

MOBTOWN BEAT

EDUCATION

ARGUING THE POINT

CAN DEBATE LEAGUES WORK WHERE CONVENTIONAL SCHOOL REFORMS DON'T?

FEW WOULD ARGUE THAT Baltimore's beleaguered public schools need more than standardized tests to spur better academic achievement among city youth. But debate leagues—long associated with the croquet-playing, tea-and-crummet set—don't readily come to mind as a likely solution.

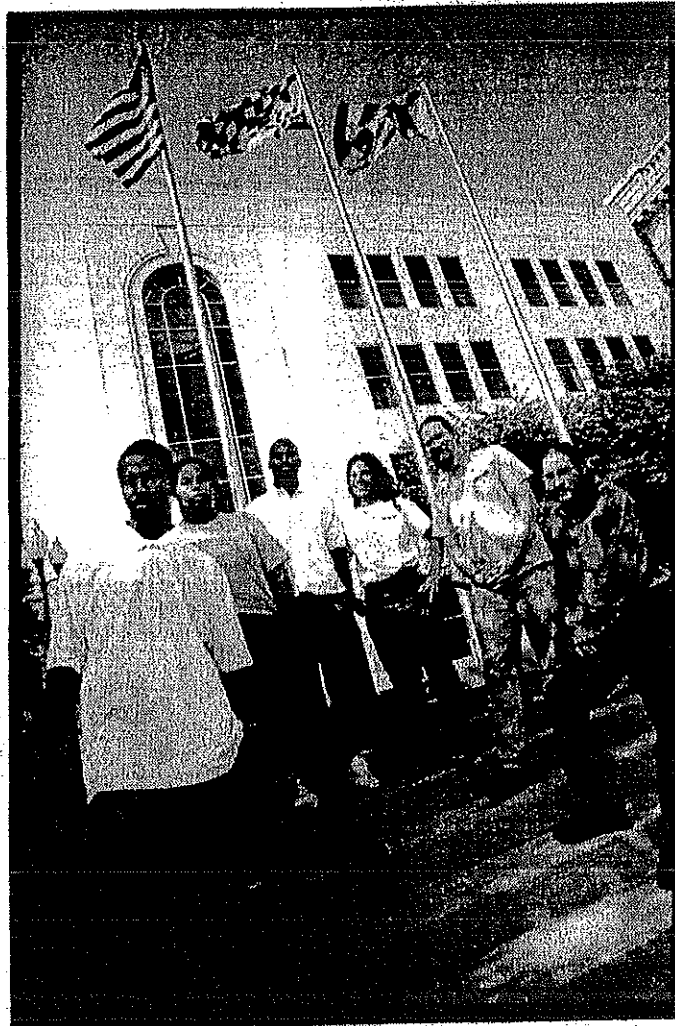
The Baltimore Urban Debate League (BUDL) is out to change that perception. Founded by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in 1999 and largely funded by the Baltimore-based nonprofit, BUDL is run collaboratively by OSI, the Baltimore City Public School System, Towson University, the Berkley Foundation at Atlanta's Emory University, and the Fund for Educational Excellence. Its goal is to help kids boost not just their smarts but their self-confidence. Toward that end, BUDL has spent the last two years recruiting high school kids who, despite poor academic performance or problem behaviors, show signs that they can learn to grasp the finer points of public-policy initiatives and social or economic reforms.

"There are kids who fade to the back of the room because maybe their reading skills are not too good ... but they have that *something* that shows they have not given up hope," BUDL coach Andreas Spiliadis says. "The educational system hasn't treated kids too well for the last 10 years, and yet despite that you see kids who you know are just brilliant."

A literature teacher at Forest Park High School in Northwest Baltimore, Spiliadis, like other coaches, stays on the lookout for kids who have what it takes to win scholarships to the nation's 78 colleges and universities that offer speech and debate programs. That the program gives students an incentive to improve their academic performance, he says, is what helps BUDL "operate on the level of school reform."

Until a couple decades ago, Baltimore high schools routinely offered debate as an extracurricular activity. But in recent years, as the city tried out assorted reform schemes, such programs dwindled, then vanished. Pam Johnson, head of the school system's Office of Development and External Relations, says specifics on when or why debating was eliminated are sketchy, but "with the number of changes and reorganizations over the years, we didn't have persons who could nurture the programs and stay the course."

Today, in exchange for a shot at college—or maybe just a chance to stay off the streets—BUDL members log some 25 hours a week outside regular class time, cruising academic or government Internet sites and poring over newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. They study expert opinion regarding United Nations human-rights policies, education-reform initiatives, and gun-control laws. Then, once a month dur-



THE BATTLE IS JOINED: (FROM LEFT) STUDENT DEBATERS DEITRICK GOODWIN, SHAWNTIA DIGGS, AND DEREK DAUGHTON, PROGRAM COORDINATOR PAM SPILIADIS, PROGRAM MANAGER CHRIS BARON, AND COACH ANDREAS SPILIADIS

ing the school year, they square off against their peers, arguing the pros and cons of a given topic. Superior research and verbal acumen win trophies, medals, certificates, and all-important bragging rights.

OSI, an arm of the philanthropic Soros Foundation, which funds social and economic programs aimed at helping poor and otherwise marginalized populations, launched its first urban debate league in New York in 1997. It has since spawned a dozen others, including BUDL, and together the leagues operate in 100 inner-city high schools nationwide. As with the other debate programs, OSI has been the financial backbone for BUDL, fronting \$500,000 a year to cover the costs of things like group trips to summer debate camp at Emory University and the salary of full-time BUDL coordinator Pam Spiliadis (Andreas Spiliadis' wife). For its part, the school system pays a \$1,700 annual stipend to each of BUDL's 26 debate coaches and provides students with bus transportation to meets. Schools officials say they also plan to give participating schools more Internet-wired computers.

Entering its third school season, BUDL

has grown to 300 students spanning 17 of Baltimore's 27 public high schools. Program officials say it's too soon to measure the long-term academic impact it's having on students, but they contend early signs point in the right direction. "Debate might help accelerate how many go on to college, or it helps transform kids who weren't thinking about college at all," says Towson University speech and debate professor Chris Baron, who schedules BUDL tournaments as a volunteer. "There is certainly testimony for how many were pushed over the edge [toward college] because of debate."

Derek Daughton, 17, who graduated in June from Chesapeake High in Essex but spent most of his high school days at Baltimore's Lake Clifton-Eastern High, says BUDL opened doors for him. Daughton first heard about the league through his 10th-grade political-science teacher. At the time, he says, he had "no idea what debate really was. I thought it was just arguing." But after two weeks at Emory, he was hooked.

"I discovered that whether you win or lose in debate, you learn about your world and what's going on around you," Daughton