

Dear Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Stakeholder,

The benefits derived from a child's participation in a speech and debate program are extensive and well-documented. Not only does a child improve in vocabulary, logical thinking, writing, vocal presentation, exposure to literature and current events, but their thirst for knowledge and self-improvement is piqued, leading to a self-confidence they will count on and carry with them for the rest of their lives. These qualities and the fearlessness they bestow are one of the many reasons that college admissions staffs consider speech and debate to be one of the most desirable activities for applicants, in that students who compete in it are one of the surest bets to be able to surmount the stresses and rigors of college life.

You might rightfully wonder, then, why such a valuable activity is not accessible at more LAUSD schools! There *is* a flourishing network of speech and debate competitions occurring at the elementary, middle and high school level in Los Angeles County, **but** they are dominated by private schools and after school enrichment academies, which are keenly aware of the activity's benefits and anxious to deliver that advantage to their clients. Lamentably, no LAUSD elementary school competes in speech and debate, while only three middle schools have been fortunate to start programs. At the high school level, of the 168 schools soon to compete at the State Championship Tournament in April, only eleven hail from the LAUSD. Essentially, unless your child attends one of fourteen schools, he or she is denied access to a successful speech coach unless you pay for a private tutoring academy.

As an alumna of the LAUSD and the University of California, I strongly believe in the potential of public education. It was through participation in school activities like speech and debate and the Academic Decathlon that I was able to find a reason to rush to the library after school or on a hot summer's day and either research a law or find a selection from Shakespeare that I could perform. I cannot imagine how much emptier and subdued my journey through high school would have been without Saturday speech competitions to look forward to. This is why I cannot countenance the current state of exclusivity for speech and debate. It stands today as a mysterious "luxury" item, and I ask you to help me change that.

As the Director of Speech & Debate at El Camino Real Charter High School, I invite you (and your children/students) to our inaugural L.A. County Orator's Cup on Saturday, May 17th, a first of its kind speech competition where it will not matter what school a child attends, but rather his or her interest to have fun, overcome fear and experience the infectious synergy that takes place at a speech tournament, where nicely-dressed children challenge themselves to persuade or entertain (depending on their personality), all the while seeing that they fit quite well among highly-motivated peers whom it'd be great to form bonds with. For a small fee (which goes up after April 15th), we will offer trophies and divisions for elementary, middle and high school students, some of whom are stars we'll hear from in years to come.

Please turn to www.forensicstournament.net/oc/14 for rules, events and registration. If you cannot send children but would like to donate time, money or ideas to help us get this reformist project off the ground, that would be much appreciated. At root, the hope is to break the information gap and incentivize schools/students to form speech clubs during or after school. Speech is too fun—and VITAL—to leave to elite leagues and neighborhoods. Our society stands to benefit if EVERY sector gains access to the leverages of language.

Ricardo A. Velásquez (rv4@me.com) • (323) 744-9888 • www.ecrspeech.org/orators-cup