

From LA Times January 20, 2009

No argument: High school debate is popular once again

Literacy and graduation rates are improving for teens in debate programs. Students hope to put to rest the stereotype of debaters as geeks with pocket protectors.

By Yvonne Villarreal
January 20, 2009

Crowds of [Lincoln High School](#) students flooded the sidewalks along Broadway recently as another school day came to an end. But 16-year-old Tania Navarro wasn't in the crowd. She sat inside one of the school's bungalow classrooms, tapping her pencil against the sheet of paper in front of her.

"I love to argue," she said.

But her penchant for verbal confrontation hadn't landed her in detention hall.

She and nine of her classmates are part of the back-in-vogue world of high school debate, long a staple of American high schools until falling out of fashion in the 1980s. Educators and others are hoping the art of forceful and reasoned argument will once again sweep into many of Los Angeles' high schools.

"For many of our students, English is a second language, and many of them are poor . . . and debate has nothing to do with that," said Supt. Ramon C. Cortines, who was a member of his college debate team.

"They learn, in the end, that they can succeed with their words even when society tells them they can't."

Some schools have individual debate teams, but their numbers are spotty and they frequently depend on the dedication of one teacher.

The National Assn. of Urban Debate Leagues, which includes the Los Angeles chapter, is a nonprofit network of policy debate teams made up mainly of minority students from urban high schools in 24 large cities, including New York, Boston and Chicago.

"Too often students are inactive, passive recipients of the educational system and its process," said Brett Flater, director of Los Angeles Urban Debate League, which was launched in the fall. "When they understand they have a voice, a drastic change occurs: they're suddenly engaged. You don't have to train students to get up and express an opinion -- they're full of them."

In 1999, the Southern California Urban Debate League was established to support economically underserved schools in Orange County. Debate teams are relatively scarce in other urban districts, where dropout rates are high, test scores are low and a large majority of students qualify for reduced-price lunches.

The Los Angeles debate league serves more than 80 students -- a number organizers hope to increase to

300 students in 30 schools in the next three years. The L.A. chapter's \$326,000 budget comes mostly from Los Angeles Unified School District funds and donations from members of a local advisory board.

"Our mission is more debate for more kids," said Lenny Gail, chairman of the Chicago-based national debate organization, who belonged to his high school and college debate teams. "We felt almost as if there was a moral imperative to try and get something going in L.A. because of the number of kids who might not be exposed to the benefits of debating."

And recruiting them isn't difficult, Flater said. The stereotype of debaters as suburban geeks wearing pocket protectors isn't a barrier for participating students, but it's an image they hope to change.

"It's telling kids like us, who might not live in the nicest areas or have access to all the resources kids in other neighborhoods do, that we have worth," said Fernando Morones, 14, who is part of the 26-member [Elizabeth Learning Center](#) debate team in Cudahy. "This sets a level of fairness that we might not otherwise have. . . . It's showing others that we're capable."

But being capable only goes so far. Like the topics they argue, debate itself takes research and strategy. Students receive nearly 600 pages of high-level research organized into specific topics that they craft into an argument.

Students who participate show improved academic achievement, according to the national urban debate league.

Literacy scores among debaters have increased by an average of 25%. High school graduation rates among regular participants are nearly 100%, and more than 75% of urban debaters attend four-year colleges.

For Tania, the statistics aren't merely abstract figures. The freshman has overcome a few roadblocks in her journey. A native of Mexico, she said she repeated kindergarten and second grade when her English skills weren't up to par.

Today, Tania said she has a 3.5 grade-point average and dreams of attending Harvard Law School.

"Debate has helped me so much with my studies," Tania said. "My writing isn't perfect. I mispronounce big words sometimes . . . but I'm learning and I'm doing better. Now, when I see a word I don't understand in the research materials, I look it up instead of skipping over it."

yvonne.villarreal@latimes.com