

# A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>

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**Connecticut Debate Association**

**AITE and Farmington High School**

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**Resolved: All schools in the United States should be required to teach to a common academic standard.**

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## Introduction

This is the October 2013 edition of my notes. Previous year's editions can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#). Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Farmington High School presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

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.

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## A Hard Topic for the Affirmative?

I thought this was going to be a hard topic for the Affirmative to win. So I was surprised when the side distribution statistics showed the Aff won the majority of rounds at both AITE and Farmington. Since I judged three rounds and awarded two Aff wins, I suppose it is my own fault. But I suspect Aff won on arguments that they didn't know were insufficient because the Neg didn't know they were insufficient either. Let me explain.

### ***What Does the Aff Have to Demonstrate?***

When you analyze the resolution the second question you have to answer (after “What does it mean?”), is “What does the Aff have to show to win the debate?” The Aff needs to answer this question in order to build a case, the Neg to defeat it.

The packet is not necessarily helpful in answering this question. None of the articles is likely to be entirely on point. This month's packet focuses on the Common Core standard which is rapidly being adopted in the US, but that standard is not mentioned in the resolution.

What the resolution does state is that “all schools should teach to a common academic standard.” All schools already teach, or try to, and all schools have academic standards of some sort. To win the debate, the Aff must show there are benefits from all schools teaching to the *same* standards. This is a very small foundation on which to build a case.

### ***Examples***

Let's take a look some Aff contentions and see whether they support adoption of the resolution.

#### **1. Better Education**

I think most Aff cases included something like this:

*Contention:* Common standards will raise the quality of education

*Problem:* This may or may not be true. But if it is true, why wouldn't it also be true if each state, town or even school taught to a higher standard than whatever they have now, even if they were all different?

*Better Contention:* Common standards provide for a minimum national quality of education which can be raised over time.

*Solution:* Only a common standard can set a floor on the quality of education across the country, and this floor could be raised over time. This would clarify the value of a high school diploma. Different standards may not even be comparable, so it could be hard to tell if any minimum level is achieved or whether any overall improvement occurs over time. And like environmental standards, any state could enact higher standards so long as they met or exceeded the minimum.

#### **2. Educational Funding**

Another common Aff contention (or plan feature) included higher spending on education:

*Contention:* Schools that struggle with the common standard will receive additional education funding, improving education.

*Problem:* Two problems, actually. First, you can allocate funds to struggling schools regardless of the standard used, so again the benefit isn't exclusive to common standards. But second, if you do this, is the benefit derived from the standards or the spending? Probably from the spending.

*Better contention:* Common standards allow limited educational funds to be fairly and efficiently allocated to the neediest schools.

*Solution:* If we had infinite funds, we could solve a lot of problems. But money is limited and there many competing needs. Common standards provide a consistent measure of school performance, so you can identify the weakest schools and direct the money where it will do the most good. For example, Massachusetts, with high standards leading to more students performing poorly, won't suck all the funding away from Mississippi where low standards mean everyone is a star. You get to the same place—improved education from higher spending on the worst performers—but you travel by way of the resolution this time.

### **3. Teaching to the Test**

Understanding the resolution affects the Negative too. One Neg argument I heard was that common standards will encourage teaching to the test.

*Contention:* common standards will harm education by encouraging “teaching to the test.”

*Problem:* Teaching requires standards, even if it is simply deciding what to put in the lesson plan each day. Unless you abandon student evaluation, there will always be a test. And unless the teacher enjoys tormenting students, the test will have some relation to the material being taught. So every teacher is teaching to the test (or testing to the teach), and this is a problem regardless of the resolution.

*Better contention:* common standards will harm education by forcing teachers to teach to a test that may have no relationship to the actual needs of the students.

*Solution:* This revision of the disadvantage turns on the different impacts of common and custom standards, the heart of the resolution. The Neg still needs to justify customization, but that is a key element in defending the status quo.

### **4. Improved Teacher/Student Mobility**

This was a “gimme” in the first article that perfectly captures the sense of the resolution.

*Contention:* Common standards improve teacher and student mobility among the states.

*Solution:* This is an inherent difference between the resolution and the status quo. With varying standards, every state will have its own teacher certification process and no student will know quite where he fits in if his parents move from Massachusetts to Mississippi or the reverse. Aff can argue teacher training costs will be lower and education more efficient as teachers can follow economic incentives to where they are most needed: no need to re-certify to get that high paying job in Mississippi. Parents

will feel more able to follow economic opportunities knowing their children's education won't suffer.

### ***Extra-topical Benefits***

When the advantages of the Aff case come from features not inherent to adopting the resolution, we say those advantages are "extra-topical." The Negative should consider each plank of the Aff plan and each Aff benefit or disadvantage and ask whether they come from the resolution or are just useful add-ons by the Aff to sell the plan to the judge.

An extreme example illustrates this point. You can materially improve any Aff case on any resolution by adding the provision, "and we will give one million dollars to every American." I've seen very few resolutions over the years where this would be relevant, but it is one heck of an advantage.

One question you can ask yourself to decide whether a feature of the Affirmative case is topical is, "Can I counterplan this? That is can it be added to the status quo without adopting the resolution?" In this case the answer is yes: the Neg can trump the Aff by offering two million dollars to every American, thereby winning the round!

For an advantage or disadvantage, the question is whether it is the result of the resolution, or the result of other factors in the plan. There are two examples above: higher standards and more spending may improve education, but you don't necessarily need common standards to raise existing standards or to spend more money.

### **Red Herrings**

There were a lot of "red herrings" on Saturday, arguments that really weren't legitimate attacks on the Aff case and could be easily dismissed. Some examples:

*Constitutionality:* common academic standards are unconstitutional. Constitutionality is never a valid argument in debate; only reasons explaining why something should be constitutional or not are valid. Even if it is unconstitutional, the Constitution can be amended. The classic example is that slavery was constitutional once.

*Federal control:* common academic standards mean Federal control of education. No. Read the packet closely. Common core was not developed by the Federal Government and is being adopted by the states individually and voluntarily, not because a Federal law requires it. Five states have not adopted it as yet. This argument is only valid if the Aff specifically mandates a Federal role. Note even if the Aff does specify it, you still have to explain why Federal control of education is a bad thing.

*All schools:* Aff has the right to a reasonable definition of terms. If they limit the debate to public schools, or high schools or elementary schools or even private schools, that would not be unreasonable limitation in my opinion. The Neg still has plenty to argue about.

*Common Core:* "common academic standards" does not mean adopting the Common Core. While this topic was suggested by the rapid adoption of Common Core as a de facto national standard, we did not want the debate to revolve around particular details that may or may not be in Common Core. The Common Core is several hundred pages

long and best debated in detail by experts. The issue on Saturday was whether there should be a common standard, not what the standard should be.

*Fixed standards:* standards are not necessarily frozen and need not prevent innovation. Even national standards generally change over time as the governing body sees need for improvement. Consider building codes, auto safety standards, even the Constitution. You would need to argue something like: the more people who are involved in and affected by the standards the harder it will be to get agreement to change the standard.

*Implementation issues:* there will be a cost to implementing new standards. Unless the Neg can show these will be excessive or ongoing, this isn't much of an argument. Teachers will need to be trained and they and the students will need to get used to the new standards. But teacher training goes on all the time, and students currently have to adapt to a new teacher every year. It is hard to see how common standards will make this any worse.

*Teaching to the test:* As noted above, everyone teaches to the test, unless they have no plans to evaluate the students in any way. If teachers are evaluated based on how well their students do then teachers will have an incentive to teach in a way that they believe will help their students succeed. Unless you demonstrate that they will teach something that is not in the students interest, there is no disadvantage.

## **Time Management**

Raise your hands: how many of you have been caught short at the end of a speech, having failed to present everything you planned to say? One, two, three... pretty much everyone. (My hand is up, too, in case you are wondering.)

Covering a lot of material quickly and concisely is an important debate skill. You have a limited amount of time and you have to use it efficiently. You can't say everything you'd like so you have to be selective. And you can't compensate by simply speaking fast, no matter what you may heard about other debate formats.

The most common time management mistakes I see are:

- Spending too much time on one contention or argument. Even if it's a really good contention, don't let it suck the life out of the rest of your case. Learn to time your own speech. Before you get up, mark your notes so you know about where you should be as each minute or half minute passes. If you reach your mark, move on.
- Spending time answering arguments that you don't need to answer. If your opponent didn't respond to one of your arguments, note that it stands unanswered and move on. Spend your time on clash, not on repeating yourself.
- Addressing Aff and Neg contentions that directly clash separately instead of combining them as one issue. For most resolutions the Aff and Neg cases will overlap. Use that overlap to organize your presentation and shorten your speech.
- And the number one all time biggest time waster of them all: reintroducing yourself and your partner and re-reading the resolution at the beginning of every speech. Once per team per round is plenty.

Two speeches are particularly important with regard to time management: the First Negative Constructive and the First Affirmative Rebuttal.

### ***The First Negative Constructive***

In two of the three rounds I judged on Saturday the First Negative did not manage to present the entire Neg case in his constructive speech. This is bad enough, but it means the First Negative never posted any reply to the Affirmative case. A sharp Second Affirmative will simply note that his own case stands unopposed and spend the remaining five and one-half minutes burying the Negative case.

*The First Negative Constructive should always present the Negative case and cover the Affirmative case.* Unless the Negative case matches the Aff point for point, the First Negative should spend no more than four minutes on it, saving at least two minutes to respond to the Aff. If the Aff case is strong, you might want to split your time evenly between the two.

Remember, you only need to get the Negative case out and on the board in the INC. You don't need to present every argument you have for each contention. The Second Negative can use them after he has heard the Second Affirmative's reply. In fact, if you know the most likely Aff response to your case, it can be very effective if you save the strongest points against those Aff replies for the Second Negative to use as rebuttal!

### ***The First Affirmative Rebuttal***

Many consider the 1AR to be the most difficult speech in policy debate. It follows two consecutive Neg speeches—the Negative block—that are more than double the length of the Aff rebuttal. A good Negative team will coordinate those two speeches to bury the First Affirmative with more than he can possibly accomplish.

A good 1AR starts by carefully listening to the 2NC and the 1NR. A long time speaking by one side means you have a long time to listen. If the First Affirmative holds back a little during cross-ex of the Second Negative, that's a bit more time to think, and if the First Negative takes prep time before his rebuttal that's even better. Flow the two speeches side by side, and note whenever the two Negative speakers cover the same item: that's one less for the 1AR! Your flow of those two speeches should be an outline for the 1AR. If you can develop the habit of noting your rebuttal points next to each Neg point while you flow, you can save a bit more time.

The First Affirmative next has to carefully plan his speech in order to cover everything. This is where you take two minutes of prep time and you don't get up until they are finished. Even if you think you are ready, if your prep time hasn't run out, look again!

During your prep time, first, go back over the 2AC. Is there any unfinished business that you need to add to the list of things to do? If so, try to add it to an existing item in your outline, else add it as a new item.

Third, look at the augmented outline from your flow of the Negative block and added items from the 2AC. If a Neg argument is a restatement of something the Second Affirmative already answered and not a new reply, you just have to note that in passing. You do not have to repeat the entire argument your partner made. If two or more points

can be combined into one issue, do so. Just make sure you indicate when you identify the issue which contentions fall under it.

Fourth, prioritize the issues. It's always nice to go over things in the order they were presented, but if the most important issues are left until the end and you don't get to them, then "nice" could lose the round. Cover the arguments you need to win the round first before going on the minor points. As long as you give the judge an outline at the start of the speech you will be fine.

Remember the 1AR is a speech for answering the Negative arguments. It is not a speech for summarizing the debate. That is for the 2AR. That doesn't mean that the 1AR shouldn't identify common issues and combine Aff and Neg contentions under them in order to efficiently deal with the Negative block. Those common issues may even become the basis for the 2AR summary. But the essential difference between the two Affirmative rebuttals is this: at the end of the 2AR I should know what the key voting issues are and why they fall to the Aff; at the end of the 1AR there should be no significant Negative argument that has not been answered.

Finally, remember each team has two members, and you win or lose together. The First Affirmative should make sure his partner agrees with what he plans to do in the 1AR. And the Second Affirmative should be thinking about which issues he will come back to in the 2AR as part of his summary.

### ***Getting to Carnegie Hall***

There's an old joke where a man walks up to a policeman in New York City and asks, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice!" says the cop.

It's the same thing in debate. If you were caught short in any speech in any one of your rounds at a tournament, review your notes after you get home. Look at how you spent your time and figure out how you can say more by saying less.

- Delete anything that wasn't really relevant. Focus on your case and your opponents' case. There are many fascinating issues you can discuss, but the only ones that matter during the round are the ones that help you win.
- Make sure you make a point once, not two or three times. When you have a really good argument, it's tempting to dwell on it. Don't! Make the point and move on.
- Link and combine related arguments—if A3 and N2 clash directly, cover them as one issue, not two separate contentions. It's easy to spend time going over the Aff case then the Neg case or vice versa one contention at a time. But it's faster to draw lines connecting the parts that match up and discussing them once, not twice. It's easier for the judge to understand too. Note that as I said above this is just organizing your speech efficiently, not summarizing the round.
- Figure out what you can shift to your partner's or some later speech. Remember you have both a constructive and a rebuttal. More important, remember you have a partner. As long as you introduce an argument in the constructives, you can

bolster it in the rebuttal. And your partner can make the point or add support in his speech.

- Figure out what does the least harm to your case and leave it out. Sometimes you have too much to say and you have to prioritize. But try to do it in a way that doesn't sound like you were caught short—make it your decision, not the clock's.
- Put time markers on your outline so you know where you expect to be as time passes on the clock.

Then time yourself giving that same speech again...and again and again until it fits.