



BOSTON DEBATE LEAGUE

Transforming School Culture Through Debate

Boston Debate League

Executive Director
Boston, MA

THE SEARCH

The Boston Debate League (BDL), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for students in Boston public schools through the rigor of debate, seeks an exceptional leader to serve as its next Executive Director. The new Executive Director will lead a significant expansion of BDL's efforts within Boston to advance its mission of integrating argumentation and competitive debate into BPS to develop critical thinkers ready for college, career, and engagement with the world around them.

Despite recent gains in academic achievement, low-income and minority students continue to face systemic obstacles that impede their academic performance and, for some, sap their motivation to succeed. The skills that students learn through debate, analyzing texts, synthesizing arguments, and presenting those arguments clearly and confidently, reposition students as the drivers of their own learning, foster motivation, and provide students with the tools they need to be successful in secondary school, college, and beyond. Debate offers a range of learning opportunities to a wide variety of students, from those already highly-achieving to those off-track academically and at risk of dropping out.

Created in 2005, amid the Urban Debate League (UDL) movement, the BDL has grown from a small, volunteer-driven organization to a prominent education initiative embraced by senior BPS leadership, including the Superintendent and the Boston School Committee. The BDL manages two debate programs: (1) an After School Debate League (ASDL) that offers regular competitions in interscholastic policy debate; and (2) Evidence Based Argumentation (EBA), a program of professional development, piloted in 2010, that trains teachers to use debate techniques in their classrooms.

Thanks to the generosity of local donors and a significant investment from the school system, ASDL has expanded to 29 BPS middle and high schools. Last season, BDL had over 930 debaters compete in middle school, high school English, and high school Spanish divisions.

EBA transforms classrooms and repositions students as the drivers and interpreters of their learning. Using a scaffold approach to argument instruction, where teachers guide students through a progression of skills as they work toward producing sustained, multifaceted arguments

that draw on evidence from external texts and are organized around a central thesis, EBA is presently engaging 300 BPS teachers and 3,500 students.

The BDL recently adopted a strategic plan to bring both of its programs to scale in Boston. The core objectives of the plan are that by 2021-2022 there will be a competitive debate team in every BPS high school and middle school, and a growing number of schools will use EBA as a core method of instruction. As a result, over the next five to seven years:

- The number of schools with debate teams will grow from 29 to 75.
- Every BPS student in grades 6-12 will have the opportunity to join a debate team.
- The number of debaters per year will grow to close to 2,000.
- The number of schools with EBA will grow from 8 to 29.
- The number of volunteers that BDL engages will grow from 800 to meet the needs of this expansion.

This plan demands a leader with the capacity to raise resources, forge powerful alliances among education reformers and the organization's existing supporters, and nurture the growth of urban debate as a means for tremendous scholastic achievement throughout BPS. The successful candidate will have demonstrated experience and acumen in organizational development and leadership, a passion for social justice and education reform to benefit urban youth, and superior communication skills. The next BDL Executive Director will have the platform and responsibility to promote and brand the BDL as an essential and valuable player in advancing the urban debate agenda, while collaborating with leaders in Boston's education and nonprofit communities.

This invitation describes the BDL and its programs in greater detail and sets forth the challenges and opportunities that make the position of Executive Director so compelling for a leader wishing to make a real difference in empowering Boston's students to develop and attain goals. The BDL Board of Directors has engaged the national, executive search firm, Isaacson, Miller, to assist with this important search. All inquiries, nominations, and applications should be sent to Isaacson, Miller at the address and in the manner indicated at the end of this document. All inquiries will be held in strict confidence.

The Value of Debate in Educational Achievement

The evidence that debate works to advance educational achievement for students is readily apparent:

- Students who join an urban debate team are 42% more likely to graduate from high school than their non-debating peers (77% vs. 54%).
- Debaters have higher GPAs (.20 points or 20% of a letter grade).
- After just one year of debate, students' ability to read for accuracy increased more than three grade levels, and students' ability to read for fluency and comprehension increased more than two grade levels.
- Students experienced a 15 percentile ACT score increase for both reading and English after just two years in debate.

- Debaters are 34% (English) and 74% (Reading) more likely to achieve the ACT college readiness benchmark after just two years in debate.

While debate can help high-achieving students to access and succeed in college, it has an even greater impact on struggling students. Debate is a powerful literacy tool for students whose reading challenges could otherwise undercut both their academic performance and motivation to succeed. A University of Missouri study found that after one year in a UDL, debaters attended school more frequently, improved their GPAs by 10%, decreased risky behaviors, and achieved a 25% increase in literacy scores relative to a non-debating control group. Studies have shown even more pronounced improvements for underrepresented minorities and particularly for Hispanic and African American males.

The Boston Debate League

The Boston Debate League's mission is to integrate argumentation and competitive debate into BPS to develop critical thinkers ready for college, career, and engagement with the world around them. The BDL is intent on extending the benefits of debate to the students who need them most. BDL debaters closely reflect the BPS student population; they are 24% Hispanic, 54% Black, 11% White, and 8% Asian, and 76% are low income. While many high achieving students participate, 40% of debaters started in the bottom half of their class and more than 50% were in the middle two quartiles.

Impressed by the early impact of the BDL, BPS increased its investment in debate ten-fold from \$50,000 in the 2009-10 academic year to over \$550,000 in 2014-15. Boston's foundations, major corporations, and private philanthropists have been even more generous, tripling the BPS commitment. Between private philanthropy and the support of the school system, the BDL has had the means to expand in just six years from three high schools to 27 middle and high schools, from 25 student debaters to over 900, from a budget of \$200,000 to \$2.5 million, from a staff of one to 17, and from a volunteer base of under 100 to over 800. In this period, the BDL also created EBA, one of the most sought after professional development programs in the city.

BDL Programs

The Boston Debate League's programming is unique among the city's after-school and other youth development programs in that it targets middle and high school students and blends competition and fun with rigorous academic work. While many programs aim only to keep teens safe and occupied in the afternoon, debate provides an engaging, educational opportunity that actively cultivates social and academic skills. The BDL presents debate in a variety of ways so as to reach a broad spectrum of students, from those already highly achieving to those who are off-track academically and at risk of dropping out.

The After School Debate League (ASDL), begun in 2005, administers school-level policy debate teams and regular interscholastic competitions with four levels of competition as well as a division for Spanish speakers. Each school's debate team is led by coaches who are teachers in the school. After school practices are held multiple times each week, and students can compete once a month. At tournaments, students argue for and against policy proposals, honing and applying their

research, critical reasoning, writing, and persuasive speaking skills. Tournaments expose students to peers who inspire them to exert more effort in their education, as well as role models who give them confidence to pursue their goals beyond graduation.

The impetus for the EBA program came from BPS, which tasked the BDL with figuring out a way for more students in member schools to gain the tremendous academic and social benefits of debate. In consultation with the BPS Academic Superintendent for High Schools and the headmasters of the member schools, the BDL concluded that the most effective way to bring debate's benefits to all BPS students would be through a coordinated professional development program that trained teachers to employ debate as a pedagogical tool in their classrooms across all academic disciplines. The BDL partners with schools that have agreed to make EBA their sole curricular initiative.

The Strategic Plan

BDL's long-term vision is to grow debate programming to a level where it helps schools to transform their academic cultures, and eventually to aid the district itself. As described above, the core objectives of BDL's Strategic Plan are that, by the 2021-2022 academic year, every Boston Public School student in grades 6-12 will have the opportunity to join their school's debate team, and a growing number of schools will use EBA as a core method of instruction. Activities to achieve these objectives are organized around three key priorities:

Growth & Impact: BDL programs will go deeper in existing schools, e.g., engage more students, while expanding to more schools. Creating a larger mass of students in a given school who are routinely engaged in rigorous debate will change the academic culture of that school; taking that model to all BPS middle and high schools will change the academic culture of the district.

Capacity & Sustainability: Building organizational capacity is a pre-requisite for BDL to achieve ambitious growth in a way that is sustainable and ensures high quality. Expansion to new schools will be slower at first as BDL hires staff and develops systems and processes needed to handle more ambitious growth in later years.

Data & Evaluation: BDL will develop and implement new systems to further evaluate and refine its programming. Constant quality improvement is essential to long term impact. This process has begun with the creation and staffing of the Evaluation Manager position, through which the BDL is creating an organizational evaluation plan to document program impact and shape program growth.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over the next five years, the BDL will face six important and exciting challenges. The board seeks an Executive Director with the passion and experience to pursue the mission, execute the strategy, and make debate a signature activity in the Boston Public Schools.

Promote awareness of the Boston Debate League throughout the city and engage key constituencies.

The Executive Director will offer persuasive leadership, advancing the case for urban debate in all BPS middle and high schools and conveying the BDL's mission, vision, and strategy to all stakeholders. The board will look to the new director to build a broad constituency of supporters in Boston's legal, business, academic, and government sectors. The new leader will need to explain debate, explain its attraction to BPS students, and articulate the value of urban debate for the student, the school, and the system. The Executive Director will be the essential communicator for the organization, who conveys the mission, the vision, and the strategy to all of the stakeholders.

Champion and execute the strategic plan to grow the BDL and its impact.

The BDL board and staff designed and adopted a new strategic plan in 2015. In five to seven years, the BDL should reach all BPS middle and high schools with large debate teams that broadly represent the student body. EBA should become a well-known and valued form of teaching, widely understood and practiced in BPS classrooms. The strategic plan envisions that debate will become a signature activity in the BPS. The next Executive Director will embrace the plan's ambition to double the budget and the volume of fundraising, and increase the number of volunteers and the size of the staff. Working collaboratively with a strong team, the Executive Director must have the capacity to execute the plan and adapt it when necessary.

Recruit, develop, and inspire a strong senior and junior staff who can enthusiastically build the BDL.

The BDL attracts a committed, passionate, and mission-driven staff; fiercely committed to quality education. They share a broad enthusiasm for the mission and are eager to collaborate with an Executive Director in its execution. The BDL is an entrepreneurial organization that has grown rapidly. The Executive Director will need to understand and value the individual talents and aspirations of a young staff, and be able to engage their passion, while finding organizational structures and operating systems that enhance performance in the office and the field. The staff is eager to contribute, and a new Executive Director should create an environment and structure that galvanizes their best efforts and builds loyalty and productivity.

Constantly improve the quality of BDL programs.

The BDL develops a young person's lifelong critical thinking as few other organizations do. Perfecting this core tenet of the organization's mission is increasingly a great source of motivation and purpose for the staff as well as a measurement of their efforts. Not only does this pursuit of excellence enhance their work, it also deepens the commitment of their most central partners: BPS, teachers, coaches, students, judges, and volunteers. The Executive Director will embrace this cause, always insisting on renewed commitment to innovation, quality, and the highest levels of execution in all of the organization's work. Partnering closely with the evaluation manager, s/he will be vigilant in identifying areas where ASDL, EBA instruction and teacher training, and internal management of the two, can be refined.

Engage the leadership of the Boston Public Schools.

From the beginning and through three superintendents, BPS has been an enthusiastic supporter of the BDL. The leadership at the highest levels, in the central office, in the networks and divisions, among the Heads and in the schools, have all understood how both EBA and ASDL inspire students, improve academic performance and add significantly to school culture, raising expectations among students and faculty for intellectual achievement.

The next Executive Director will engage all levels of the BPS, working closely with key figures, aiding the schools to develop and implement debate programming that supports the fundamental educational priorities of the BPS.

Work with key constituencies on issues of equity and difference.

The BDL works on educational improvement in a large, diverse, urban system with students from varied racial, ethnic, gender, and religious identities. Issues of equity surface regularly and are central to good programming. The Executive Director will be comfortable with all discussions of difference and be capable of providing leadership on matters of diversity with staff, volunteers, coaches, students, and donors and to engage the BPS on these issues, even when they are emotionally charged.

Build the BDL's strength in the philanthropic community.

The strategic plan focuses on substantially increasing the BDL's revenue through an expanded donor base. Local foundations, individual philanthropists, and many leading corporations in the city of Boston have been very supportive of the organization. It has a compelling story that captures the imagination of the philanthropic community. The next Executive Director will build on this success, deepening the city's understanding of the organization, widening the group of donors, and engaging the full philanthropic community in the BDL mission. BDL can add fuel to the full educational improvement agenda of the city, and the Executive Director will make that case to both public and private funders.

The BDL seeks an individual who has a track-record of successful fundraising, the ability and disposition to build relationships with funders and partners, and who is, or can become, a fearless and passionate promoter of urban debate among the funding community.

REQUIRED EXPERIENCE AND QUALIFICATIONS

Although it is unlikely that any one individual will bring all of the experience and qualifications listed below, the successful candidate will have many of the following attributes:

- BA/BS required; advanced degree preferred;
- Experience as a teacher is preferred and experience with public school districts and the pressing issues of educational reform is greatly valued;
- Experience as a high school and/or college debater is desirable but not required;
- A track record of leading a nonprofit organization through a period of significant expansion;

- The capacity to explain a complex program to varied constituencies and to engage public and private donors in the BDL mission;
- A capacity to lead important discussions about difference and diversity of every form, in regular day-to-day operations and, on occasion, in contentious settings;
- Significant experience in education, advocacy, or nonprofit management including a senior leadership role with some responsibility for financial oversight;
- Experience in partnering with a nonprofit board of directors;
- Successful experience enhancing the capacity of an organization, sharing senior management responsibilities, team-building, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability, and implementing financial control systems;
- A managerial style that is personable, genuinely collaborative, and inclusive; personal qualities that ensure trust in governance and the highest standards of honesty and integrity; dependability; and an inclination to circulate, communicate, listen, and learn;
- Ability to translate mission, strategies, and goals into day-to-day operational objectives;
- Ability to engage in strategic planning and implementation;
- A strong sense of confidence and the wisdom and courage to make difficult choices, based on available data, when needs are abundant and resources are not; and
- Energy, passion, poise, flexibility, and an abiding sense of humor.

APPLICATIONS AND NOMINATIONS

The Boston Debate League has retained the services of Isaacson, Miller to assist with this search. Review of applications, nominations, and expressions of interest will begin immediately and continue on a confidential basis until an appointment is made; and should be directed to:

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Lionel Anderson, Associate
Isaacson, Miller
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Electronic submission preferred via:
www.imsearch.com/5656

The Boston Debate League is an equal opportunity employer.