

The following letter is sent from Jane Berry-Eddings, State Speech Championships Director. I apologize for the length but was not certain I could send it out as a Google Doc without having to grant multiple permissions.

To the Speech Community,

I spoke to a student at state who was devastated by comments on a ballot. We have all had this happen to our students. We have discussed what we see the problem to be, and have made efforts to solve them.

This student was not just focused on how much the ballot hurt but on how to solve the broader problems surrounding judging. I asked that the student please take the time to outline what some of the problems are, and suggest solutions.

In the process of that discussion I realized that we have for years encouraged our students to use their voices to bring solutions to the world, to right the wrongs they see, and encourage others to action. We take pride when after they graduate, their voices bring change. But as an organization we do not provide them an opportunity to have a voice in our activity. We encourage them to work through us. Maybe we should look at a means to give them a more direct voice in an activity that encourages the use of their voices.

I know this is a busy time of the year. I checked with the student and we agreed to send the letter out now, and revisit the issue in the fall.

Thank you,

Jane

Dear Coaches,

Because of the kindness of Jane Berry-Eddings, I'm writing an open letter to you today to talk about discrimination in our community. When competitive debate was founded it was an exclusive activity, and in many ways, it has remained that way. We have yet to have any protection against discriminatory language in our rule book, in fact, we are the only OSAA activity that does not have open discrimination against the rules. It's time to change that. I honestly think I could leave this email here and include the rule changes I'm advocating for coaches to propose and implement but I think it's important to explain how discrimination is still taking root in our community.

As I have experienced, some members of our community don't think discrimination still exists in Speech and Debate. Just because it's not in our faces does not mean it's not real. Very rarely does a judge walk in and say I don't vote for people of color; however, judges will put on ballots, *"you're speech advocating for gay rights is against my religion"*, *"you're not black enough"*, *"your voice is too shrill, you're a bad speaker"* or a myriad of voting issues based on outward appearance. Appearance-based judgment happens way more often than we're acknowledging.

For me it was at state this year, I had a prose about disability. My thesis was that instead of isolating people with disabilities by laughing at them or avoiding them we should laugh with them. When we make jokes about our disabilities, able-bodied people often get offed on behalf of those who are disabled due to a power saving dynamic. This offense can only be achieved with the belief that those who are disabled are weaker than one's self. In my speech, I didn't talk about my disability or experience because to me it's private. I'm a teen still fighting a battle I'm not ready to share. To my judge however I wasn't disabled enough to give my speech, I didn't look the part of a disabled person so she made the judgment I wasn't. *"The speaker of this piece and its intended audience aren't disabled. Don't assume your audience and judges are able or that disabled*

*people can't speak for themselves about what is or isn't offensive"* Instead of listening to the message of pity being used for power, my judge only acted the way I asked her not to. She got offended on behalf of people she didn't know, because she decided they needed defending. Her entire ballot had nothing on how she thought or felt about my piece just accusations on how I was perceived as offensive. Even in my story an undefined narrator with only my acting to portray their voices was assumed to be able-bodied. So, one judge's view of me, and the world around her decided my senior state. Because of that judge, I was next to break. It's crushing to know you deserve something you worked so hard for and just never achieve it because you don't look the part because one judge doesn't see you as enough.

My experience is mild among the others I've heard. Judges stalk kids and trade ballots to get to them, judges having policies of not voting for women, or judges refusing to vote on issues based on identities that disrupt their political ideologies. These issues are prevalent because we're not stopping them. When I told Jane my story, she told me about how when she used to debate, she'd walk into a room and lose ballots for being a woman. Jane's experience is not isolated to just one generation of debater; discrimination has manifested and affected the entire community. There is no consequence if someone discriminates.

Imagine if it was your student. Wouldn't you want some justice? Here are the rule changes I propose to fix the issue.

One- If a tournament is to break to an out round ballots from prelims must be made available when out round breaks are announced.

What this solves- It allows competitors to see if discrimination has taken place on their ballot, and problem solve using the next rule.

Two- A judge's decision may not be protested, UNLESS a decision was made on external factors of the competitor's appearance, identity, or any external factor beyond the competitor's control.

What this solves- It allows the community to take action against discrimination without opening every ballot someone disagrees with up for protest.

Three- As of 2020-2021 a system to permanently ban judges from our community should be put in place.

What this solves- I am leaving this vague on purpose, because while a system like this is important as a competitor, I have no clue how to implement this. What I do know is that there has to be a way to keep our community safer. In its current form, our community is a host to predatory behavior and the repetitive problem of discriminatory behavior. Not having a system to permanently ban judges is becoming more and more problematic. In past years I've seen and heard about ballot trading and stalking of students from judges. Blocking a judge is simply not enough for people disgusting enough to stalk children. Protecting students should be a top priority for all coaches, and putting rules in place to do that protects students and coaches from liability.

Four- Disband the four-year recognition, and replace with team MVPs. Make students selected by coaches an MVP award winners. Each team should have a limit based on team size.

What this solves- While I understand this is a more radical idea honoring students based on making it to state for four years often puts focus on the wrong set of ideals in debate. Debate is not about winning it's about what we learn. Putting a focus on the four-year seniors forgets the students that may have worked just as hard or for just as long but may have not been as lucky. I spent two years in debate, I was one of the first people in my team's history to compete on a national circuit, but at the end of the day when saying goodbye my coaches still forgot to say my name. I was one of three seniors, but I was a second class on my team, just because I joined late. We should honor students based on their excellence in competition and in character. Upholding things like the four-year award breeds negative bias based on preliminary ideals that aren't as important as being a genuinely good person on one's team.

This Letter was written and contributed to by 10 anonymous students from six different teams and 4 different districts. Thank you for reading.

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