

# Urban schools argue in favor of debate teams

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## Learning to make a point has paid off in myriad ways and drawn White House attention

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ATLANTA -- Two years ago, just as she was about to become a teenager, Michelle Parks' life was at a crossroads.

Her friends in the public housing development where she lived were engaged in an all-out effort to recruit her into their gang. And at school, teachers who saw potential beneath her tough, street-smart exterior were urging her to join a debate program that was about to get under way.

"It was a big decision," said Parks, now 15, speaking with the confidence of someone twice her age. "I had to listen to my conscience. I knew the gang was going to keep me in trouble and debate was going to keep me out of trouble. So, in the end, I followed my own mind."

The decision to take up debate changed her life. A girl who had never been much farther than the boundaries of her public housing apartments now has been places she never dreamed of seeing, including the White House at the invitation of First Lady Laura Bush.

Parks has become a poster child for urban debate teams, a trend that has taken the art of debating from the clutches of wealthy private schools and spread it to public schools. Across the nation, in cities such as Chicago and Atlanta, thousands of mostly black and Hispanic students from poor neighborhoods are learning to use words as a weapon in their personal war against poverty, underachievement and violence.

### Resurgence after plunge

While debate teams were prevalent in all-white urban public schools prior to the 1960s, they had for the most part vanished by the 1980s when those schools became predominantly black and faced severe budget cuts.

Since Emory University started the first Urban Debate League in Atlanta in 1985, the program has spread to 335 high schools and middle schools across the country, involving more than 3,750 students.

The nation's second oldest program, in Chicago, operates in 41 public and three other schools. There are 850 debaters involved in the program. And more than 500 students have registered to participate in a citywide tournament Dec. 9-10 at DePaul University.

### 'Like lacrosse'

"Debate teams have always been like the lacrosse of academic competition in prep schools, private schools and affluent suburban schools," said Les Lynn, executive director of the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, based in Chicago. "It has been rediscovered by urban education leadership because it engages and motivates kids and brings about competition the way sports do."

In Atlanta, a program began last year targeting middle-school students from public housing developments in the city.

Parks was one of the earliest students to participate in the Computer Assisted Debate program, which has been selected as a signature program for the first lady's Helping America's Youth initiative.

Bush visited Benjamin S. Carson Honors Preparatory School, one of the two schools in Atlanta where the program takes place, last spring to view the program. Parks, who gave the introduction during the visit, was invited to speak at a White House summit in October.

Parks acknowledges that before she began debating she had disciplinary problems.

"I was skipping class, talking back and fighting all the time," said Parks, wearing burgundy braids the same color as her sweater.

Debating not only turned her into a mostly A student but also helped her see a clear path to what she wants to become—a lawyer and then a judge.

"When I got into debate, my whole world changed. It took me on paths I thought I would never see. I never thought I would meet Laura Bush, but I met her and George Bush," she said.

Recently Parks, now a 9th-grader at another school, returned to Carson to talk to younger students about her success. She promised them they could go just as far if they worked hard.

Already, some of them were clearly on their way.



Debaters Gerakd Norwood (from left), Joshua Simmons, Shavarious Render, Robin Ayers and Ron Shirley rehearse in Atlanta

During the group session, held twice a week at the school, about two dozen 6th-, 7th- and 8th-graders studied their research on topics ranging from the war in Iraq to the USA Patriot Act. They stood and read aloud, practicing their enunciation and preparing themselves for a well thought-out argument defending their positions.

### Debating torture

On this day, the subject was whether the U.S. has the right to torture suspected terrorists to gain information. Thirteen-year-old Shavarious Render, an 8th-grader who thought there could be a benefit in limited torture, defended his position against 12-year-old Ron Shirley, a 7th-grader, who was against torture.

"We should have the right to torture if they have information we need. You need to try to get it out of them," said Render. "That is what the police do when they take you into that room. They do that to get information."

Shirley countered that there is a historical pattern of torture.

"Many people did this. The Nazis tortured Jewish people because they didn't like them," Shirley said.

A year ago, Shirley and Render were more likely to have been in a fight on the playground than arguing over torture. But since joining the debate program, they have gained more confidence and are looking to the future.

This is exactly what Marvin Nesbitt of the Atlanta Housing Authority had in mind when he approached officials at Emory University, Georgia State University and the Boys & Girls Clubs about starting a debating program for public housing students after learning about a program in Baltimore on CBS' "60 Minutes" program in 2003.

"Debate is not typically used as intervention, but I thought it was time to try it," said Nesbitt. "Our inner-city instinct is to argue, and that is one thing debate allows them to do. It's almost like a trick. You present it to them in a way they are used to, and once you get their attention, you sneak the learning in."

### Studies point to gains

At Carson, initial studies have shown that disciplinary problems among debate participants fell by 50 percent, according to Melissa Maxcy Wade, director of forensics at Emory. A study conducted at the University of Missouri about Urban Debate League students in Chicago and four other cities last year found that reading scores improved 25 percent more among debaters, compared with non-debaters. Other research also has shown improvement in oral communication skills, grade point average and self-esteem.

Wade said the program teaches children that there is power in the voice.

"These kids, in many ways, have been largely abandoned by traditional support systems. There are a lot of family issues around employment, substance abuse and other challenges," said Wade, who helps run the Atlanta program. "There is a lot of fighting and if you have a dispute, you hit. We work a lot with respect issues and learning to use our words so we don't have to use our fists."