



Dear Administrators,

I can recall a statement from my student days about the importance of training in speech: "Speech: A Ready Man." Certainly today, we would make the statement inclusive of gender, but there is an essential truth captured in that yearbook slogan from yesteryear.

Many skills and much training go into the preparation of our students who compete at tournaments in speech and debate. Like many motor skills we learn during our school days, carefully honed, intentionally directed, and confidently delivered oral performance is one upon which we can rely for quite a long time. I think it's a bike-riding lesson that can be seamlessly relearned and renewed.

Possessed of such skills, our students gain a talent developed to deal with the increasingly complex issues they will confront as they mature. The rhetorical arts, devices, and structures deserve a central place in the education of those who need to confront a world that can be joyful, bewildering, and, sometimes, downright nasty. I've been lucky to witness the NSDA national competitions which demonstrate the best talents, the best speakers, and the most accomplished debaters. And these competitions are important sources of achievement and pride for our students. But the skills, the attitudes, and the behaviors developed by training in speech and debate, however, are vital for everyone. It's a case of both/and rather than either/or.

Speaking well, debating well, doing the right research to support a point of view are some of the best ways to counter half-truths and falsehoods, to train students to not only perform well but also to think well and to keep the passions and distractions in check. And that's why training is a great word to use here. It's basic, maybe a little old-fashioned, but in the education of our students, this training is at the core of two skills repeated in 21st century learning: communication and critical thinking.

What a gift to provide for students now and for the rest of this century. The long-term power that can transcend adolescent angst and social helplessness. The training, done well, done fully, can teach the mind and touch the heart. And that can be the case as it helps students deliver messages in person, to be sure, but let's be more realistic, over the social networks and who knows which networks of the future.

When I arrived at the tournament in Salt Lake City in June of 2016, I spent a little time following a custom I use as an administrator or speaker: getting myself in the moment. That meant looking into the faces of students and coaches in the crowd outside of the auditorium and watching the skilled finalists in Dramatic Interpretation. And it also meant looking at the items in the store.

One struck my eye: "Don't Hate – Debate."

Exactly. Let's make them ready women and men.



Sincerely,

Michael A. O'Toole

Principal, La Salle College High School, Pennsylvania

2016 National Speech & Debate Association Principal of the Year

Find this and other letters of advocacy on our website:  
[www.speechanddebate.org](http://www.speechanddebate.org)