



JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

Danielle Smith, a junior at Digital Harbor High School, listens as Baltimore Urban Debate League members make their cases.

A student competition where every word counts

By LAURA LOH
SUN STAFF

For a few minutes yesterday, Dayvon Love was running to be the next president of the United States, and the students in Room 321 of Digital Harbor High School were the voters he was trying to win over.

Gleaming from behind a podium in a white suit and black tie, the Forest Park High senior outlined his plans to boost the economy and reduce the nation's budget deficit.

"The first issue we need to fix is

the loss of jobs," Dayvon said, his voice booming and confident. "Next, what I propose is to increase taxes on the top 2 percent. ... There's no reason we should have an upper class that has all the money."

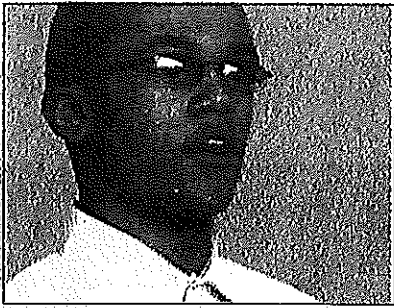
No sooner had Dayvon finished his five-minute speech than his rival in the mock-presidential debate pounced.

"How much money will this bring in, to tax the upper 2 percent? Give me a number," demanded Adam Jackson, a junior from Walbrook High Uniform Services Academy.

Dayvon was cornered. Students in the audience chuckled, enjoying the confrontation. But in the manner of a good politician, he rallied and retorted: "Enough to get us out of a deficit."

The exchange took place during the first of three debates held yesterday morning by the Baltimore Urban Debate League, an organization made up of teams from 26 city high schools.

The debate league's 400 or so members spend afternoons and weekends doing [See Debate, 4B]



"Candidate" Adam Jackson spells out his economic proposals.

President Bush and Sen. John Kerry go head to head over U.S. policies — and so do about 400 local high school students who participate in the Baltimore Urban Debate League.



Dayvon Love waits for a chance to respond to his "rival candidate."

Local debate team competitors learn to make every word count

[Debate, from Page 1b]

research on debate topics, practicing debate techniques and competing in tournaments.

The league, known as BUDL (pronounced "boodle"), organized the mock-presidential debate to help students make connections between their skills and the political process.

Pam Spiliadis, the league's executive director, said she would like to see students transfer their debate skills into community activism. Her husband, Andreas, who helps train the debate teams, said the students have been dissecting the recent debates between President Bush and Sen. John Kerry.

"They clearly are looking at [the debates] now from a different standpoint, because they're having to get up and give these speeches" themselves, Andreas Spiliadis said.

Hot-button issues

For the three pairs of students from Digital Harbor, Forest Park and Walbrook high schools who debated yesterday, the hot-button election topics were the economy, the environment and foreign policy.

At times, the debaters sounded like more blunt, pared-down versions of their counterparts in the real presidential campaign.

Ashlee Avery, a fast-talking Forest Park senior, tried to win over the audience by proposing a vision of collaboration among nations. "That's what's wrong with the world right now: We're not caring about each other," she said, adding that the United States should stop acting unilaterally in Iraq and do more to end the crisis in Sudan.

Her opponent, Donnell Ricks, seemed to relish his counterattack.

"I will worry about you before we worry about anybody else," the Digital Harbor junior told his fellow students. "She cares about Iraq or somebody in Sudan before she worries about one of you."

Although the topics were sophisticated, the teenagers kept the discussions in the realm of the familiar. A popular strategy was using education as a problem-solver.

'Education is key'

Deverick Murray, a senior at Digital Harbor, argued that education was the most powerful tool to protect the environment. "Education is key," he said. "People can't save what they don't understand."

When his rival, Walbrook High's Mirraaj Abdal-Rahim, threw her support behind better

anti-pollution laws, Deverick fired back with a series of questions to prove his point.

"If you didn't learn about debate, could you stand here today?" Deverick asked.

"Yes, I could. Debate is just arguing."

He tried again: "If you didn't know that fire burned you, could you keep from getting hurt?"

When she balked, the audience got impatient. "Just answer the question," someone called out.

"Maybe not," Mirraaj answered, a hint of defeat in her voice.

After the debate, Mirraaj flopped into her seat.

She later explained that she was tired of arguing against debaters who used education as a solution for everything, as one team did last year.

Erin Scofield, a Digital Harbor sophomore in the audience, said he felt it didn't matter who won the debates. He said that losing — which he did a lot as a freshman on the debate team last year — doesn't make debate any less exciting.

"If they win, they win," he said. "If they lose, they can try again."

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