

A Coach's Notes¹

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Connecticut Debate Association

AITE and King School

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Resolved: Connecticut should adopt high school education reforms substantially similar to the McQuillan Initiative.

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Introduction

This is the first edition of the 2008-09 CDA season. If you would like to receive the previous editions of these Notes, please email me and I will send them to you.

Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round in two formats, transcript and flow chart, and a copy of the packet from the tournament. I try to email these to CDA coaches within two weeks of the tournament.

These notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful teaching tools. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students in subsequent issues. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Why Adopt This Resolution?

In the final round at King the Negative team made an argument, an observation really, that should be made more often. It was probably the major reason the Negative won the round. After presenting the Negative contentions, the First Negative turned to the Affirmative case and noted that the three contentions (see box below) were simply statements of fact about the educational system in Connecticut. None of the contentions

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supported adoption of the resolution. In fact, the First Negative said that the Negative agreed with the Affirmative contentions, but believed there were better ways to solve the problem described.

Affirmative Contentions

1. *Redefining Connecticut high school education is critical to preparing the young*
2. *Test scores in Connecticut high schools are stagnating*
3. *Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind law, the Connecticut high school diploma has lost value*

I believe the Negative was largely correct. All three of these contentions describe a need, but describing a problem does not recommend a solution. Some problems are best left alone, and solve themselves over time. Others have multiple solutions, and it may not be clear which is best. Some problems cannot be solved, at least not with the resources likely to be available. Even if Connecticut high schools are in trouble, it does not follow that we should adopt the McQuillan Initiative. That is for the Affirmative to demonstrate.

Stock Arguments for a Policy Resolution

There are four stock arguments when debating a policy topic: need or harm, inherency, solvency and benefits.² If there is no need for the resolution, why adopt it? If the problem can be solved with existing programs (inherency), why adopt the new policy embodied by the resolution? If adopting the resolution won't solve the problem, why adopt it? Finally if the resolution does more harm than good...you get the idea.

Each argument is a link in a chain. The Affirmative case is only as strong as its weakest link. The Affirmative gets to choose the links it want to use. The Negative can choose to challenge any link to win the debate, as the four questions above show. If the Affirmative neglects any argument in the chain, they leave an opening for their opponents.

In my experience, all debaters understand needs and benefits. Generally the packet will have a clear description of a problem and its consequences that the Affirmative will use to start the debate. Most Affirmative teams will also provide some explanation of how adopting the resolution will solve the problem or alleviate its effects. However, this is not something that the Affirmative may assume. Just because there is a problem in education doesn't mean that a given education policy will solve the problem described.

Many Affirmative teams believe that if they have described a problem that the resolution appears to solve, they have made their case. Many Negative teams seem to agree with this case structure, in that they will either argue the problem does not exist, or that the resolution won't solve it. But there is another possibility. It may be that the problem exists, and that adopting the resolution will solve it, but that still does not mean the resolution should be adopted.

² See A Coach's Notes, November 10, 2007. This is the way I was taught to structure a policy argument. Other sources may give a slightly different list. Freeley and Steinberg list only three: topicality, inherency and significance (Freeley, Austin J., and David L. Steinberg, *Argumentation and Debate*, Wadsworth, 2005, Chapter 11). The Wikipedia article on *Stock Issues* in policy debate lists five: topicality, harms, inherency, solvency and significance. Basically, these all come down to about the same thing.

First, the problem may go away by itself. Most colds go away in seven to ten days regardless of what one does to cure them. Giving antibiotics is actually harmful in that it helps create resistant bacteria. It's often suggested that juvenile crime is most directly related to the number of teenager's relative to the rest of the population. If the problem will go away by itself, spending money and resources to "solve" it may not be justified.

Second, the problem may exist because current laws are not enforced or remedial programs already in place are not properly staffed or funded. Some credit the decline in New York City's crime rate under Mayor Giuliani to aggressive enforcement of existing laws on minor offenses like loitering and disturbing the peace—termed "community policing"—because it created an environment that discouraged more serious crimes. Most problems we debate are not new and there are usually some efforts under way to deal with them. One can always argue that schools would improve if they were better funded, teachers better trained and paid, and more discipline required, all of which are consistent with the status quo.

Third, there may be better ways of dealing with the problem than adopting the resolution. Most Negative teams, like the one in the final round this month at King, will present alternatives to the resolution. Some may even present a full blown counterplan. They may also argue that adopting the resolution may do more harm than good, with disadvantages outweighing any benefits.

The point is, the Negative should not let the Affirmative get away with describing a problem and assuming the solution. The Negative should make the Affirmative show why this particular resolution is the only correct way to solve the problem.

Inherency

Many debaters do not understand inherency. For the Affirmative, inherency is a necessary and convincing argument in support of the resolution. For the Negative, questioning the necessity of the resolution is a powerful attack.

A textbook definition is:

"Inherency refers to the probability of future harm; that is, it considers the cause or causes of a problem and addresses their nature, persistence and permanence. An inherent need is a need intrinsic to the status quo. The affirmative has to prove that the need cannot be resolved by modifications, adjustments, repairs or any other means except by adopting the plan called for by the affirmative under the resolution. In other words, the affirmative must prove that the significant harm it identifies is built into the essential nature of the status quo through the legal structures and/or societal attitudes."³

That text goes on to describe three standard inherency arguments: structural, attitudinal and existential. Structural inherency is probably the strongest of the three. Structural inherency means either the existence or lack of a law or program prevents the problem from being solved. Attitudinal inherency means the problem persists because of beliefs that are widely held. Existential inherency argues that a problem can only persist if society is currently unable to solve it.

³ Freeley and Steinberg, p. 189. Note that in CDA debate, the Affirmative need not present a formal plan. But the resolution generally requires the Affirmative describe some practical course of action, i.e. a plan.

Let's consider each how each form of inherency might be argued given the Affirmative needs listed above. One structural argument could be that No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on testing general skills and holding schools rather than students responsible is counterproductive in high school. The McQuillan Initiative, defining and testing for a specific knowledge-based curriculum, will restore quality to high school education. This would focus the debate on the relative merits of the two types of programs.

An attitudinal argument might be that poorly informed students and parents choose or pressure local school boards to provide, courses that are less than optimal for a high school student in today's society. Only a centrally developed and imposed curriculum, matched to standard tests, can overcome these poor choices. (This raises an immediate Negative counter argument that McQuillan would impose a curriculum that students and parents don't really want.)

Existential inherency would argue that the fact that high school students are poorly educated is proof high schools currently can't educate them well. Therefore a new program is needed. This type of argument has always struck me as an example of "post hoc"⁴ logic (though as I go back over my flow charts from past topics and debates it is quite common in CDA debate). There could be a lot of reasons why existing programs should be effective but are ineffective as applied. Still, it might convince some.

Affirmative Strategy: Choosing Your Ground

The inherency argument you make depends on the need you choose to present. The third Affirmative contention above is consistent with a very strong inherency argument. What exactly is "the value of a high school diploma?" One interpretation is that a high school diploma is valuable to the extent that it represents a well-defined level of educational achievement. If every school district has a different curriculum and different standards for passing and graduating, it is almost impossible to know what a diploma represents. Anything other than well-defined curriculum with specific performance standard—like a test—would by definition have the same weakness. This is a classic structural inherency argument: in the absence of a standard it is impossible to measure results, so that a program substantially similar to the McQuillan Initiative is necessary.

Which leads to one last observation: *the Affirmative has the option of choosing the case it presents*. Just because the packet provides a laundry list of harms doesn't mean the Affirmative has to present every one of them. For example, low quality education has many causes, from poor home environment to lack of pre-school programs to crowded schools and so on and so forth. It seems unlikely that curriculum reform and testing in high school is going to fix that, no matter how well argued.

Consider a much more limited Affirmative case:

1. Need: People with Connecticut high school diplomas are less likely to be hired or admitted to college because employers and admissions offices cannot determine what they know. This leads to lower wages and opportunities.

⁴ From the Latin "post hoc sed non propter hoc" or "after this, but not because of this." It is a logical fallacy to assume that just because one thing follows another that it is caused by it. One needs to demonstrate the mechanism of causation to make the argument.

2. Inherency: A diploma is only valuable to the extent it represents measured achievement over a defined curriculum, so that employers and colleges can determine its value
3. Solvency: The McQuillan Initiative will require students to take specific courses geared to the needs of business and colleges and to pass standardized tests on the material in order to graduate, giving the Connecticut high school diploma well-defined value.

This is a much more limited case than what I suspect most Affirmatives presented, and much more limited than what the packet presents. But it is the right of the Affirmative to limit the debate through choice of definitions and arguments to the strongest case that they can present. Note that the Affirmative can also argue that the McQuillan Initiative will improve education overall, a benefit, without having to prove it will solve all the problems that plague the educational system.

What Is Debate Really About?

The most important thing that you do in a debate is to listen to your opponents. Almost anyone can walk into a room and present a set of prepared arguments. A good debater will listen to his or her opponent and adapt their prepared arguments so they are positioned directly against the case presented. A great debater will analyze the structure of his or her opponents' arguments and explain why they are inadequate.

One of the most important things you should learn as a debater is how a good case should be structured. One of the most valuable skills you can develop is to be able to apply that knowledge to analyze what you hear and build your response from it. Debate is not just argument, but argument about arguments.

Why Judging Is Like the Weather

Academic debate is a judged contest. While most forms of competition have judges or referees, we can distinguish between those in which they simply enforce the rules and those in which they determine the results. Football, baseball and soccer have referees who keep play inside the rules; diving, gymnastics and debate have judges who score the performances.

While bad calls can harm both types of competition, in a refereed contest the players can act to change the score in ways that are obvious to all—a touchdown, a home run, a goal. In judged contests even if the entire audience favors one contestant, only the opinion of the judges matters. A bad call by a ref is therefore less likely to decide the result of the contest than a bad decision by a judge.

“Everyone complains about judging, but nobody does anything about it.”

I believe complaints about judging are as old as debate itself. When I debated in the late 1960's we regularly complained about the quality of the judging. It's also a constant theme in the debate literature.⁵ One could almost say that it is a time honored tradition to

⁵ For example, see the archived articles for *Rostrum*, the official publication of the National Forensic League, on their web site, www.nflonline.org.

spend the ride home from a tournament reviewing the ballots and complaining about the judges.

The issue is inherent to debate for three reasons. First, the need for judges exceeds the supply of well-qualified judges. There are few activities that require one judge for every four participants (one judge for every two in Lincoln-Douglas debate). In order to support the number of students interested in debate, less experienced volunteers have to be recruited for most tournaments. It also makes it impossible to provide multiple judges for each round to get more consistent results.

At CDA tournaments we deal with this problem by holding a Judges' Workshop to train new judges and refresh the working knowledge of less experienced judges. We also encourage volunteers to continue to participate in future tournaments so that they learn by experience. But an hour is a short time to teach someone how to judge.

Second, there is no single agreed upon framework for judging debate. A review of the debate literature provides a list of "paradigms" or approaches to judging. One text categorizes them as a skills judge, issues judge, policy maker judge, hypothesis testing judge, *tabula rasa* judge and evaluator of argument judge.⁶

Some leagues and tournaments require judges to fill out a form describing their paradigm which debaters can read prior to the debate in order to adjust their presentation and arguments.⁷ In CDA, most of the coaches have been judging for a number of years and are relatively well-known to debaters. Most of the volunteers are new to debate, and would likely be unable to provide a meaningful paradigm in any case.

In others leagues, teams can indicate their preference (or lack thereof) for certain judges, and those preferences are considered by the tab room in assigning judges to rounds. The principle is to assign judges, not so that each team gets the judge they prefer, but that the judge is approximately equally preferred by each team. In other words, if you get a judge you dislike, at least you have some assurance your opponents dislike them too. This can be a bit cumbersome to implement, and has a number of disadvantages if teams try to "game" their preference lists, or if their preferences become known.

Third (and this is my strongest inherency argument) even judges of equal skill who claim to judge debates in a similar fashion may come to different conclusions when judging the same debate. Opinions will differ as to the strength and importance of arguments. Two judges will hear and note different things on their flow chart as they listen to the debate. While good judges will try not to be influenced by any personal biases, good judges will also acknowledge that they exist and will have some impact on their decisions despite best intentions and efforts.

"If you don't like the judging, wait a while. It will change."

In every CDA tournament you will face three judges. You will have to do your best to convince each of them to decide in your favor. Convincing judges who agree with your approach to debating is easy. What you must learn to do is to recognize and convince

⁶ Freeley and Steinberg, Chapter 17.

⁷ See http://www.tabroom.com/index/paradigms.mhtml?tourn_id=256 for the judge's paradigms for the recent high school invitational tournament at Yale University. It's certainly interesting reading, though I am not sure how useful.

judges who are less appreciative of what you do. Since the risk is probably greater with less experienced judges, you may want to pay more attention to basic technique. After any round where you question the judge's decision you might want to ask yourself:

1. Did we speak well? Did we stand up straight and use a reasonable tone of voice? Did we appear pleasant and enthusiastic? Did we look like we were happy to be there?
2. Were our speeches well-organized? Did we start each speech with an outline of what we were going to say and end with a summary of what we said? Did we indicate in our speech each time we moved from one argument to the next so the judge knew what argument we were on? Did we use full paragraphs and complete sentences?
3. Were our arguments clearly stated and easy to understand? Did we make connections between our arguments and those of our opponents? Did we explain why each argument was correct, or did we simply assert them? Did we clearly indicate which arguments were important, and which ones less so? Did we allocate our speaking time in a way that reflected the importance of the arguments?
4. Did we end the debate with an explanation of why the decision should be in or favor?

There is nothing fancy or clever about any of these questions. If you aren't sure about a judge, the best thing you can do is get the basics right. Speak well, be clear and well organized, explain your arguments, clash with your opponents, leave a good impression. You can get fancy when you get to the final round.

“There is no such thing as bad judging, only different kinds of good judging”

As a participant in many rides home, both as a debater and a coach and a judge, I find that it is also a time honored tradition for debaters to focus on all the wrong things. Once a debate is over, lose or win, the only thing that matters is what you can learn to improve your performance in the next debate. Perhaps the worst way to do that is to look at the scores in the boxes.

Remember that the CDA requires that the winning team have higher speaker ranks and points than the losing team. This often requires some adjustment in the points in order to get the ballot to agree with the overall decision. While it is not required, we advise judges to make their decision from the top down: (1) decide who won, (2) assign speaker ranks, (3) assign speaker points. As a result, the numbers given to each of the skill categories may not reflect your actual performance in either absolute or relative terms.

But even if the numbers in the boxes were reflective of your absolute and relative skills, what does getting a 4 in Cross-Ex, a 3 in Clash and a 5 in Civility tell you about your performance? Realistically, how would you use that information to do better in your next debate?

The most important feed back on the ballot are the judge's written comments, starting with the reason for the decision. The best judge is not the judge who gives you a win, but

the one who writes the most useful comments on the ballot. You would do well not to waste time critiquing the critique, but trying to understand why the judge wrote what he or she wrote. If you can explain the critique, you'll know what you need to do better next time.

Second, if you don't take good notes during the debate, you will be at a disadvantage when it comes time to read the ballot. We've all been there. A debater reads something on the ballot and asks, "What does this mean?" or "How can this be right?" And I reply, "Tell me what was said in the debate." And if the debater does not have good notes on the round the conversation doesn't go very much further. Remember, your coach wasn't there. If you can't provide objective information on how the round went, it's going to be hard for you or your coach to help you make sense of the ballot. This is why I recommend that all debaters flow the final round, so they can compare those notes with their coach and teammates and develop their note-taking skills.

Finally, you have to learn to be your own best judge. You should be able to re-create the important arguments of all of your debates from your notes. You should be able, with your partner and coach, to write your own critique of each round, in effect to fill out your own ballot. When you've done that, and only when you've done that, will you have the right to critique the decision of the judge.

Appendix: The Judges' Workshop

I started giving the Judges' Workshop in 2002, revising what I had heard others present. I have taught at many of the tournaments since then, and I think my presentation has largely been well received. Over the summer I put together a written version of what I would like to think I say when I give the workshop, call it an idealized version.

There is no official CDA policy on judging beyond what is in the CDA Handbook. However, I believe that my presentation largely conforms to the Handbook, and I have tried to clearly indicate where I am expressing my own opinion. If any readers—coaches, judges or debaters—have questions, comments or criticism, please email me or approach me at one of the CDA tournaments.

I've included that document as a separate file as an appendix to this edition of A Coach's Notes. I hope that the coaches, many of whom are working with their teams or helping to run the tournament, will appreciate having some idea as to what I'm telling their volunteer judges. This document could be presented to your volunteer judges prior to the tournament if they would like more perspective on what they will be asked to do.

I also see no reason why debaters should not know what we tell the judges. It may give them a better appreciation of the judging process that they can use to improve their debating techniques. Please feel free to let the debaters have a copy. I'd be especially interested in hearing what they have to say about how debates should be judged.