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Study: School Debate Programs Linked to Improvements in Academic Achievement, Graduation Rates, and College Enrollment

Impacts Are Largest Among Students Who Were Lowest Achieving Prior to Participation

Washington, October 24, 2023—Participating in policy debate programs in middle and high school is associated with improvements in English language arts (ELA) achievement and increases in the likelihood that students graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education, according to new [research](#). The study was published today in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association. It was conducted by Beth Schueler from the University of Virginia and Katherine Larned from Harvard University.

Video: [Study co-author Beth Schueler discusses major findings and implications](#)

Policy debate is an interscholastic, competitive, extracurricular activity in which teams of students engage in structured argumentation about public policy issues. Participants focus on a single resolution for the entire academic year, which requires them to learn about one policy area in depth.

Typically, extracurricular debate programs are disproportionately found in private and high-income public schools. However, this study was conducted in the context of the Boston Public Schools, where the Boston Debate League, a nonprofit, serves a student population that is majority low income and students of color.

The study relied on data from the Boston Debate League, Boston Public Schools, and the National Student Clearinghouse for students enrolled in Boston Public Schools during the 2007–08 to 2017–18 school years. It included the 3,515 students who participated in the Boston Debate League over that time.

“We found that debate was linked to improvements not only in overall ELA achievement but specifically in those ELA competencies requiring critical thinking skills,” said Schueler, assistant professor of education and public policy at the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development. “The impact was almost entirely concentrated among reading subskills that involve more analysis and argumentation.”

The impacts were substantial, translating to roughly 68 percent of the learning in ELA that typically takes place over the course of the ninth-grade year. The gains were largest among students who were lowest performing at baseline, suggesting that policy debate does not need to be reserved for high-achieving students.

The authors also examined effects on high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, finding positive impacts driven by increased enrollment in four-year colleges and universities.



“These results provide policymakers a rare promising program for reducing inequality in reading achievement, analytical thinking skills, and educational attainment among middle and high school students,” said Larned, a fellow and doctoral student in the education policy and program evaluation program at Harvard University. “Debate programs are cost-effective relative to other high-profile interventions and therefore have great potential for scalability.”

The authors pointed out that researchers have uncovered very few interventions that generate impacts of this magnitude for secondary school students, especially on literacy outcomes. School leaders looking to boost ELA outcomes could look to this type of extracurricular activity for supporting older students in learning.

“Policy debate appears to be a rare strategy for improving literacy skills among middle and high school students,” said Schueler. “It helps to demonstrate that secondary school is not ‘too late’ to support student progress in reading.”

There are likely implications for teachers working in traditional classrooms. Some professional development programs have been designed to help teachers infuse key principles of debate pedagogy into regular classrooms. The authors suggested that researchers should explore the effectiveness of these programs to help uncover the extent to which debate would generalize to students who do not opt for the extracurricular activity.

The authors also recommended that future research should examine the relative effectiveness of different extracurricular activities, as well as further assess policy debate’s impact on critical thinking, argumentation skills, and other competencies needed for academic and civic participation, such as social perspective taking, media literacy, ability to distinguish fact from opinion, and engagement with the policy process.

Study citation: Schueler, B., & Larned, K. (2023). Interscholastic policy debate promotes critical thinking and college-going: Evidence from Boston Public Schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Prepublished October 24, 2023. <http://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231200234>
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