tournaments. How many tournaments will each student have to attend?

Notice for Missing Events. What kind of notice will a student have to give if they are late for or absent from a practice or tournament?

Research. How much research or other work will they have to do on their own time?

Team Events. Will they be required to help with special events sponsored by the Debate Team, such as fundraisers, hosting a tournament or public debates?



Instead, while the coach should emphasize the many benefits of debate, the coach making clear that it takes hard work to achieve them. Students will get the message most clearly if they are presented with a list of concrete expectations: students must come to at least one team meeting a week, attend at least three tournaments, give adequate notice and a valid explanation for any practices they miss, etc. Even if the coach ultimately decides to be more lenient than this, it doesn't hurt to set the bar high at the beginning.

Of course, if the Informational Meeting is nothing more than a list of demands, few if any students will want to join the team. The best way to hook students on debating is to let them try their hand at it. At the Informational Meeting you can have the students engage in mini-debates. The topics for these debates should be ones they already know a lot about and would consider fun or interesting to argue about.

Give every student the opportunity to present one or two short speeches (one minute in length) on these topics. This activity can have as much or as little organization as the coach chooses to give it, as the primary goal is just to let the students do a little spontaneous debating and leave eager to do more. It is important that the topics concern issues the students know a lot about so they will not be as nervous speaking in public. Compliment their efforts speeches by pointing out strengths in their speeches.

Sample Mini-Debate Topics for the Informational Meeting

School policies: "Should our school have a dress code?"

Politics: "Is George Bush the worst President ever?"

Music: "Who is the most important rap musician today?"

Sports: "Who is a better quarterback, Vince Young or Tom Brady?"

Creative: "Should America have a King?"

Students will most likely be curious to know exactly what kind of debating they will be doing. A list of rules doesn't capture the spirit of the activity nearly as well as a live performance. Having veteran debaters from another school or even another UDL in a nearby city put on a short demonstration debate is a much better way of showing students what they'll be getting into. If there aren't any experienced debaters available, videotapes of demonstration debates could serve this purpose. Be sure to leave time at the end of the meeting to answer any questions that students may have.



Following Up with Potential Recruits

Tell them how to participate. Be prepared to tell students when and where the next Team Meeting will be. Distribute an informational flier or brochure that contains this information, along with other materials summarizing the benefits of being a member of the team.

Get commitments. Before students leave the Informational Meeting give them an opportunity to commit to coming to the next Team Meeting.

Track them down. Some student won't want to commit on the spot, but don't leave it up to them to report later that they are interested. Find other students who were at the Informational Meeting and use them to encourage the rest of the students to attend the Team Meeting.

Show confidence in them. Students who aren't confident that debate is right for them will often be persuaded to give it a try if a teacher makes clear that she believes it is. For students whose parents are frequently busy or largely absent from their life, the opportunity to connect with an adult who takes a meaningful interest in their personal development is a tempting and ultimately rewarding one.



Building Support in the School

While students are the most important part of the debate team, coaches should also try to build support among their fellow teachers, the parents of students at the school, and the school administration. These other supporters can assist in recruitment, advocacy for the team, securing access to school resources, and otherwise making the coach's job more manageable.

Teachers

Other teachers are often the easiest to enlist, as they will have the opportunity to see first-hand how debate is benefiting students in their classes. Take advantage of opportunities to tell them about the many benefits of debate and keep them abreast of the team's accomplishments.

The support of other teachers is valuable for many reasons, not least of which is that students may need to get permission to miss class on occasion to attend tournaments or other events. Teachers are much more likely to make this concession if they know the educational benefits of the activity. They may also recommend students from their classes whom they feel would make good debaters. Teachers who are especially taken by debate may even be willing to help out as judges or assistant coaches.

School Administration

The support of the school administration may be a little more difficult to win, but it is no less important. The principal is often overworked and forced to balance the interests of a large number of competing groups: students, teachers, parents, the community at large, and her bosses at the district and/or state level. Combine these pressures with short tenure, strict accountability regimes, and (in many areas) a trend towards loss of control over the hiring of school faculty, and the result is a principal who, no matter how well-intentioned, may not have much time, money, or interest to devote to the school debate team.

Nevertheless, the principal is an invaluable ally. She and other administrators may be able to provide financial assistance for special events, and often control access to school resources such as computers, photocopiers, and classrooms. Principals who understand the value of debate are more likely to agree to host a tournament, grant permission for debaters to miss class to travel to a tournament, provide a coach stipend, or introduce a debate class into the school.

As school administrators are less likely than other teachers to see the benefits of debate immediately, coaches should make a special effort to exhibit them. Announce team achievements over the school intercom and post them on your classroom door, display trophies and other awards prominently, and talk up the benefits of debate for students and the school. Of course, the students themselves are the best evidence. When possible, arrange for them to speak at faculty meetings or obtain permission for them to come to a meeting with the principal.

The Principal's Bottom Line

As undesirable as they may find this fact, school principals are frequently forced to think in terms of their own bottom line: standardized test scores. Fortunately, debate makes students better at reading, writing, critical thinking, and organizing their thoughts logically. A recent study by the University of Missouri's Linda Collier found that students participating in a UDL improve their standardized reading scores by 25% more than their non-debating peers over the course of a single year. Statistics like these, as well as anecdotes about 'success case' students, can be very persuasive to school administrators.

If she has time, the principal may accept an invitation to a tournament, awards dinner, public debate, or other special event, and even if she doesn't have time she will still appreciate the offer. Giving her an opportunity to participate genuinely in the formulation of the vision for the team is another way to entice interest and secure long-term support. Above all, be aware of the principal's situation and respect the many demands on her time.

Parents

Finally, informing parents of students about the debate team is very important. Even parents who don't generally take an active interest in their child's education have the power to forbid their son or daughter from attending a tournament or staying after school for practice. However, if these same parents understand that debate can help their child improve grades or be accepted to and pay for college, they may be more willing to permit her to participate. Some parents who are convinced about the value of debate may encourage their child to join and agree to serve as judges or assistant coaches.

Attempt speaking directly with the parent(s) of all students on the team in order to communicate what membership on the team will entail for their child. This means talking about the benefits of the activity as well as the expectations. The coach can reach a larger audience of parents by speaking (or having her debaters speak) about debate at a PTA meeting. The PTA can also be a source of funding for special events such as invitational tournaments or team parties.





Building Support Outside of the School

When the school looks good, the school administration looks good. That means as the team generates positive attention from the media, colleges and universities, local businesses, or educational organizations, the coach will likely earn the appreciation of the principal and the respect of higher-ups such as district superintendents and local politicians.

Special Events

Publicizing tournament results is one way to increase the team's visibility, but that may not be as 'newsworthy' as other events. Holding an awards banquet to celebrate the successes of the team's first year (making it through is success enough!), a public debate on an issue of local concern, or a public forum event with a local politician, policymaker, or academic are other ways to build alliances and attract positive attention. Invite parents, teachers, students who are not already members of the team, the principal, relevant school district administrators, local politicians, and anyone else who has supported the team or who might do so in the future. Even if these invitations are declined the invitation, their recipients have still been reminded about the team and its successes.

The Media

Events can be publicized with promotional flyers, an article in the school newspaper, or a press release sent to local news outlets. Media attention and the presence of local dignitaries are mutually reinforcing: the press is more likely to cover an event when public figures will be in attendance, and the promise of a good photo-op will attract politicians and administrators.

Some school districts may have rules that govern how and when their employees may interact with the media. Be familiar with these policies before planning a publicity strategy.

A Word of Caution in Dealing with the Media

When working with the media, think carefully about the message to communicate, and phrase press releases or responses during interviews appropriately. Some reporters will be tempted to portray a debate team at an urban high school as a 'diamond in the rough'. Their angle on the story may be about how nice it is that for once urban youth are settling disputes with words rather than weapons, or about how debate keeps kids occupied after school, when they would otherwise be dealing drugs, committing crimes, and becoming teenage parents. While debate is a real solution to real problems such as these, coaches must be cautious about allowing the media to reinforce negative stereotypes about their neighborhood or their school.

Politicians and Staff

When working with politicians, school administrators, and similar potential allies, the key to success is making simple, deliverable requests and following up on them as necessary. While it may not be possible to follow up with a high-profile supporter directly, assistants and secretaries may be more important targets for persuasion anyway, as they often guide their bosses' decisions or even make them outright. A state senator's chief of staff, for example, is more likely than the senator herself to handle a request for funding or schedule the senator to make an appearance at an event.

Even capturing the attention of the assistants of especially high-profile figures can be difficult, and having a personal 'in' is a huge advantage in these situations. By building a network of supporters among parents, teachers, and community activists, of people who know the superintendent spouse's cousin may follow up on a



the coach creates a pool of people who know the coach may not know personally, a colleague's know his secretary, who appointment and help to request.

Requests are more when they allow for to develop over help coaches

complicated web of written and unwritten rules within the school system and to keep abreast of changes in the political climate.

likely to be approved a meaningful partnership time. These partnerships navigate the often-

Even once someone has made a commitment, it may be necessary to remind her or her staff several times to carry it out. Don't feel guilty about being a thorn in the side, however; it may be the only way to receive notice in a busy office, and public figures that have made commitments understand that they will be held accountable for carrying them out.