

# Up For Debate

If you can explain an argument to someone who doesn't understand it, then you can win a debate."

That's not just something SGS Debate coach and English teacher Chad Rigsby says. It's also something he practices in his Upper School Debate class, where older debaters teach the younger students the finer points of research, critical thinking, building persuasive arguments, and public speaking.

Chad debated and coached at Gonzaga University before restarting Saint George's Debate program in 2005. "It's built like a college program," he says, "with strategy sessions, scouting other teams and judges, research assignments – and everything gets shared." His students agree that everybody who walks in the door gets something out of it.

"Research skills are big," says junior Grace Generous. "I can find minute details on any subject quickly, as well as identifying key phrases and patterns."

"It teaches you how to build an argument," says junior Charlie Darnall. "Papers got easier after taking Debate. And I wouldn't have run for ASB if I hadn't had this experience."

Charlie also credits debate class for helping him structure his IB Extended Essay on black G.I. resistance during the Vietnam War. Grace learned about the AIDS crisis in debate camp last summer and has chosen that topic for her Extended Essay.

The most competitive debaters attend summer institutes, often for four or five weeks at a time, to prepare for tough state and national-level contests. The SGS Debate team fields pairs of policy debaters to competitions locally (winning the Greater Spokane League title this year), statewide (reaching the Final Four the past five years vs schools of all sizes), and to national tournaments as far away as UC Berkeley and Washington DC (2nd overall).

"We are probably the only team in the Northwest that's been competitive on the national circuit for the past 10 years," says Chad. "And it's a whole different experience to debate teams from Brooklyn or Baltimore!"

Some of these teams have six paid coaches vs Saint George's team with Chad and sometimes a recent SGS alum such as Max McGougan '17, who was recruited by Northwestern, or Joe LeDuc '11, who debated at Wake Forest.

Tournaments are a whirlwind of activity, with 90-120 minutes per round, and four or five rounds in a day. "You're going at least 8 hours straight," says Charlie, "but when you are in it, it goes by fast." To get more in-depth during debates, top teams even share their arguments and sources in advance.

Recent debate topics have covered foreign policy and educational policy, but this coming fall's topic is particularly timely. *Resolved: That the U.S. federal government should substantially reduce its restrictions on legal immigration to the U.S.*

"To prepare, we already have 9th graders researching how immigration law is based on the same laws that made slavery legal," says Chad, "and on the perils of seeing some people as legal, and others as illegal."

This year, for the first time, Saint George's also fielded Lincoln-Douglas debaters, who tackle political problems in a philosophical contest. Chad expects these tough-minded ninth graders to be exceptionally competitive, along with the policy teams, in a few years.

Trying something new and challenging old assumptions are just some of the benefits of debate. "For years in my own classes," says Upper School English teacher Jeff Darnall, "I have noticed that debaters, on the whole, tend to be better researchers, more organized writers, and deeper thinkers – especially in terms of discerning implications of ideas and structures of logic."

Whether a student simply wants to improve their public speaking, discuss politics, or figure out how to ask sharp questions in the most difficult forums, there's a place for them in the Saint George's debate program. Chad puts it this way. In the debate program, "Everyone has something to teach, everyone has something to learn."

– John Carter, SGS Communications



**Above:**  
Chad's 2017-18 Debate Class won the 2B Academic Championship for highest grade point average in the State.

**Below:**  
Elite policy debaters Grace Generous and Kylie Vera took 2nd at State, while Nik Chaudhry and Charlie Darnall finished 3rd at State.

