

POWERFUL PREPARATION IN THE NJFL

by
Jennifer Billman

In the fantasy film *The Never Ending Story*, a pair of pre-teen protagonists struggles to save Fantasia from *the nothing*. The first, Atreyu, is a warrior. He fights *the nothing* with physical skill, grappling with a wolf named G'Mork and travelling thousands of miles to consult the Southern Oracles. The second, Bastian, observes the unfolding drama nervously, unsure of his ability to intervene. When Atreyu's best efforts fail, it is Bastian who must save the kingdom by naming the ailing child-empress. This simple speech act by a middle level student rescues Fantasia.

Just as Bastian saved a kingdom through rhetoric, today's NJFL members possess tremendous power through communication. NJFL focuses this potential like the laser-beam eyes of the Oracles in the film, thereby empowering its members to become great thinkers and leaders. Through your work as an NJFL educator, students gain skills, accumulate knowledge, and build confidence. No one has to save a dying child-empress here – but we do have a unique opportunity to grow our youth.

First, participation in competitive speech and debate provides a highly effective way for middle level students to build communication skills including speaking, listening, and writing. These critical skills translate into significant advantages in school and later, the workforce. In fact, studies show that students who are trained in speech and debate tend to earn higher grades and score higher on standardized tests. In addition, students who are trained in forensics typically demonstrate superior critical thinking skills, which enable them to be judicious consumers of information and powerful voices of logic.



Beyond this, students in forensics have a significant outlet for their creative energies. Forensics enables students to explore subjects which are personally relevant to them, which encourages them to seize responsibility for their own education. In situations where core content is pre-determined, using forensics as an instructional tool enables students to identify personal connections with the material, improving both retention and comprehension. This unique aspect of the activity makes it particularly relevant for both gifted and at-risk populations, which are often underserved by standardized curricula.

Finally, NJFL builds confidence in young speakers. Early exposure to public speaking may help obviate stage fright in young orators, giving them a significant advantage over the general population (which collectively fears public speaking more than death). Equally important, forensics gives junior high school students a place to belong. Take it from a former – okay, current – nerd: speech is the best place for an awkward pre-teen to find acceptance and social support. Luckily, forensics also helps students develop social skills involving empathy and

conflict resolution – just in case your brainiacs have to venture beyond their microcosm of precociousness.

To be fair, NJFL is not completely analogous to the *NeverEnding Story*; in our realm, one word isn't sufficient to save a nation or redeem a child. Still, careful instruction and committed involvement in NJFL can garner

the benefits noted above. In fact, the gains in a pre-teen's academic, cognitive, and social abilities are so consistent and substantial that we owe it to our young people to train them in forensics.

In *The NeverEnding Story*, Bastian must return to the real world after he saves Fantasia with his voice. So, too, your students will vacate your classroom eventually and venture out into a world full of scary metaphorical wolves and nothingness. As an educator, you have the opportunity to equip them for their journey with life-changing skills and experiences through the NJFL. Just say the word.

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