

MEETING MIDDLE SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY WITH A COMPETITIVE SPEECH PROGRAM

by Gayle Ista Hyde

Agassiz Middle School is a sixth and seventh grade building. It is broken into teams or houses. As a building, we stress our desire to try to achieve the objectives of a middle school and try to follow middle school philosophy. Our competitive speech program meets several goals of our school.

Goals

One of the goals of our school is to have 100% of our students involved in an activity outside of the classroom. Because speech is different than athletics, our administration saw a need that we could meet through a competitive speech program.

In addition, another goal of the middle school is to work for positive self-esteem. The tournaments we attend award many ribbons or certificates, usually at least half of the contestants in each category receive awards. In addition, the tournaments we attend are usually quite generous in terms of actual trophy place awards as well. It is rare for my students to attend a tournament without most receiving something tangible to take home. We are also members of the National Junior Forensic League. This membership rewards students simply for being brave enough to try a speaking activity. If they attend they receive points. If they volunteer for speaking in the school or community, they receive points. If they present orally in class, they receive points. All of these points add up to increased degrees for the student. They are on the same level playing field no matter the level of the natural talent. They can see their points accumulating and they feel good about this. This meets the goal of positively building self-esteem in students.

We also meet the school and district goal for increasing communication skills. This is an important goal of our Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum committee. Our school has seen an increase in student interest in communication activities since our program was established.

Because as a program we have found ourselves rooted in the overall goals of the school, we have garnered the support of our teachers, our administration, and our district to establish and maintain a speech program separate from the levels above us. We have come to be known as an individual program in our state.

Beginnings

For most of the speech season, we exist as a separate speech team. We practice each day and work together much as a high school speech team does with a few exceptions. I begin the season with an open invitation for sixth and seventh grade students to attend a speech workshop held at North Dakota State University. The students miss a day of school to experience an explanation of speech events. I ask the students to commit to attending at least one tournament if they attend the NDSU workshop. They don't have to speak, but their attendance usually results in them signing up for the next tournament as a speaker! When I actually start the practice season, I

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usually conduct several meetings of group instruction regarding the basics of speech. The next step is to schedule before and after school practice groups of three or four students to "try out" pieces. The students critique each other in addition to my evaluations. This helps them focus on each others' performance, and they learn a lot in the process. Finally, I move to individual 15-20 minute practice slots. They may still come and observe others, but they only are required to attend practice during their individual "lesson" time.

Tournaments

The first tournament we attend, we do not enter as competitors. I put an early tournament on the schedule so students can come to a tournament and experience it without worrying about speaking as well. When I do this I "attach" each student to a high school student who is competing. The middle school student follows the high school student's schedule to get a feel for what it is like to do speech in competition. This really cuts down on the anxiety at the first tournament in which we compete!

We register for tournaments as Agassiz Middle School. Some of the junior high and middle school programs in our state register as part of the high school teams. Others register as themselves, but are clearly a feeder program to the high school program. Still others only compete for a few weeks to give the junior high/middle school students a taste of the competitive speech world. We compete the entire season as Agassiz. Only at tournament which are limited to high school registrations do we integrate into the high school team's open slots.

Being a middle school teacher, I am excited about the increase in programs at this level. I think that the National Junior Forensic League has made an impact on schools in our area beginning junior high/middle school programs. The NJFL provides a method of rewarding students for hard work who might not always be the "winners." It is a great organization for middle schools and junior high schools to join.

(Gayle Ista Hyde is a middle school teacher and NJFL coach at Agassiz Middle School, Fargo (ND) HS).

FORENSIC MENTORING IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

by Jean Hoerer

Richland #44 is a consolidated school district. The high school and the elementary school are in separate communities seven miles apart. There is constant concern that the transition from sixth grade in the elementary school to the seventh grade in the high school is too foreign and traumatic for the students. Our administrators are always looking for ways to make that move easier for students. Consequently, when the speech department suggested that a speech season for sixth graders be established and that the high school speech team be the sixth grade coaches, the administration saw an opportunity to help students become familiar with the environment they would be coming to in a year. The reason that the speech department had suggested this activity was that it seemed like a good idea to begin earlier to build a program. Seventh and eighth graders had been able to compete with the upperclassmen. However, few of them ever sought that opportunity. It seemed as though it took a couple of years for a student to decide what forensics was and whether he/she would like to try it. Thus, the plans were laid. I was the only forensics coach in the system; there was no possible way that I could add to my existing load. I talked to the veteran speech students and proposed that they coach the sixth graders who would be interested in speech. The older students loved the idea.

The process we began then is basically the same as we use today. In January, I go to the elementary school, armed with a letter to the parents, to talk to the sixth graders about being in speech. One or two seniors go with me. We explain what speech is and what a commitment on their part would involve. They are each given the letter to take home to their parents. On the bottom of the letter is a perforated detachment, which they are to return, signed by a parent, if the student wants to participate. Twice each week, each student rides the shuttle bus to the high school to practice. Students are met at the door by a high school speech team member who will help coach the practice session for that date. Most senior high speech team members work one night a week from 3:30-5:00 p.m. Hence, each sixth grader is being coached by two different senior high students, with whom s/he becomes better acquainted. At the first practice session, all of the sixth grad-

ers, junior high speech team members, and senior high speech team members meet together. We call this meeting our "work night." The students choose categories and selections. The sixth graders watch the older students practice their speeches, and the older students help the younger ones make choices as to what category they will compete in and either help them start writing or help them choose selections for interp. The night culminates in pizza and a little socializing. It is a good way to get the sixth through eighth graders comfortable with the older kids.

After practicing and preparing for competition, the day finally arrives when the first junior high tournament is held. The "coaches" are enlisted to go to the tournament as judges. They are then present to help junior highers read schedules, find rooms, and calm nerves. Both groups look forward to this day for which they have been preparing for nearly six weeks. We compete at five designated junior high meets; then the junior high season is over. Seventh and eighth graders may continue to compete with the senior high team.

The benefits of this mentoring program have been multiple. The administration has achieved for several students the goal of smoothing the transition from elementary to secondary levels. The sixth graders come to seventh grade already familiar with the building, with the upperclassmen and with some of the teachers. The speech department has accomplished what it wanted also. The students are learning the basic skills earlier so that in senior high, they can concentrate on nuances. The size of the program at Richland has more than doubled, and this year; the school board hired an assistant coach. These benefits were all anticipated. The finest benefits are those that were not necessarily anticipated. For example, the senior high students have been able to hone their skills because by watching and teaching the younger ones, each student more clearly identifies where s/he is weak and what her/his strengths are. The younger students emulate the senior highers. They are more willing to change and work at skills that senior high school students point out to them. The bond between older and younger become so strong that team cohesiveness develops. The

school has boasted an NFL chapter since 1991. Many senior high students get involved in the mentoring program for the judging points, but they stay with the program for the personal gain. The younger students are motivated to become NJFL members in order to emulate their coaches. This past year, we added 26 new members and degrees to our NFL chapter, and 28 new members and degrees to our NJFL chapter. The mentoring has resulted in more good things than any of us had ever imagined.

(Jean Hoerer is an NJFL coach at Richland #44 Consolidated School District, Colfax (ND).)

THE SOCIALIZATION BENEFITS OF FORENSICS

by Robert S. Littlefield, Ph.D

There are few who dispute the claim that students tend to do better in their classroom work if they participate in speech or debate activities. When looking at outcomes represented by the acquisition of enhanced research, writing, presentation, listening, and evaluation skills, most students meet or exceed the expectations of their classroom teachers. When exploring the social side of competitive forensics, there are additional benefits for students who get involved at the middle or junior high level. While there may be more than the four I list here, I contend that the social benefits derived from include: improved attention to personal appearance and hygiene, the empowerment of students to speak out, improved behavior as an observer, and enhanced respect and collegiality toward adults. These benefits are the focus of this essay.

Appearance

Most middle and junior high students are concerned about how they look. Their bodies and voices are changing and many are self-conscious about what others think of these changes. In the school setting, they are exposed to their classmates every day. Unfortunately, as far as socialization goes, many times students are stereotyped or categorized by their tastes, activities, and behavior. Once they have been so placed by their classmates, it is difficult for them to reverse the placement and they may experience frustration or alienation. One of the benefits of interscholastic forensics for these students is the ability to “restart” their socialization within a group of students who have similar interests. At a speech tournament, students are encouraged to dress in a way that is more formal than their normal school attire. Most coaches are aware of the research that suggests that when students place more attention to how they appear to the critics, their scores tend to be better and they place higher in the competition. In addition, in the more formal forensic environment, it is easier for an adult to encourage students to keep their hair away from their expressive eye brows or to avoid wearing jewelry that might become a distraction from what they are trying to say. As the students begin to pay attention to what they wear and how they look at tournaments, they come to realize it may also

make a difference in their classrooms. Because their classmates are not aware of what has transpired at the tournament, middle and junior high forensic students may be able to make changes in their own appearance that enhances how they think of themselves and the way they interact with others.

Empowerment

In many classrooms, communication activities are fairly informal. Students are encouraged to speak clearly and avoid losing their focus in the face of possible distractions. However, the fact that classmates know each other quite well makes it difficult for a student to take on a *persona* or speak with authority. Without a skilled teacher to control the interaction, the shy students simply fall back to the stereotypes that have been imposed on them and choose not to confront the assessments of their classmates. In competitive forensics, students rarely compete against a student from their own schools. As a result, when they are in a round of competition, they can be whomever they want to be. This freedom to speak, without fear of interruption or negative judgment from peers, becomes an empowering dimension for their socialization. Students who would otherwise be shy find their voice through competition. In turn, the skills they acquire through competition can enhance their presentations in class and help them to build their self-confidence to the point where they can confront the stereotypes or hold their classmates may have on them.

Observation

Learning to be a good observer at forensic tournaments is another socializing benefit for some younger students. Our society is very visually-oriented. Young people watch the television more than ever before. Through cable access in their homes, students can go to the movies, opera, symphony, super bowls, athletic events, and concerts. One effect of this access is a less-attentive, less-formal climate for observation behavior. A student can eat, sleep, talk, read, or play games while watching something on television. Without an environment where students must be active participants as a listener, they never learn to focus on the spoken word. Forensics provides such a focusing environment. This was brought close to home when one of my younger students, unbeknownst to me,

stopped by the snack bar on his way to a round to observe a teammate. Once in the room, he proceeded to open his soda can and tear into a candy bar. Fortunately, the critic in the room instructed him to refrain while students were speaking. It didn't take long for his more experienced teammates to explain why this behavior was distracting and he learned not demonstrate observer behavior that was more appropriate to an athletic event.

Respect

Finally, students learn respect for adults through forensics. Initially, younger students don't really know how to communicate with adults who serve as critics. These students often disclose far too much information or remain self-conscious around judges or coaches from other schools. As time passes, and these students become more aware that coaches from other schools are often judges, they associate these coaches with the students they are meeting from the other schools. As students talk about their coaches, their new friends learn to be more comfortable and communicate on a level that is respectful and courteous. Another dimension of this respect comes from the ballots written by the adults who serve as judges. If the comments written by the critics are positive, students learn that their personal efforts are acknowledged and rewarded. If the critics provide suggestions for improvement, the students learn that they are worth helping. The respect that comes from this interaction enhances the student's self-esteem.

The socialization of students is an important dimension of development that results through participation in interscholastic forensic competition. While the classroom environment is an excellent place to introduce students to the importance of communication in our world, the tournament setting can provide benefits ranging from increased attention to appearance and hygiene to respect for adults. As the NJFL moves forward with its programs for middle and junior high school students, it will be useful to consider the wide range of benefits to be gained by the young people who are allowed to participate.

(Dr. Robert S. Littlefield is a member of the NJFL National Committee).