

# Why Do We Do Policy Debate?

by James M. Kellams

Since 1973, Louisville High School, one of the smallest schools in the Eastern Ohio NFL District, has produced more than 250 state qualifiers, five state champions, more than 40 national qualifiers, and 11 national finalists. The Louisville High School Speech and Debate Club success is guided by a mission statement which proclaims, “The Speech and Debate club is about non-violent, civil disobedience. It is about expression of ideas, and the desire to be heard and change the way people think.” At Louisville, students in the debate program are encouraged to respectfully question the status quo and to become proactive in their quest for the truth. After all, we believe this is the mission of forensics: to find and proclaim the truth and such exploration empowers the individual.

For Louisville and others in the Eastern Ohio district, Policy Debate encapsulates all that is right about forensics. It is the most rigorous of all forms of debate in National Forensic League competition, pushing the students to the limits of their ability and beyond, as well as pushing common standards about how they view the world. While other forms of debate also encourage students to examine both sides of an issue or exercise critical thinking, Policy Debate allows students the opportunity to engage the issues to a much greater degree than other debate categories which frequently change topics. Policy Debate enables students to recognize the far-reaching implications of an issue which often transcend philosophies, ideologies, and national boundaries. One soon realizes that a simple plan, for example, to increase social services for persons living in poverty in the United States, has links to the devastating impacts of hunger, slavery, and dehumanization on a global scale. When

a student’s mind is expanded in such a way, one is capable of recognizing how addressing seemingly insignificant issues at home can link to favorable changes for people who are often out of sight and forgotten in other parts of the world. Policy Debate thus becomes an instrument for social change not as a consequence of the activity itself, which is nothing more than spoken words delivered in coded jargon in a closed room at an auctioneer’s pace. Rather, Policy Debate facilitates social change because it expands global awareness, encourages expression of ideas in the face of opposition, and sparks many to proactive participation in activities and careers which give back to their communities.

These days, speech and debate programs throughout the region have been evaluating the benefits of Policy Debate against the perceived negatives. By now, all have heard the criticisms of jargon-laced speeches delivered at excessive speed and high maintenance costs resulting in a uniquely specialized, “elitist” activity which limits community involvement. As a result we are seeing many programs eliminate Policy Debate. Undoubtedly, Policy Debate is evolving, driven by the need to adapt to under-funded programs, and the increase in popularity of other forms of debate, some of which are intentionally structured to be unlike Policy Debate. At Louisville, we see the positive effects Policy Debate has on the educational process of individual students, and so we choose to adapt to the various budget and administrative constraints by training new judges and coaches, shifting to electronic-based evidence repositories, and encouraging students to see Policy Debate as a personal challenge to be conquered rather than feared. The personal benefits one gains are just too great to be dismissed for reasons which often boil down to nothing more than a judge’s preference.

We would encourage coaches and program administrators to not focus on the outward presentation of a complex activity like Policy Debate. Look under the hood and evaluate the massive challenge that Policy debaters routinely overcome to compete in an activity that is life-changing and so personally rewarding that students often credit their successes to their high school debate experience.

Every year, thousands of students engage in hundreds of thousands of hours of research and rehearsal pouring over millions of words to engage in a program of competitive rhetoric debating pressing social issues. Yet for all the sound and fury, very rarely does it result in meaningful public dialogue and not a single debated issue is solved as a result of high school debate. So why do we do it? Clearly, debate is an educational activity designed to empower students with life-enriching skills, and Policy Debate is one of the most effective at achieving this objective. The Louisville mission statement says, “...It is about expression of ideas, and the desire to be heard and change the way people think.” At Louisville, we are seeing the mission come to fruition, as those former state qualifiers interact with their community, changing the way people think. This is how Policy Debate effects real and lasting social change. This is why we do Policy Debate. ■

## *About the Author*

**James M. Kellams** is Debate Coach for Louisville High School in northeastern Ohio. He has been passionately involved in the debate program for five years, and this is his first year as a certified assistant coach under Kelly Ladd, Director of Forensics at Louisville High School.