

In Defense of Competitive Speech

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For some years, the financial woes afflicting Oregon schools have worsened. Until recently, most schools have been able to stretch their increasingly scarce resources and make do without major reductions in their offerings to students—a fact which has encouraged some factions to push for still further cuts. But now, without question, the crunch has come—and with no relief in sight, districts across the state are being compelled to shorten their instructional year, cut staff and services, and eliminate programs of unquestioned value.

One of the programs threatened in many districts is competitive speech. And why not? Speech is not a high-profile program, attracting excited taxpayers every weekend to sit on stadium cushions and watch their money at work. Even in the best of times, many taxpayers wouldn't see the point of spending good money so that students could travel to other schools to read poetry, orate on the benefits of legalizing marijuana, or debate issues which aren't in their power to resolve. So in a time of general sacrifice, shouldn't such a program join Water Polo and Popular Cinema on the chopping block? I believe it should not. I

believe that competitive speech, far from being expendable, is central to the educational mission of our public schools-preparing students to be functional participants in a democratic society.

Speech instruction offers development in the skills of rhetoric, interpretation, and debate; competition hones those skills. That much is fact-what is open to question is whether it is important to develop those skills and to offer the opportunity to hone them in competition. Both history and a rational assessment of the world today tell us it is not just important, but vital.

Rhetoric is the art of using words effectively. It has been considered an indispensable part of a well-rounded education since the dawn of recorded history. Nearly 2,500 years ago, a young Athenian named Demosthenes put a pebble in his mouth to practice speaking around it, so he could master a crippling speech impediment. He mastered his disability, and went on to become one of the most famous orators of all time. This point of this story is not that public speaking was invented 2,500 years ago-the point is that public speaking was already a long-established tradition even then, complete with clear and powerful expectations of the speaker. Rhetorical skills were central to both the direct persuasion of the public and the conduct of useful debate among

leaders-and thus were absolutely essential to the functioning of the earliest democracies.

The importance of oral interpretation goes back much, much farther even than that, into the dim prehistoric past. Linguistic scholars know that humans have possessed the written word for only a tiny fraction of our total history-and that for the vast period before the written word, there was only the spoken word to define a culture and its inheritance. Accordingly, there was almost no one more valuable to a people than its bards and story-tellers and actors. These were the folk who carried forward from one generation to the next a people's religion, its history, and its values-who, with their ability to bring passion and life to mere words, were simultaneously creating and perpetuating the cultures to which they belonged. Clearly, rhetoric and interpretation-and standards of excellence in each-were once essential aspects of the fabric of human life. Have they become less essential in America, somewhere along the way? They were still essential here in 1863, when Lincoln stood to rededicate a nation's courage after the shocking carnage of Gettysburg. They were still essential in the 1930's, when Franklin Roosevelt summoned an exhausted country's will against the Great Depression. They were still essential in 1961, when John

Kennedy called upon us to serve our country, and launched the programs that put humanity into space and computers in human hands. And throughout, the interpretations of entertainers from Mark Twain to John Wayne to Denzel Washington have defined America for herself and for the world, driving evolutions in behavior, language, and attitude that shape society itself. And now? Any literate observer of contemporary society will guess that in a random audience of a hundred American adults today, half or more would greet a reference to Demosthenes with blank incomprehension-though fifty years ago, anyone with an eighth-grade education would have recognized his name instantly. A substantial percentage will not understand the reference to Gettysburg, except as part of the phrase "Gettysburg Address." Few will be aware that Mark Twain was as famous for his lectures and readings as for his books. For many, such words as "rhetoric" and "carnage" in this document will be mysteries whose meaning must be gathered from context or ignored. Very, very few will perceive that citing famous names is a standard rhetorical device-one which may be used or misused in the pursuit of an argument.

In that context, then, is speech still important?

To say that it is not is to suggest that because fewer and fewer Americans are capable of basic calculation or lucid writing, we should abandon mathematics and composition. Competitive speech is one of the very few realms in which it really matters for students to understand classical references, basic history, manipulation of an audience, and the uses of persuasive technique—they'll get thumped by their competitors if they don't. And do these things matter very much in the society our students will join upon graduation? The society for which we are supposed to be preparing them? I believe that while literacy and its oral expressions receive less encouragement in our educational and cultural lives than they once did, they are absolutely as important as they have ever been. The power of speech—the ability to use words to dramatic effect—is nowhere more evident than in the present debate over whether or not the United States should go to war against Iraq, or in the many, many debates over where America is headed economically, politically, and morally. These are issues of unsurpassed importance in the daily lives of millions upon millions of people, and they are being decided to a considerable extent by the power of public speaking in all its manifestations. The ability to speak well continues—and will continue—to be an essential part of any American's ability to

participate effectively in anything resembling our traditional democracy.

Perhaps even more important for the average person-who admittedly may never stand up to address large numbers of people-is the ability to recognize what is being done when other people stand up to do so. A careful education in the skills of rhetoric and interpretation prepares us to do more than exercise those skills-it prepares us to recognize when those skills are being exercised, and temper our responses accordingly. If one has no idea what the ad hominem argument is, or a statement of false cause, or slant wording-if one has never been educated in the ways of effectively assuming a character for an audience-then one's vulnerability to those techniques is the same as it was for the mobs who rioted through Roman streets two thousand years ago. Ignorant people today are as easily stampeded as ignorant people at any point in history-and like their predecessors, must eventually pay the price of that ignorance.

An ignorance of rhetorical devices, coupled with the ignorance of history and geography and science and mathematics we already dread, produces a citizen whose vote is worth less than nothing-a citizen easily controlled by calculated appeals to his emotions and

his fears—a citizen identified by Thomas Jefferson as the worst possible danger to a democracy. In fact, it is entirely possible to consider Oregon's present dilemma as a failure of education in the very skills speech emphasizes—haven't we gotten here, to some extent, because Oregon's voters have listened uncritically to the clever rhetoric of people who promise we can have things, but not pay for them? Because we cannot see through misdirections as old as politics? In a very real sense, the question before us is whether we intend to further America's downward spiral into public ignorance and the vulnerabilities it creates—or to arrest that spiral as best we can. We can acquiesce in the development of greater and greater numbers of the citizens Jefferson feared—or we can dig in now, and do what we can to reverse that development by maintaining competitive speech in our state.

The question may be raised: "Why 'competitive' speech? Why not just emphasize speech skills in our classrooms, and let it go at that?" It's a legitimate question, certainly—but as a society, we seem to understand the value of competition very well when it comes to basketball, or football, or volleyball. We understand very well that basketball undertaken for a P. E. grade, or for an intramural trophy, is not basketball at its best—and for the same

reasons, speech undertaken for a grade, or for an intramural competition, does not produce the same motivation or the same results as competition between schools.

I would never argue that we should drop competitive athletics. As a longtime coach, I recognize their value to our young people and to our society. But I would point out that schools were competing in debate and rhetoric and interpretation, busily declaiming against one another to hone their students' skills, long before they were playing football games-and that the skills so honed remain more central than football to the mission of those schools today. I would point out that competitive speech offers the benefits of competition to large numbers of students who are never going to wear the home team's uniforms on the athletic field-but who nonetheless matter a great deal to their parents, their communities, and the future of their country.

It would be unthinkable for most public high schools to drop competitive football or basketball-but it ought to be more unthinkable still to drop competitive speech. Unlike basketball or football, competitive speech matters even to those of us who do not know it matters.