

## STUDENTS SEEK TO PUT IN A GOOD WORD IN FIERCELY COMPETITIVE WORLD OF DEBATE

by Jessica Portner

Standing at the podium and grasping his stopwatch like a good-luck charm, Alex Funk defends President Clinton's health-care plan more vehemently than even the most loyal Democrat on Capitol Hill does these days.

"This plan is going to be cost-efficient," declares Alex a high school senior from Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"But they are going to turn people away from the plan," Larry Daugherty, a senior from Seattle, shoots back.

Unimpressed, Alex quickly counters that under the proposed managed-competition system all Americans would have health coverage. Seconds later, the timer beeps.

These young men are not the President's junior health-care campaigners, but rather participants in the kickoff tournament of the precollegiate-debate season, held here Oct. 15-16 at the Bronx Science High School.

While most teenagers were as far from school as they could get, Larry and Alex, their debate partners, and 150 other high school students from 24 states occupied every classroom in the school for a marathon debate on this year's topic: health-care reform.

All this year, debaters will wrangle over the question whether the United States should guarantee comprehensive health coverage to all its citizens.

The debate teams are made up of two students each. Each team can choose to back the Administration's plan or the status quo, or come up with its own prescription to reform the nation's health-care system.

"It's very rare that the de-

bate question coincides with world issues," says Richard Sodikow, the debate coach at Bronx Science, who has hosted 23 invitational tournaments during his 26-year tenure. In recent years, debate questions have focused on such social issues as homelessness or drug trafficking, but not specifically political issues, says Mr. Sodikow, whose team, as the host of the tournament, could not compete.

A current political topic like health-care reform poses more hazards than many other issues, he says, because debaters who have carefully prepared arguments may wake up one morning and find that events have overtaken them, rendering their cases obsolete.

But most of the student-debaters, flown and bused in from across the country, don't seem to mind very much.

"High school students are likely to come up with something that's innovative and new and wild and crazy that will turn out to be practical," says George B. Mosley, a Harvard University professor who observes high school tournaments and teaches a graduate-level course in which students develop alternative health-care plans.

### Novel Solutions

Although these students may not have surpassed the efforts of the Clinton Administration's 500-person health-care task force, they do put forth some unconventional suggestions.

One team recommends a holistic approach to health care that would include coverage for herbal remedies and alternative

medical techniques in the guaranteed-benefits package. For example, coverage should be included for meditation classes, the team contends, because studies show the practice reduces stress and ultimately makes people healthier.

Some of the ideas are variations on more familiar approaches, such as a state-run health system with limited federal control, which resembles a plan introduced in Congress recently by Senator Bob Dole.

Another debater suggests that the controversial "rationed care" approach used in Oregon in which cost-benefit analysis is used to determine whether certain medical procedures should be covered-be adopted nationwide.

Another novel argument that pops up in several debates is that the so-called "single payer" plan under which the federal government would be the sole source of health-care financing and would cover costs through large tax increases would ultimately lead to a nuclear war with Japan. Higher health-care costs, the argument goes, would hurt competition in the auto industry and precipitate a trade war.

Those advancing this theory say their source is a Columbia University professor who has written that trading blocs will lead to world crisis.

Although the debaters say they must ultimately detach themselves from their arguments in order to shift from one idea to the next, some have strong personal opinions about how the nation's health-care system should operate.

Larry Daugherty, who says he spent 14 hours each day for seven weeks at debate camp re-

searching health-care reform, favors the Clinton plan because he believes that managed competition will decrease spiraling health-care cost.

"We claim to be this free system, but our people aren't healthy," say Larry, who attends Seattle's Auburn High School.

Alex Funk's partner, Steve Sael, who wants to be a lobbyist in Washington some day, says he favors the single-payer approach because premiums could be scaled according to personal income.

"There's a lot of work involved, because we make assertions with evidence," says Douglas Moore, a senior from Dallas. "But there's a difference between being intellectually smart and being debate smart," he notes, moving on to the next round.

## **Summer Camp and Scholarships**

Die-hard Debaters tend to spend their summers at debate camps rather than the outdoor variety. Alex and Larry, for example, met last summer at a camp at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, while their debate partners—Steve and Nigel Barron—hooked up at Dartmouth College's camp.

Alex and Steve opted to attend separate camps so they could meet more judges and gather more evidence to support their debating positions.

Steve is so devoted to this extracurricular enterprise that when his mother moved to Minneapolis, he moved in with Alex's family in Cedar Rapids so he could stay at Washington High School with his partner. Steve felt the Minneapolis schools lacked competitive debate programs.

Most high school debaters say they are attracted to the activity because it is a perfect primer for careers in law and politics. But they also pursue debate in hopes of one day win-

ning college scholarships.

Although no debate scholarships are awarded at the high school level, most national collegiate programs award scholarships to the winning teams. While no exact figures are kept on the number of such scholarships offered, dozens of these tournaments take place each year.

On any given weekend there are more than 100 high school tournaments around the country, says James M. Copeland, the Secretary of the National Forensic League.

The league, which hosts the national championship every year has 2,500 schools nationwide serving thousands of individual debaters.

But only affluent private schools, or public schools whose debate records can attract corporate sponsorship, can afford to participate in these cross-country tours.

One coach says his school spent \$25,000 last year to send its two-person team on the debate circuit. Debaters also help raise money through doughnut sales, car washes, and other activities.

## **'As Rigorous as Football'**

A fiercely competitive lot, debaters see themselves in the purest sense as athletes—a sensibility reflected in their rankings: novice, junior varsity, and varsity.

Players train up to 25 hours a week and win team letters that they sew onto their school jackets. And as they are hurling arguments at lightning speed during competitions, they tend to work up a sweat.

"It is as rigorous as football," says Mr. Sodikow, sitting in his office crowded with dozens of silver and gold trophies reflecting seasons of success. "But they are more like touring professional golfers."

Throughout the weekend, the team members tote two or three large plastic tubs bearing

the fruits of their hours of research into the health-care system at debate camps last summer. The weight of each tub is a kind of status symbol, like a weightlifter's heaviest press.

Filing the materials is the hardest part of debating, says Nigel Barron of Auburn high school, only half-jokingly.

During each round, the teams rely on cards containing newspaper articles or quotes from a politician, philosopher, economist, or other source to make their points. In the time allotted, they lob as many points as possible to their opponents, who must return the volley with a verbal punch or lose the round.

"It's stimulating to know you can beat somebody with your mind rather than your physical prowess," says Jordan Alpert, a senior at Bronx Science and a host at the tournament.

A four-year veteran of the sport, Jordan is already looking forward to next year's question, which he hears could concern either sub-Saharan African policy or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. "I gave up baseball for this," he says, without regret.

## **Fast Talk and Decorum**

The debaters at the tournament, 60 percent of who are male, are judged on their analysis, reasoning, evidence, organization, and delivery, and they go to elaborate lengths to gain that slight edge over the opposing team. Most of the young men wear ties, some of which are standard preppy but others of which sport the slightly funkier look of a Mona Lisa or an impressionist design.

Sometimes debaters go too far. One debater is docked 25 points (out of 30) for [insulting his female opponent.] Being abusive and arrogant is not in the tradition of debate, says the judge, before heading down the

hall to register the score.

(Portner to page 30)

(Portner from page 22)

But the debaters at this tournament seem less likely to stumble on decorum than on speed.

During the 60-minute debate, each team has two eight-minute speeches in which to cram as many arguments as possible. The rest of the time is devoted to rebuttal and cross-examination.

With this limited time to make their points, debaters in recent years have begun to talk more like auctioneers than orators.

It takes time to learn how to speak both fast and clearly, and judges, like auctioneers, have developed the knack for "listening quickly."

To master this high-speed repartee, Steve says he holds a pen in his mouth while he practices his speeches to improve the clarity of his delivery. If you can speak clearly with pen in your mouth, he opines, then your speech will be more under-

standable during the debate.

Some debaters say they consult singing coaches to learn how to improve their breathing techniques.

But even when the cases are painstakingly prepared and the speeches carefully rehearsed, luck plays a part in a tournament's outcome. For this reason, Nigel and Larry carry a toy Buddha around with them, rubbing its tummy for luck before every round.

But the Buddha's magic fails the Seattle team here: They drop out the first day, after the prelim rounds.

Steve and Alex, however, ascend to the final round before losing to the reigning champions from Atlanta. This day, the Cedar Rapids duo must be satisfied with second place.

"We are excited, but we're running out of adrenaline," admits Steve, holding a plaque he will add to his growing collection.

Standing in the rain outside

the school before flying home, the four young men are still on a high. Steve is lobbying Nigel and Larry to come to Iowa for his school's invitational tournament at the end of January.

"We'll pay room and board and you can crash at our house," says Steve. Larry and Nigel nod at each other, weighing the expense of the trip, missed classes, the jet lag.

"See you in Iowa," says Nigel, slapping Steve on the back before loading his tubs in the van.

All together, the four of them-Nigel and Larry, Alex and Steve-will debate the details of health-care reform in two dozen more competitions before this school year is over. One more stop along the tour won't hurt them.

*(This article appeared in Education Week, November 10, 1993, and is used (in this edited revision) by permission)*