

THE NATIONAL FORENSIC LEAGUE: IN NEED OF A JUNIOR

by Dr. Carolyn Baker

For the past ten years, I have worked with younger students (grades 5-8) in the area of forensics. Having been in the classroom for over 18 years and being involved in numerous junior high/middle school activities, I found forensics to have been most beneficial to these young people. Having personally witnessed children gain self-confidence and improve speaking skills, I see the National Forensic League enhanced by creating a National Junior Forensic League.

My enthusiasm for forensics in the middle school was so strong that as I worked on my Doctorate in Education, I decided to focus my dissertation in this area. Although my "Evaluation of a Middle School Forensic Program" suggests further research, I would like to share the results of one aspect of the study--the parent/guardian phone interview.

Before discussing the interview, some background information regarding the forensic program being evaluated will be helpful. The Catholic Middle school league began in the school year 1990 - 91. Although the league's focus centers around its four yearly tournaments, from the beginning coaches are urged to focus on the self-esteem of the child. Inspiring students to do their best is encouraged over winning; watching them improve is even more gratifying. To help foster motivation, the league staples "you're a winner" ribbons on all critique sheets of those students who place in each round. From its inception, the Catholic middle school forensic program has been based on helping students feel good about themselves while enjoying the thrill of competition.

The participants in my doctoral study were students who had joined their school's forensic team and had participated in three required competitions. To be a member of their school's forensic team, students had to be in grades 5, 6, 7, or 8. After the first tournament, there were approximately 90 students in the study. After the third tournament, 52 students remained who had competed in all three league tournaments. These 52 students came from four Catholic schools (the league had 7 active schools in the first year; currently, there are 10 schools active in the league). Tournaments included debate and individual events.

The parent/guardian interview (this was one measure out of three used in this evaluation) was an evaluation measure that revealed strong support for the forensic program. Fifty-two

phone interviews were completed by an interviewer who was experienced in research but not familiar with the forensic program (this was done to avoid researcher bias). I reviewed the interview process with the interviewer in detail. We discussed the guide, including explanation of the wording on the guide, allowable probes, and coding procedures. Before the interviews began, six pilot interviews were conducted. After revisions were made, the interviewer then practiced with me for feedback to the interviewer's understanding of the correct interview process. The interview was developed to evaluate the forensic program on the basis of improving public speaking skills and promoting self-esteem.

Of the 52 students involved in this aspect of the study, all 52 phone interviews were completed. The 100% success rate was possibly due to notes that were sent home prior to the interviews to remind parents/guardians that a phone interview would be forthcoming. There were a total of eleven questions on the interview. The key question was open-ended: "How has the forensic program affected your child?" Of the 52 respondents, 45 commented that their child was affected positively in some area of public speaking skills (see Table 5). The public speaking skill most often mentioned in the interview was the ability to speak in front of other people (see Table 6). Some parents mentioned that their children had never spoken in front of people and that forensics had helped them. Their children used to be hesitant to speak out but now had confidence in speaking with people.

Table 5

Summary of Responses to Question 6: How has the Forensic Program Affected Your Child?

Overall responses	Percentage of Respondents
Improved Speaking Skills	86%
Improved Self-Confidence/Self-Esteem	71%
Overall Positive Comments	33%
Positive Aspect of Competition	19%
Positive Academic Results	17%
No Noticeable Improvements in Speaking Skills/Already Competent	12%

Table 6

Public Speaking Skill Responses to Question: How has the Forensic Program Affected Your Child?

Public Speaking Skills Gained from Forensics -- Responses to Question 6	Percentage of Respondents
Ability to Speak in Front of Others	37%
Improved Articulation/Diction	25%
More Vocal Variety	23%
Better Enunciation	15%
Uses Appropriate Volume	15%
Improved Dialogue With Others	13%
Facial Expression When Speaking Improved	13%
Helped with Oral Reading	12%
No Mention of Speaking Skill Improvement	12%
Has Become a Performer/dramatic	10%
Speaking Rate Improved	10%
More Poise	8%
Improved Intonation	6%
Improved Organization of Oral Presentation	4%
Uses More Gestures in Speaking	4%
Explored Range of Emotion With Speaking Style	2%
Oral Communication Skills Enhanced	2%

Of the 52 respondents, 37 mentioned that their child's self-confidence or self-esteem had been positively affected as a result of being in the forensic program. Several respondents had mentioned that as a result of the program their children felt good about themselves. One parent commented about her daughter, "Her performance gives her a great deal of confidence and, naturally, any recognition for that performance is an added plus." Another comment, "I think anytime a child has a chance to present (himself/herself) to an audience, they see the fruits of their labor, they'll feel good about themselves. That's like a snowball: the more it grows, the better you feel."

Perhaps the three most favorable responses concerning positive self-confidence/self-esteem effects from a forensic program were:

She (daughter) has tended to be introverted, public speaking has given her the opportunity to be recognized and given her respect, recognition, and approval.

She (daughter) feels very confident that she can do anything. It (forensics) has encouraged in that aspect. Even though she has not won any great awards, she feels she has accomplished something.

He's small, couldn't find anything he was good in--he didn't say much positive about school. He was looking for something and he said, "I like forensics, I'm good at it," and from this confidence, he's been able to say it (being good in a specific area) about other areas, even school.

Question nine on the interview guide asked, "What do you like best about the program?" All 52 parents/guardians responded positively to this question (see Table 7). The highest percentage of responses (37%) involved the positive aspects found in tournament competition and increased ability to speak in front of others.

Table 7

Summary of Responses to Question 9: What Do You Like Best About the Program?

Overall Responses to Question 9	Percentage of Respondents
Positive Effects of Tournament Competition	37%
Increased Ability to Speak in Front of Others	37%
Team/School Spirit	29%
Improved Self-Esteem	27%
Educational Aspects	21%
Overall Positive Effects	21%
Alternative to Sports	17%
Development of Life-long Skills	13%

Parents liked the tournaments because they offer the opportunity for students to watch other students compete and then compete themselves. They learn to mix with other students from other schools. Parents are impressed that a tournament can involve so many children that are willing to give up their Saturdays. Parents also mention the fact that tournaments offer such a diversity of content. There is such a broad range of events in which to compete and so many categories that fit each child. The tournaments also help students learn how to win and lose. If a school wins a sweepstakes trophy, everyone is excited. The increased ability of students to speak in front of others tied with the highest percentage of responses (37%). As one parent stated, "These people can now just get up and speak."

The final question asked parents to rate the program, "On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, how would you rate the forensic program at your school?" Of the 52 respondents, 92% gave the program the highest two ratings of a 4 or 5 (the rating of 5 had 63% and the rating of 4 had 29%). The rating of 3 had 6% of the responses, the rating of 2 had 2% of the responses, and the rating of 1 had no responses.

Obviously, this study was intended to evaluate this particular forensic program and not any other population; however, there are implications that might be beneficial for the National Forensic League to note. The information suggests that, according to parents, a forensic program in the middle school can be beneficial. Besides positive responses concerning public speaking skills and self-confidence, parents' response included posi-

tive effects of tournament competition, educational aspects of the program, the team or school spirit that was fostered, and the development of skills that can last a life-time.

I personally encourage the National Forensic League to give recognition to junior high students involved in forensics by creating a National Junior Forensic League. Just as the National Junior Honor Society increases desire in students to go on and become a members of the National Honor Society in high school, the National Junior Forensic League could do the same (our high school forensic's coach likes the aspect that she does not have to go over the basics with students who have been in a middle school forensic program--they come to here ready to learn even more). The students could earn recognition (points) by being involved in speaking events, with no special emphasis on competition. I envision students wanting to read to the "extended care" students or to the elderly to gain points and thereby being involved in service learning. The "tapping" ceremony could be similar to the National Junior Honor Society, if schools choose this way to recognize NJFL students.

To those NFL members who are hesitant to begin a National Junior Forensic League because they will "burn out", please reconsider. Certainly this is a possibility, but I assure you, (and I am sure there are others out there who would agree with me) the positive effects of a NJFL far outweigh the negatives. A NJFL would be a building type of program which can lead to a smooth transition into a high school forensic program. It is simply not a "mini-clone" of a high school forensic program. I feel the NJFL might also bring about a networking system of interested forensic coaches in the middle school arena who could come together occasionally to share ideas and initiate growth in the different aspects of forensics. Just think how refreshing it would be if the first thing that comes to mind to a student when you say NFL is **NOT** the National Football League.

(Carolyn Baker received her Doctorate in Education in August 1992, from George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. She found the Nashville Catholic Middle School Forensic League (the 1994-95 school year will mark 5 years of service to the Diocese) which includes all schools in the Diocese of Nashville, Tennessee. Carolyn is employed as Enrichment Coordinator and Forensic Coach for Overbrook School in Nashville, is an adjunct faculty member of Aquinas College, and is a forensic consultant for the Nashville Catholic Schools.)

[The NFL Executive Council, at the Spring Council Meeting, authorized the creation of an NJFL beginning the 1995-6 school year.]