We urge you to de-emphasize the skills of debating and focus rather on the ideas being debated. Our educational model envisions debate as a method of inquiry, one that works in every situation where dialogue can contribute to the understanding of phenomena.

Students often want more concrete parameters for classroom behavior—clear expectations of what they are to do. You can help to reassure students by providing a clear framework of how the debate is to run and what each student will be expected to do in the debate. While the spontaneous energy of debate is often obvious, many participants also learn vital decision-making skills. Because debate is an activity where students define not only the subject but also the process, they have an enormous impact on how the debates operate.

We begin our discussion of preparation with a checklist of behaviors that debaters can use to ensure success and to inspire their performance. Several New York Urban Debate League coaches asked one of the authors to compile a list of characteristics that describe a good debater as well as those that describe a poor debater. Because the debate is supposed to be won by the team who did the “better job of debating,” these rather abstract and symbolic characteristics very often translate directly into competitive success. We also think they translate into success later in life. For your use we provide them for you.

**The “Better” Debater**

- Is a gracious winner and a respectful loser.
- Gives strong rhetorical reasons for the probative force of his or her arguments.
- Makes needs of and benefits to others the focus of the debate through her or his arguments instead of focusing on his or her competitive triumph.
- Argues through excellent evidence, but always makes argument the focus, not evidence. Good debaters use evidence to support their arguments and do not assume the audience recognizes the importance of their arguments.
- Debates dynamically, with enthusiasm and commitment.
• Sees the big picture, is aware of how ideas influence one another, and uses those relationships to enhance analysis in the debate.

• Knows the value of having a working command of the debate topic. There is no substitute for knowing what it is you are debating about.

• Understands the need for organization in order to identify the critical tipping points in the debate.

• Projects an image of an intelligent person who is seeking to understand and discover the truth.

The “Less Skilled” Debater

• Becomes frustrated when debate success isn’t easy or automatic and loses the benefits of debating through lack of determination.

• Whines that everything is against her or him: judges, situations, other teams, and fate.

• Fails to show respect to all participants—opponents, judges, audience, and hosts.

• Speaks from a position of privilege—demanding that you trust and accept his or her ideas over those of others without demonstrating why.

• Fails to make connections between various issues and arguments in the debate.

• Speaks only in generalities or only in specifics, not understanding that both the big picture and the minutiae are important at all times.

• Fails to have fun in the debate because of an overly competitive nature or lack of interest.

• Fails to pay rigorous attention to the judge’s critique, learning neither from failure nor success.

• Fails to focus during the debate, allowing his or her mind to wander and be distracted by outside events.

Discerning who is the better debater can be difficult, requiring you to be carefully involved in the debate’s progress and observing each