The BUDL Effect: Examining Academic Achievement and Engagement Outcomes of Preadolescent Baltimore Urban Debate League Participants

By Shackelford, D.

JOHNS Hopkins University’s Daniel Shackelford has conducted the first quantitative study examining the effects of participation in an extracurricular debate club during preadolescence on students’ later academic and engagement outcomes, including entry to selective-entrance high schools.

Dr. Shackelford examined a 10-year sample of 2,263 4th to 8th graders participating in Baltimore City’s Baltimore Urban Debate League (BUDL) between the 2004 to 2013 school years, comparing their standardized math and reading scores, attendance, and entry to selective-entrance high schools to 81,906 peers who did not participate in BUDL. Ninety-one percent of both groups were African American, and 96% of both groups received free and reduced-price lunch. Results showed that:

- Among the debate students themselves, preadolescent debate participation yielded more than a 6% increase in reading scores and a 4% increase in math scores on standardized testing.
- While debate inherently involves reading and might be accountable for increased reading achievement, Dr. Shackelford observes that debaters were 10% less likely to be chronically absent than non-debaters, and this increased engagement in school may have yielded the improvements in math scores.
- BUDL students were also more likely to attend a selective high school (E.S. = +0.122) or selective career tech high school (E.S. = +0.015) than to attend a traditional high school.

However, it is of note that these two groups were not matched at baseline: students who became debaters differed from controls prior to their participation in BUDL, with higher standardized test scores and attendance, so no true causal conclusion can be drawn from comparing groups.