

DEBATING FUNDING, FUNDING DEBATING: THE CHICAGO DEBATE COMMISSION'S TALE OF TWO CITIES

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Recently, a daily columnist for the Chicago Tribune wrote an article lauding the suburban debate teams at the two Glenbrook high schools. The piece mentioned a few other successful suburban teams, but tightly focused on the hard work done by the Glenbrook students and coaches, the exoticism of the activity and elaborateness of the programs, and the schools' enviable competitive records. These points of emphasis typify the media's coverage of debate: suburbs, elite, affluence, intelligence, winning.

On one level, the writer, Eric Zorn, and his paper should be commended merely for turning their attention to interscholastic debate. In a sports-obsessed society, competitive debate should receive substantially more attention than it does, since it abstracts the excitement and motivating energy of athletic competition and applies it to the exercise of crucial academic skills, such as critical thinking, research, and argumentative writing and speaking. As a Glenbrook South debate alumnus, I am also fully aware of how deserving the Glenbrook students and coaches are of recognition for their thorough dedication to the activity.

There is another story, though, implicit in the *Tribune's* paean to suburban debate, one that could be told by reconfiguring the information in the article, and by looking for what has been left out. The alternative story would find debate synecdochical for the social inequality that afflicts the public education system of Illinois, and of most of the rest of the nation. Zorn is right in saying, "Local cultural factors play a . . . small role in the formation of debate powerhouses" (1). His central claim, however, that "The key element [to winning debates] seems to be the skill and dedication of the coaches," (1) is misleading in this formulation and requires correction.

Unquestionably, finding a coach dedicated enough to devote the level of time and energy necessary to facilitate the activity's student-centered learning is crucial. In order to win tournaments, the coach must also be an effective teacher, an engaging motivator, and an able strategist. But preceding the coach in importance as a key element in "the formation of debate powerhouses," and of more modest but still successful high school

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debate programs, is school district funding. Zorn seems to acknowledge as much earlier in the piece: "But they do get support where it counts -- close to \$220,000 a year in funding from the district. . . .¹ This money pays for the extensive travel demanded at the highest levels of debate and for a pair of the top coaches in the country" (1). Debate coaches are professional educators and rightly insist on being paid for their time and expertise; suburban coaching stipends can amount to \$10,000 or more, as an addition to the teacher's regular salary. If the coach is the immediate "key" to a strong debate program, then the First Cause and most essential condition is adequate district funding.

Funding levels like those enjoyed by the Glenbrooks leave plenty to spend after the coaches' stipends and salaries are removed, roughly \$60,000 per school. Some of this money is spent on travel -- both local and national. Then there are assistant coaches. It is not unusual for a suburban debate program to have four college debaters on staff throughout the debate season, providing a sizable edge in training and support over the program that has only one coach. The suburban budget also pays for various means to improve the team's research -- from subscriptions to unpopular but useful magazines delivered to the school's debate office, to an expensive Lexis-Nexis hook-up. It also pays for a ready supply of basic debate materials, such as legal pads and abundant photocopies. A school's debate budget, therefore, converts into competitive advantages at a rather high level of efficiency. Budgets, rather than merely the skills of the coaches, "explain why a look through lists of top-finishing Illinois schools of the last 20 years shows many of the same names occurring often" (Zorn 1).

The other half of the revised story one might tell would focus on the part of the Chicago area excluded by an exclusive focus on suburban debate, namely the city proper. Glenbrook South coach Matt Whipple is quoted in the article saying that "When a program dies, it's usually because they lost their coach" (qtd. in Zorn 1). But that wasn't what happened in Chicago. Beginning in the late sixties, debate teams were strangled by tightening budgets, due primarily to constricting property tax revenues. This is not the place to rehearse the well-documented case against the public school funding system in

¹ Zorn never cites the source of this figure, and I was unable to verify it through the administration of the District. Apparently it includes the coaches' teaching salaries, in addition to their stipends, and all other costs of the debate program. The actual debate budget, subtracting the two coaches' salaries (not their stipends), would be approximately \$100,000.

Illinois, which has at its base the local property tax, resulting in vastly unequal levels of per-pupil funding between public school districts. Suffice it to say that incomparable public school debate budgets are a keen manifestation of the way we fund our public schools. For the past thirty years, then, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have been bereft of debate. While debate has improved the educational prospects and enriched the minds of thousands of suburban students, equally talented and deserving city students have not had the opportunity to participate in even the most basic competitive debate, not to mention to join programs like those at the Glenbrooks.

Occasionally during this period, a lone Chicago public school has had a debate program: Kenwood and Du Sable had programs for awhile, and I helped start one at Whitney Young in 1994, when I was an English teacher there. These programs have always been isolated and short-lived, however, truncated in depth and duration by the constant (and only intermittently successful) search for funding. The few scattered debate teams in the CPS over the past thirty years only remind us that the stakes are too high in public education to rely on ad hoc, as opposed to systemic, policies.

Chicago is not atypical in having allowed a stark disparity to develop between public schools in the city and the suburbs, signified by the difference in debate programs. As a direct response, Urban Debate Leagues have been forming over the past five to seven years in a growing number of cities. For example, in Atlanta the Emory University debate program has operated a growing Urban Debate League in the Atlanta public schools for eight years. In addition to actively progressive members of the college debate community, the Open Society Institute, a private operating and grantmaking organization funded by philanthropist George Soros, has taken up the urban debate banner. The OSI has funded two meetings convening representatives from college debate programs around the country who are currently interested or involved in implementing Urban Debate Leagues, and provides funding for several leagues across the country.

Now Chicago too has an Urban Debate League, and it is thriving. Chicago has in place a public/private cooperative venture that may be setting a national example. The Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas and Reform Board President Gery Chico deserve substantial credit; they have perceived the educational value and power of competitive debate, and have allocated school-site funds for an expanding Pilot Project. The Chicago Debate Commission (CDC), an organization formed in 1995 by the Community Renewal Society, the League of Women Voters, and Phi Beta Kappa,

administers the program -- trains the coaches, supplies the judging, and runs the tournaments -- with much of the funding coming from the OSI. The Chicago Urban Debate League is in its second year, with ten Chicago public high schools participating, and hundreds of city students debating at tournaments across the city. Northwestern University is playing an important role, offering Chicago debaters ten Provost Scholarships to their renowned debate institute this summer. The University of Iowa is doing likewise, having granted five student scholarships to its summer debate camp.

The Glenbrook schools each receive a budget of roughly \$60,000. The CPS allocation is \$75,000 for the city -- which, given the high demands on its very limited funds, signifies considerable support. This is central to the story that might have been told: a debate budget disparity of about eight to one between public schools in affluent suburbs and public schools in the city. This revised story would report that debate is a metaphor for the way class inequality is transmitted in this country, often disguised by the apparently meritocratic and "fair competition" narrative distilled for us by sporting contests. But Zorn also might have told an affirmative story of a broad swath of civic-minded people in Chicago (and beyond) who, having been made aware of this particular social inequality, are doing the right thing and doing what they can to end it. The *Tribune* might then have talked to Joseph Slowik or Dominique Brewer (two of our league's most successful debaters last year) and asked them what impact the opportunity to compete in debate is having on their young lives and their hopes for the future.

Work Cited

Zorn, Eric. "There's No Debate: Glenbrook Schools Are Powerhouses." *Chicago Tribune* 5 May 1998, sec. 2: 1.