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## Debate Season Kicks off at JM

By Zoe Portnoff



Students prepare for debates at the Oct. 25 tournament held at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. Photo Zoe Portnoff

Would you be ready in 20 minutes to argue that texting does more harm than good? Or that the U. S. has a moral obligation to provide West Africa with aid during the current Ebola outbreak? For the students of the East Bay Debate League who competed against other middle schools in the first of a series of county-level debate tournaments at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School Oct. 25, the answer was "yes" - and they were ready to argue the opposite side just as quickly.

Students have just four weeks on average to prepare for each tournament, utilizing resources ranging from the U.S. Constitution to recent news articles found on the Internet. Each tournament consists of numerous debates, taking place across the course of a day. The most recent tournament also focused on topics including whether prospective job applicants should be asked to reveal prior criminal convictions and whether California's desalinization program will do more harm than good. After receiving one of the four topics and which side it will be arguing for, each team of students had 20 minutes to prepare its points on a single sheet of paper before beginning its debate against an opposing team. "It's creative thinking and flexibility, and even adults have a problem with being able to see both sides of an argument, and these are 13- and 14-year-olds who are able to see both sides of an argument, and wrap their heads around that within a 20-minute time period and prepare for it," Don Read, the head of the debate classes at JM, comments.

The speakers, however, showed no signs of nervousness during their debates, demonstrating their ability to think on the spot and remain calm even while under attack by their opposition. Orinda Intermediate School and Joaquin Moraga both placed well in the tournament, with three person teams from JM claiming fourth and second, and a team from OIS winning third out of a total of 44 individual teams. OIS also claimed second place in "Tournament Sweepstakes," a category awarding the highest placing overall schools.

The "Golden Gavel," the trophy for the overall best speaker selected from approximately 132 students, was awarded to JM student Sharon Yuan. "I like how you actually have to think. In a lot of extracurriculars, you don't really have to use your mind as much, but in debate you have to think on the spot, prepare your point, and really work for it," Yuan says.

The East Bay Debate League was started in 2007 by the Claremont McKenna College, where the National Tournaments are still held each year in April, but the Middle School Public Debate Program has been running for 15 years. JM began its program as a small club, with 10 students. Over the years it has grown into a program of two academic classes and a total of 58 students involved.

"Honestly, kids like to argue! The key thing is, here, they're not just arguing, they're arguing for a point - they're not just idly saying 'I'm right, you're wrong,' but then learning how to talk through their thoughts, give reasoning, and ultimately develop skills they'll utilize later in life," Kyle Chan, county tournament director and JM debate alumni states. "It helps them (the students) sharpen their public speaking skills, not just within our own league, but also for the future, when they need

to give speeches in other environments. We're training the leaders of the future."

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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