

How does debate help students excel?

By Julie Yi

President John F. Kennedy said, “I think debating in high school and college a most valuable training whether for politics, the law, business, or for service on community committees such as the PTA and the League of Women Voters. A good debater must not only study material in support of his own case, but he must also, of course, thoroughly analyze the expected arguments of his opponent....The give and take of debating, the testing of ideas, is essential to democracy. I wish we had a good deal more debating in our institutions than we do now” (Freedom and Union, 7).

The words President Kennedy spoke decades ago are resonating with contemporary parents and education specialists as the popularity of debate clubs grows by leaps and bounds. At education centers throughout California, educators are quickly adding debate and essay programs to their typical after-school offerings of homework support, tutoring, and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparation classes. Why the sudden rapid growth?

Awareness is increasing that, more than any other educational endeavor, debate teaches students to investigate new ideas and open their minds to various viewpoints. It is certainly a way of thinking and learning that Korean-American parents want their children to possess. In addition, debate teaches nearly all of the skills necessary for success in school as well. During research, students learn note taking and critical reading. Throughout the preparation process, they learn analysis, critical thinking, organization and writing skills. Finally, the presentation component teaches them public speaking, poise and confidence, and “thinking on their feet”.

As we know, college-bound students must now craft a persuasive essay as part of the writing section of each SAT test. Debaters have a true advantage because of their experience preparing for competitions where persuasion is the ultimate goal. Knowing this, some education center programs reinforce the inherent preparation by including a required essay component as a post-presentation exercise and grading it in the SAT format.

The debate process nurtures an interest in current events and the political, social and economic issues of today’s world that will last a lifetime. The rich blend of skills developed during the entire debate experience adds to students’ “competitive edge”, not only as they proceed through their formal education experiences, but throughout their adult lives as well.

Julie Yi is director of Apex College Prep with locations in Walnut Creek and Cupertino, Calif. She may be reached at julie@apexcollegeprep.com. www.apexcollegeprep.com