



Dear Administrator,

Last April, when it became obvious in-person tournaments would not be held anytime in the near future, the Massachusetts Speech and Debate League (MSDL) opted for a live, synchronous virtual tournament. We felt live interaction with judges and competitors was necessary for student engagement, vital in the midst of a quarantine, and integral to the activity itself. To some students, and even coaches, it was a hard sell. We were venturing into uncharted territory. Many of the students I coach had to be encouraged to compete. The concept this may be the “new normal” did not sit well with most.

With the help of all of our league coaches and many other volunteers, including past league presidents and alumni of our state league, we successfully held the first live virtual tournament in state history. Our debate rounds piloted the new NSDA Campus virtual rooms (the platform didn’t even have a name when we were using it!).

What we discovered is that the new normal works, and works well. Students got used to practicing and performing while at their homes, judges bent over backwards to make sure students in their rounds felt good about their performances, and most importantly, our students had one final, culminating activity for the school year during a time when so much else in their lives had been taken away. Almost everyone, including the reluctant participants, ended up enjoying the experience. As is always the case, our speech and debate community came together and focused on what was best for our students, and the students reaped the benefits of everyone’s efforts.

With so many challenges facing our country today, it is more important than ever to help our students find their voices, to understand both sides of an issue, and to continue to express themselves in creative and thoughtful ways. The virtual world has opened doors for our expanding community, and the community continues to offer students the ability to express their creativity and scholastic talent. Speech and debate students are not just the future leaders of our communities or our country; they ARE the leaders, fighting for social justice online, on the phone, and even in person. It often is the young who initiate change, and they once again are leading the way.

There has never been a more important time for speech and debate education. With many online platform options, tournaments are moving forward around the country, and students are continuing to learn from coaches, volunteer judges, and their competition experiences. Being able to hold tournaments online has broadened access to the activity, making it possible for students to compete without the burden of travel to distant tournament locations.

With some schools across the country currently forced to forego many traditional extracurricular options, there is no better time for schools to offer their students the opportunity to engage in online speech and debate. We may be physically apart, but our students are connected, learning, and articulating their messages. They are finding their voices.

We hope more schools will take advantage of this “new normal” and provide for their students an experience which is like no other: the community of speech and debate.



On behalf of the Massachusetts Speech and Debate League,

Greg Cunningham

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Find this and other letters of support on our website:
www.speechanddebate.org/advocacy