

Critique of the Final Round¹

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

Critique of the Final Round at Farmington

The Final Round was between the Hamden team of Henry Hansen and Colette Kroop on the Affirmative and the Simsbury team of Kevin Gyurco and Matthew Shaw on the Negative. The debate was won by the Negative team from Simsbury.

A Judge's Perspective—by Everett Rutan

The material in the first two sections (*The Cases*, and *Clash and Decision*) is close to what I would have written on the ballot, explaining the reasoning behind my decision. The remaining sections are further commentary on the round. Remember, this piece benefits from over a week for reflection and additional time for composition and editing. An actual ballot would be a lot rougher (and harder to read). Remember also that I was one of five judges, whose opinions may differ.

The Cases

The Affirmative presents a standard needs-benefits case²:

A1: The status quo fails to prepare students for life after high school. (The need)

Plan: National standards in math, reading and writing for public schools grade K-12, performance measured by standardized tests, enforced by using the results to evaluate teachers..

A2: The plan will benefit underachievers. (Aff adds a plank to their plan in discussing this contention, that students will be held back until they pass the test for the grade level)

A3: The plan will close the socio-economic achievement gap. (Aff adds another plank to their plan by indicating poorly performing schools and even classrooms can apply for and will receive additional funding)

The Neg case is a disadvantage and two solvency arguments.

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² The Aff did not present in this order. My flow notes and flow chart of the debate can be found on the CDA website.

N1: Common standards inhibit innovation (the disadvantage)

N2: Standards and testing fail to meet the need because they don't measure (and presumably teachers won't teach) higher order thinking skills (solvency)

N3: Common standards distract from the real issues which are social and economic (solvency).

Clash and Decision

The Aff notes that innovation can occur outside of the core areas and in teaching technique. The Neg replies that standards are confining and the Aff plan is a rehash of No Child Left Behind. But this is not an important argument to either side. And as I mention elsewhere³, I think this argument is red herring. Standards are reviewed and revised over time, and there is usually a mechanism to test and evaluate potential revisions, so innovation is possible. What the Neg probably means here is the teach-to-test aspect of the solvency arguments below will squeeze anything else out of the classroom.

The real clash evolves out of N2 and N3 and the question of solvency (and so counter to A2 and A3). In cross-ex, the Neg presses the Aff on the impact of strict enforcement by testing, suggesting that it will discourage failing students leading first to truancy then to dropping out. The Aff stresses social promotion means students are not educated, but never gives a reason why holding them back will solve that other than perhaps practice makes perfect. The Aff then does itself no favor when, asked what will happen to teachers of underperforming students, answers they will simply be fired. (Four of the five judges are teachers, and getting them to accept this argument may be an uphill battle.)

There is a much better reply to both of these arguments: “the test results will allow us direct extra help to needy students and teachers alike.” But the Aff does not present it. The Neg keeps reminding the audience of the bad consequences of these two rather harsh remedies and in my opinion carries this issue.

Similarly, Neg carries N3, that the real problems in education lie elsewhere. In rebuttal the Neg emphasizes the Aff will apply additional resources to the classroom, not to the families. Aff notes that many individuals overcome poverty, poor home life and skipped breakfasts to thrive in school, but say nothing to counter the broader argument connecting these factors generally to poor educational outcome. Certainly there are always exceptions, but they often prove the rule. Again the Aff misses a more effective reply, that aid could as easily be directed to the entire child as to the classroom, once they are identified. So Neg carries a second issue and my vote.

Missed Argument

Underlying the debate are two major flaws in the Affirmative case that neither side mentions but certainly influence the result. First the Affirmative assumes the benefits follow from the plan, i.e. that logically if you hold students back until they pass, incentivize the teachers by evaluating them against their students' performance and direct funding based on negative results, the result will be better educated graduates. But no evidence is presented to support this, and I believe this helps open the door to the

³ See my Coach's Notes for October 12, 2013 on the CDA web site.

Negative solvency arguments, especially tagging the Aff as a re-hash of No Child Left Behind.

Second, while A1 argues that poor performance is due to standards that are too low, nothing ties the problems in education to a lack of a common standard (other than the Aff cited need for a minimum standard to keep Mississippi students from appearing as superstars). Further, as the Aff clearly states, the benefits in A2 and A3 follow from holding students back, holding teachers to account and spending (presumably more) money, not from common standards. These are all things that are or could be done in the status quo without the adopting the resolution.

We say the Aff case lacks inherency: it is not clear why the status quo—with a combination of individualized standards, more accountability and more money—would not solve the problem as well, assuming the Aff solvency arguments are true. The Neg does use these arguments, so they don't count against the Aff. But I believe most judges and debaters listening to the debate will feel there is something missing and wonder whether the Aff has proven their case, even if neither side articulates this particular argument.

Lessons to Be Learned

Always ask yourself, “What are we supposed to be talking about?” This debate was not about the resolution given in the packet, but rather something along the lines of, “Resolved: the US should strictly enforce grade promotion and teacher performance evaluation standards.” A Negative that notes the Affirmative is not supporting the resolution at issue should win the round easily, and would have won my ballot on that basis had they presented the argument.

But you need to consider the entire judging pool. There are some judges, especially in national competition, who will simply vote Neg because the Aff hasn't presented a prima facie case supporting the resolution. You may feel this injects too much of the judge into the round, especially if the Neg doesn't raise the issue, and I would agree. But the judge's decision is final.

Most judges are willing to accept whatever the two teams choose to debate. Here the two sides tacitly agreed to debate a topic that was related to the resolution, but not quite on point. The issue allowed room for either side to prevail and the debate was interesting, informative and well-argued. Sometimes you judge the cases you have, not the cases you would like to have (apologies to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld). This is what I did, and what I do as a rule, because I don't believe in inserting myself into the issues.

Some judges, especially inexperienced judges, will grant the Affirmative great leeway. They may not understand the argument that the Aff case is really not on point, or they may not understand that argument is fatal to the Aff. So the wise Neg will argue thusly: “The Aff case (or contention or benefit or whatever) isn't related to the resolution for the following reasons... But even if you feel it does support the resolution, here are reasons why you should not accept it...” Better be safe than sorry.

Note that I wouldn't describe this as a **topicality argument**. The Aff definitions track to the concept of “common academic standards” as per the Common Core discussed in the

packet. The debate was simply “extra-topical” (as in extra-terrestrial) in that most of the plan, advantages and disadvantages were outside of the resolution.

One way to recognize extra-topical issues is to ask another question, “Can I counterplan this?” The First Negative could have stood up in his Constructive and said:

Our counterplan is to require all school systems to eliminate social promotion, strictly evaluate teachers based on the performance of their students, and direct additional Federal funding to the worst performing schools. Since this is the heart of the Aff plan and the source of all the benefits they presented, the Aff has demonstrated that our plan will succeed. But, we will leave States and localities to continue to set classroom standards as they see most appropriate to their local conditions. So our counterplan is superior to the Aff in that it addresses local conditions and needs, while, as the Aff has presented, solves America’s education problems.

The Neg counterplan does not require adopting the resolution so it is valid, and I don’t see a flaw in this attack.

The second less is that debate is always about interpretation: not just what you say, but how you frame it. Suppose the Affirmative had used the following definition of the resolution:

We define the resolution to mean that all schools in the United States should be required to end social promotion and to strictly evaluate their their staff based on the performance of their students as measured by independently developed standardized tests. In other words, our “common academic standards” are focused on the consistent enforcement, while leaving States and localities free to develop teaching standards and curricula as they see fit.

The difference here is that rather than mandating detailed national standards for course material like Common Core, the Aff is mandating a common disciplinary approach to dealing with failing students and poor teachers. I think it can be argued that this is a valid interpretation of the resolution and, more important, an interpretation that CDA coaches and judges can be persuaded to accept. It may not be what the packet is primarily about, but the debate is supposed to be about the resolution, not the packet.

You might say that this case still would have fallen to the Neg arguments presented in this debate. But they would not have had a fatal flaw in their case for another Neg to find. And if they had focused on this interpretation which emphasizes enforcement when they developed the case, they might have been more likely to come up with the more constructive replies to the Negative attack that I suggested above.