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# Flashback to 1985: The State of Speech and Debate: A National Perspective

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## FROM THE ARCHIVES: FLASHBACK TO 1985

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### The State of Speech and Debate: A National Perspective

#### Richard G. Fawcett

At time of original publication in 1985, the author served as Speech, Drama, Debate, and Music Coordinator of the National Federation of State High School Associations in Kansas City, Missouri.

Since I left Minnesota to join the staff at the National Federation of State High School Associations as their speech and music coordinator in July 1978, a number of forces have impacted America's high schools, high school activities programs, and more specifically, high school speech and debate activities. I should like to focus on some of these forces tracing their eventual impact on speech and debate programs.

The nation's high schools have experienced a continual economic cutback since the 1970s. One of my first assignments at the National Federation was to travel to California to interview superintendents, activities directors and coaches regarding the impact of Proposition 13. Tax reforms followed in many states, usually without the devastating impact of Proposition 13 in California. All states suffered financial cutbacks and each cutback had curricular and co-curricular implications.

Expansion of high school activities programs came concurrently with Title IX. Opportunities for young women, especially in the area of sports, were dramatically increased as a result of a new consciousness framed by federal mandates. This expansion led to a search for coaches and faculty advisors which continues to this day. My three years as a girls cross-country coach came as a response to this expansion in the Hopkins School District. During the eight years I was an administrator in Hopkins, we constantly struggled to fill our coaching positions.

As coaches reached fifty years of age, many decided to retire from coaching but remain on the teaching staff.

In times past we would have turned to younger teachers to provide leadership for our activities programs. Economic cutbacks, together with dwindling enrollments, did not allow for the hiring of new teachers. This situation has existed for most states for nearly ten years. The problem of aging faculties is gradually being handled by attrition. Competent, young replacement teachers may not be readily available, however. We are already experiencing a shortage of science and math teachers at the high school level. Colleges of education throughout the country are warning us that an insufficient supply of teachers will be available to staff future positions created by the retirement of aging faculty members.

Finances and retiring coaches do not completely explain the leadership shortage in the areas of speech and debate, however. I am aware of several states where district budgets exist for speech and debate programs, but no coaches are applying for the openings. School administrators continue to search for competent, committed coaches to direct programs. The Midwest is filled with speech and debate positions at this very moment.

Coupled with declining enrollments and economic cutbacks is our national preoccupation with a return to the “basics.” Precipitated in large measure by the *Nation at Risk* report, the nation has been flooded with reports, legislation, and state board of education actions—all intended to revitalize American education. In many cases these educational reforms have been conceived and enacted by individuals outside the educational field. Although the intentions of these individuals have probably been good, the outcomes of their actions have frequently been less than desirable.

For example, elective programs are being threatened in many states by more stringent requirements for graduation. By setting higher standards, school districts may be driving out increasingly high numbers of marginal students. Already some schools in New York and Chicago have drop-out rates exceeding 50%. Time will tell how dramatic the drop-out rate will become.

Preoccupied with “time on task,” school districts, state boards of education and state legislatures are curtailing travel and co-curricular event time. Some states have taken the position that no class time is to be missed for any co-curricular activity. State association offices are struggling to create schedules which will allow sufficient time for outlying schools to travel considerable distances after the school day to compete.

In an effort to reduce the financial burden of co-curricular activities programs, many school districts have instituted a fee schedule which requires students to “pay to play.” Although a few state supreme courts have ruled this action illegal, the practice is widespread and continues to proliferate. It is not uncommon for an individual student to pay from \$10 to \$45 to participate in a single, one-season activity.

Another phenomenon which is becoming more common each year is the use of “walk-on” or lay coaches. Pioneered in California and Florida over the past several years, the use of non-faculty members to direct co-curricular programs continues to proliferate. School administrators are particularly concerned that lay coaches may lack an educational perspective. Since they are not regular teachers in school districts, control by school districts and state association offices is difficult.

It is not uncommon to find debate coaches who have a background in college debate, but are not certified teachers. They appear after school to meet with debaters and accompany the

team to tournaments on weekends. It may be argued that these individuals, whether coaching or judging, lack a perspective which is educationally oriented to high school debate.

Reports from state association offices and from the National Forensic League indicate that individual events continue to operate with the same or slightly larger numbers than they did ten years ago. Although exceptions exist with individual states, a pattern of sustained activity can be observed.

This has not been the case for cross-examination debate, however. Numbers have fallen off sharply in this area. Reductions from one-third to two-thirds are reported by state offices coordinating cross-examination debate. Not only are student participation figures down, but the number of school programs has dropped as well. Minnesota is an example of a state indicating both kinds of decline.

It was in response to this decline in cross-examination debate that the National Forensic League introduced Lincoln-Douglas debate as a national event. Response among National Forensic League member schools has been excellent. Participation has increased steadily over the past four years. In response to this NFL membership interest, state associations are moving to incorporate L-D debate as a state-sponsored event. Judging from the sale of National Federation debate ballots, an average of five states have added this event each year.

At the topic selection meeting in San Antonio last December, state representatives reported sustained growth of L-D debate. The only exceptions were those states where L-D debate was scheduled during the speech rather than the debate season. Wisconsin reported that it was considering shifting its L-D debate to the debate season.

Speed and spread cross-examination debating continues to alienate high school administrators and those of us who are old enough to remember a style of debate which

emphasized communication more than information processing. Some states, e.g., Missouri, have not experienced a problem with speed and spread. The consistent use of lay judges at nearly every level of competition prevents debaters from lapsing into debate jargon and unfocused arguments. Housewives, lawyers, and other members of the general public have not learned to appreciate this madness, hence they do not reinforce such debate behavior.

Another phenomenon influencing the quality of speech and debate programs throughout the country is the lack of trained teachers graduating from college and universities with a background in speech, drama, and debate. This problem was discussed extensively at the SCA meeting in Chicago last November. It was commonly recognized that relatively few teachers are graduating with the skills necessary to conduct speech and debate programs at the high school level.

For this reason it is probably more important than ever to have in-service training available for those teachers who agree to accept co-curricular responsibilities. Minnesota has a long history of clinics sponsored by SAM, the Minnesota State High School League, and the Minnesota Debate Teachers Association. These clinics offer entry-level skills to already employed teachers. From an administrator's point of view, they provide a positive inducement for prospective coaches who feel reluctant because they lack adequate training.

At the National Federation we have created a series of videotapes and booklets to assist co-curricular activities directors. For the past seven summers, we have conducted regional and/or national clinics for directors who have the responsibility of conducting workshops in their respective states. A number of states have initiated state-wide clinics as a result of exposure to this process. Representatives from Minnesota have been in attendance at each of the National Federation clinics held to date.

Last September a four-day conference directed by George Ziegelmüller of Wayne State University was held at Northwestern University to improve cooperation among all forensic organizations and to give new direction to forensic activities over the next decade. Over 150 high school and college teachers attended the National Developmental Conference.

Focusing on the educational value of speech and debate activities, conference attendees prepared a document entitled “A Rationale for Forensics as Education.” The rationale statement indicated that “forensics serves as a curricular and co-curricular laboratory for improving students’ abilities in research, analysis, and oral communication....” The document also states that “forensics remains an ongoing, scholarly experience, uniting students and teachers in its basic educational purpose.”

Considerable time was spent at the conference discussing the role of summer debate and speech institutes. Institute directors were encouraged to conduct summer institutes which were based upon “educationally sound principles and practices.” They were also encouraged to employ both high school and college teachers on their staffs.

In response to this concern the Speech Communication Association solicited considerable information regarding the summer debate institutes for 1985. This information was summarized in a mailing which was sent this spring to 5,600 speech and debate coaches by the National Federation. The purpose of this joint effort was to provide more information to high school debaters and coaches concerning the educational perspective of summer institutes.

Another conference is planned for August, 1985. The National Forensic League is sponsoring a Conference on the State of High School Debate which will take place in Kansas City on August 8, 9, and 10. The purpose of the conference is to provide an in-depth look at high school debate. Many high school and college coaches from a wide variety of geographic

areas will present papers for and against specific positions. Respondents have been asked to react to the various papers. Written transcripts of the position papers will be published this fall by the National Forensic League.

Participants in the topic selection process which is sponsored annually by the National Federation have agreed to switch the time of the 1986 topic selection meeting from December to August. This schedule change should allow more high school coaches to participate. It will also allow for greater choice of meeting sites since travel will be easier in the northern states during the summer months. It is also anticipated that coaches may have a greater opportunity to deliberate over the three topic areas announced for balloting. An additional benefit may be the earlier availability of educational materials to assist debaters and coaches with preparation for the following year's topic.

The 1985-86 national high school debate topic, United States Water Policy, has captured the interest of educators in the social sciences and sciences. At a meeting I conducted last March at the American Chemical Society in Washington, D.C., seventeen federal agencies, publishers, and national lobby groups were represented to assist with locating free and low-cost materials for high school debaters. Participants in the meeting expressed excitement over the opportunity to raise the consciousness of bright young debaters, their families and friends. Everyone felt pleased by the choice of a truly interdisciplinary debate topic for 1985-86.

Those of us who work with high school debate might profit from the widespread interest in the 1985-86 topic. We are in a pivotal position to facilitate interaction among interest groups, teachers from different disciplines, community action groups, and members of the scientific community. The skills we are teaching are central to sustained interaction among these groups.

Our role as facilitators can be invaluable to our programs, our school districts, and our communities.

I would suggest that we should do more to place ourselves in the mainstream of American social and political dialogue. A beginning point may be the selection of debate topics that bring us to “the cutting edge” of political action in this country. Those outside the debate community may become far more familiar with the process we teach. Prospective debaters may find it easier to make a season-long commitment when they sense we are dealing with a real issue—one that is vital in their eyes.

Too often we closet ourselves in classrooms on weekends—away from the social and political dialogue surrounding us. Our specialness may be an inbreeding that is destroying our activity from within. Perhaps we should consider opening our doors to housewives, lawyers, League of Women Voter members, superintendents of schools, and interested laymen. Once the doors are opened we need to venture out into the larger community where our students can practice Quintilian’s “the good man speaking well” among their extended colleagues.