

Setting up a Debating Society in your School

Many schools have debating societies that allow pupils to practise debate and encourage debate within the school. With the inclusion of citizenship in the national curriculum, societies like this will become even more beneficial to pupils.

A society greatly benefits from some input from a member of staff acting as debate coach, but the necessary involvement will of course vary on a sliding scale along with the enthusiasm and capability of the pupils. The coach will need to help pupils find a room in the school to hold their meetings, and perhaps also attend the society's meetings. If your school intends to enter external competitions or arrange friendly debates with local the coach will need to accompany the team on these trips and possibly help fundraise for them. We realise that these extra tasks add pressure to an already busy job, but would stress that large numbers of teachers find they really enjoy coaching debating and get a buzz from their pupils' improvement and success.

Key ideas for fostering debating

- Hold debates at lunch time or after school on subjects that interest the pupils involved.
- Enter national competitions, such as the ESU Mace, the Oxford Union Schools' Competition (www.oxfordschools.org.uk), or the Cambridge Union Schools' Competition. You can get details of the many competitions open to school age pupils by going to www.britishdebate.com and clicking on Tournament Calendar.
- Attend a workshop organised by the Oxford Union – please see the information sheet “How Oxford Can Help You Start Debating”.
- Arrange to debate against local schools that also have debating societies. Please email the Convenors (convenor@oxfordschools.org.uk), who will try to put you in contact with nearby schools.

Some more tips...

It may take a while for your society to get up and running. Don't be discouraged; everything takes time. The most pressing problem new societies have is drumming up interest in the school. Here are some ideas:

1. Look at your publicity.
 - Is there a way you could get your debates announced to the whole school? Do you have a morning assembly or registration class where announcements are made?
 - If your school will let you put up posters, think about how best to advertise debating in general, as well as particular campaigns for individual motions. Put posters in places everyone will see them, like main corridors, and in places where people will read them as they're bored and there's nothing else to look at (the canteen queue, the toilets, maths classrooms...)
2. Try particularly controversial motions on subjects that are likely to particularly interest young people. The motions below have been used successfully, but it is often appropriate to check the wording with a teacher before advertising a very controversial issue.
 - This House Would Have Sex at 14.
 - This House Would Legalise Smoking Pot.
3. Try motions relating to the life of the school that people may have opinions on that they want the teachers to listen to.
 - This House Would Give out Condoms in Social Education.
 - This House supports single-sex schools.
 - This House Would accept Girls/Boys to the school.
 - This House supports compulsory Physical Education/Sex Education/etc.
4. Phrase your motions in a way that will annoy people with strong views – this often encourages them to come.
 - This House Would Pay Beckham the same as a nurse.
 - This House Believes the Environment does not need saving.
 - This House would chase and kill foxes.
 - This House Trusts George Bush/Tony Blair/your headmaster
5. Try to convince a teacher or two to take part in a debate against pupils.
6. Under the new curriculum, teachers are likely to use debate more in the classroom. Ask them to mention that there is a school debating society when they do this so that people who enjoy it will come and find you.

Organisation

Your society can have whatever structure feels appropriate. Most have a small group of pupils in charge of organising debates, and a larger group of pupils who attend debates to speak, participate in the floor debate, and as audience.

The committee (i.e. the smaller group) is responsible for picking motions to debate, finding speakers for debates, and organising a time and place for debates to happen. They usually have regular meetings to agree on all this. While it is usually desirable for pupils to have much input into organisation as possible, it is important that the Committee liaises with the teacher responsible for debating.

Sometimes a Committee will allocate roles so that the work is split between people according to their talents. The following roles might be useful, but you might not need to use them all and others may be appropriate.

CHAIRPERSON

1. Chairs committee meetings.
2. Ultimately in charge and responsible for the success of the society.

SECRETARY

1. Communicates with competition organisers.
2. Communicates with local schools if you want to arrange friendly debates.
3. Keeps record of contacts for competitions and local schools.
4. Takes and records minutes at meetings and debates. In many societies, however, this is not necessary.

PUBLICITY OFFICER

1. Makes and displays posters to advertise your debates to encourage other pupils to come as audience or get involved themselves in debating.

TREASURER

1. Keeps a record of all debating expenses.
2. In charge of fundraising if there is a need for it.

Contact Details

If you have any queries, the Convenors of the Oxford Schools' Debating Competition will usually be able to help. If we cannot we will often know who to point you at.

Email:

convenor@oxfordschools.org.uk (probably the best way to contact us)

Write to:

The Convenor of The Oxford Schools' Competition
The Oxford Union
Frewin Court
Oxford
OX1 3JB

On the Web:

www.oxfordschools.org.uk