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Forensics is too valuable of a program to be lost in Ripon schools

By Adam J. Jacobi

“Forensics” is a word whose broader meaning has been masked by the popularity of crime investigation television programming, yet still describes an academic discipline of public speaking, debating, and performing considered by college and career readiness experts to be one of the best investments students can make during their time in high school.

It is time for the administration, faculty, and staff at Ripon and Lumen High Schools to more actively support forensic programming, and engage the forensic organizations headquartered in Ripon to take full advantage of the resources available to bolster these programs. More important, parents need to encourage their children to pursue this tremendous opportunity.

Our schools are replete with opportunities to engage our young people; however, I will make the bold statement that none of those opportunities simultaneously provides the level of benefits offered by interscholastic speech, debate, and theatre.

First, several studies conducted of students have linked higher achievement in test scores and grade point averages to participation in forensic activities. Moreover, a survey of ivy league admissions officers illuminated that forensic activities are considered at premium – above honor societies and other academic activities – when making competitive enrollment decisions and awarding scholarships. Case in point: while coaching at Rufus King High School in Milwaukee, two of my students in the same graduating class were accepted to Harvard, and with generous scholarships. One went on to become a Rhodes Scholar, and the other works for an influential lobbying firm in Washington, D.C.

While forensic activities provide enrichment for often-bored gifted and talented students, they also help uplift low-achieving students by building their skills and confidence in themselves. If public speaking is one of the greatest fears we harbor, imagine how conquering that creates a domino effect to strive to achieve more. The National Association for Urban Debate Leagues has compiled research that supports this claim, as well as showing behavioral and attendance boosts in students.

Forensic activities promote civic awareness of current events, which inspire the topics, debate cases, and literary performances students cultivate. When students investigate issues they are interested in, they are more motivated and engaged. And they learn more from the process. The issues also are inherently cross-disciplinary, ranging from scientific to social. This allows students to apply what they’ve learned from a variety of subject areas in school, reinforcing their learning.

The process of investigation itself, analysis and synthesis of information gathered, and evaluation and creation of new ideas and directions all contribute to the higher-level critical thinking forensics engenders. Moreover, students build upon reading and writing

with literacy in listening and speaking, which do not get enough attention – or proper, formal training – in other sectors of curriculum. Speech and debate teams are arranged as squads, so students can collaborate, share ideas, and constructively critique one another. Forensics provided an outlet to build 21st Century Skills even before there was a buzzword to describe what students were doing, and both the self-direction and peer collaboration have always been what we now call “Project-Based Learning,” a focal point of the charter school programming in the Ripon Area School District.

Even beyond the academic skills forensics builds, let’s consider how it builds students on a personal and behavioral level, enhancing their character and potential for leadership. First, students build emotional maturity: they learn to succeed and fail with grace. Second, they understand the process and importance of personal growth. As Dr. Kay Neal of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh puts it, “Forensics is the purest form of teaching, as it allows a coach to work with a student over the course of several years.” Dr. Brendan Kelly of the University of West Florida adds when he describes how students are evaluated at contests, “Forensics uses assessment in a multi-institutional setting that they cannot get from working with just one educator.”

Forensics also provides students an opportunity to network beyond their own communities. These networks often engender job opportunities later in life. The social engagement also allows helps students develop conflict resolution skills, and empowers groups that have been traditionally marginalized – such as young women and minorities – to have a voice on issues important to them.

The cost it takes a school to run a forensics program is minimal, especially compared to other interscholastic activities. As publisher Tim Lyke says, we pay a great deal of attention to football, but the crickets are chirping as forensics shrivels up at our high school. Not all students are athletic. Forensics provides an opportunity for students who fall within the spectrum between *Glee* and *Big Bang Theory*.

While there is an active competitive circuit, in Wisconsin, a high school can attend just three contests and still offer students a culminating experience on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A middle school can participate in our statewide network of middle level festivals, though sadly, in the readership area of this newspaper, only Green Lake School takes advantage of that program.

I urge officials in the Ripon Area School District, parents, and the community at-large to not throw away a program that does so much for our young people, yet costs so little in comparison to other programs in our schools with far less successful a track record.

Research and studies cited in this column were drawn from <http://www.speechanddebate.org/asp/asp/nav.aspx?navid=201> and <http://urbandebate.org/Our-Results>

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