



A member of the Prescott High School Forensics team practices a speech.

EVERY STUDENT MUST Communicate

Despite evidence that public speaking skills improve academic success, few schools teach public speaking

Terrence Falk



Too often speech education consists of little more than a student, standing before the class, reading from a paper and never looking at the audience nor interacting with those seated only a few feet away. Classroom debate means trying to shout down those with different points of view. But schools can do better. Why do too many of our public schools spend so little time and resources on public communication?

Part of the problem is that school districts are not directly rewarded for fostering oral communication skills. After all, no state-sponsored test in speech is administered that becomes a part of the school report cards. The

college entrance exams, ACT and SAT, do not directly measure such skills.

Yet there is compelling evidence that public speaking skills correlate with how well students do academically. Students who participate in structured academic debate tend to do better in college because debate teaches necessary skills such as the development of a thesis and defending it through well-researched documentation. Studies have shown that students who participate in public speaking in high school often do better on college entrance exams such as the SAT.

Scott Baker is a lecturer at UW-La Crosse and his doctoral dissertation directly addresses the

value of speech activities in developing other academic skills.

“I have never seen a standardized writing test that cannot have the scores improved by speech and debate competition or speech course work,” says Baker. “With the ability of a student to do an oral interpretation event, that student has to be able to read, criticize and analyze.”

Academic Benefits

Adam Jacobi is the executive director of the Wisconsin High School Forensic Association (WHSFA) and a former communications and English teacher and debate and forensic coach at Milwaukee’s Rufus King High School.



Students from the Lodi High School Forensics team display their hardware after a competition.

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“Public speaking occupies two whole literacy zones beyond reading and writing, that is listening and speaking, that are never taught as directly as reading and writing in the K-12 curriculum,” says Jacobi.

Poor test performance may not always be related to a lack of skills. We have all seen the individual who does well in practice but freezes up when the test is at hand. This is a classic example of performance anxiety, and this anxiety may be

exhibited on stage, in front of class, in a job interview, or on the football field.

Wade Labecki is assistant executive director at the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA). Before that, he was a school administrator, business teacher, and football coach. He also served on the board of the WHSFA. According to Labecki, “The two — speech and athletics — complement each other; they give the student

self-confidence.”

At his high school of Baldwin-Woodville, all sophomores were required to take a semester of public speaking. Students who learned how to cope with stage fright were less likely to freeze up in the classroom or on the football field. As a former business teacher, Labecki understands that the ability to communicate through the spoken word often impacts our ability to secure employment and advance to the

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management ranks.

The more we can get students involved in extracurricular activities the better, reflects Labecki, whether it be through sports, speech or whatever. “Any time you can get kids involved in their school community, it’s going to benefit them and the school community tenfold.”

In addition to their own school community, students who become involved in extracurricular activities get a chance to interact with students from other schools, other backgrounds and other communities.

■ Foster Public Speaking Skills

Larger secondary schools can make sure that at least one teacher is a certified speech communication teacher. Smaller high schools may believe they cannot afford to have a certified speech teacher yet Labecki’s own Baldwin-Woodville High School of only 300-400 students had a teacher dedicated to teaching speech and drama.

Unfortunately, it is becoming harder to find certified speech communication teachers, says Kay Neal, professor of communication studies at UW-Oshkosh. Hardly any Wisconsin colleges or universities offer



a dedicated communication certification program any longer. Because of the cost of a college education, fewer prospective English teachers pick up the additional communication certification.

But even if your school can afford to hire someone with that background, public speaking skills can’t just be relegated to a single teacher. Public speaking skills should permeate the entire curriculum. Just as we have demanded that writing and reading be a part of every academic offering, whether it be science, social studies or math, so should public speaking. And that means something more than a student getting up in front of a class and reading a paper. It means actually looking at the audience, interacting and answering questions. “Teachers can integrate

MORE INFORMATION

Does your school system wish to participate in or enhance its extracurricular speech activities?

Begin by contacting:

Adam Jacobi, Executive Director
Wisconsin High School
Forensic Association
PO Box 509,
Ripon, WI 54971
920-710-1895
whsfa.org

While the following organizations are not directly affiliated with the WHSFA, Adam Jacobi can direct you to the organizations most likely to meet your needs:

National Speech and Debate Association
(formerly the National Forensic League)

**21st Century Debate Association
Milwaukee Debate League**
(part of the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues)

Wisconsin Forensic Coaches’ Association

Wisconsin Debate Coaches’ Association





A member of the Madison West High School Forensics team delivers a speech.

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communication across the curriculum,” says Neal.

Don’t assume that your teachers, even your English teachers, know how to teach oral communication skills.

“As a former speech and English teacher, I understand there is a lot of crossover,” says Jacobi, “Yet we need to encourage our English teachers to incorporate as much public speaking as they can.” He adds, “Not all English teachers have that background.”

“English teachers probably had one basic speech class when they were freshmen in college,” says Neal. “Probably not much more beyond that.”

We will need to provide in-service and training for our teachers just as we have done with other necessary academic skills. The school board can make sure that speech communication is a part of its district strategic plan or at least an element within the school’s curriculum.

School districts can support extracurricular speech activities such as drama, speech and debate in the same way they support athletic activities. If a school can afford some of the more expensive sports teams, it can certainly field a forensic team at a fraction of the cost if they participate in the local and state contests of the WHSFA. Some more competitive leagues that culminate in national competitions may require a greater commitment of time and financial resources.

Jacobi sees added teacher training in speaking skills for schools that participate in extracurricular speech activities. Many of the speech coaches and judges are not trained speech teachers. They learn speech education skills through competitions and training programs of the various speech organizations. Those skills can be transferred back to the classroom whether the teacher teaches social studies, math or science.

The goal should not be just to field a speech, forensic, or debate team for a handful of students. The goal is to get every student involved in some aspect of speech activities. And the beauty of speech, says Labecki, is that public speaking “Touches everyone, from the top student, to the student who needs accommodations, and everyone in between.” ■

Terrence Falk serves on the Milwaukee school board and is the WASB region 14 director. He taught communications and English and coached debate and forensics in Milwaukee Public Schools.

