

September 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Jacobi, A. J. (2010). Advocating high school speech communication education: Sowing stronger seeds for the future. In D. Cronn-Mills, & L. Schnoor (Eds.), *Conference Proceedings: National Developmental Conference on Individual Events 2010* (pp.121-122). Minnesota State University, Mankato.

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## Advocating High School Speech Communication Education: Sowing Stronger Seeds for the Future

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### Abstract

This paper presents a case for the necessity of speech communication as part of the core curriculum for secondary schools in the United States. In considering research-based pedagogical practices, as well as outcomes-based assessment, communication education focuses students' critical thinking and competency in the two most overlooked zones of literacy: listening and speaking. To that end, the National Communication Association (NCA) and its special interest organizations, such as those focused on forensics are urged to support efforts to require speech communication as a graduation requirement, to require those courses be taught by teachers certified in communication, and to encourage NCA member institutions to recruit communication majors to be licensed as secondary teachers.

### Introduction

In his book, *Global Achievement Gap*, author Tony Wagner discusses skills needed in the 21st century knowledge economy; how businesses are looking for employees who know how to think critically and solve problems. While the education sector has been rife with frenzy to prepare students to achieve on high stakes tests, President Obama's *Race to the Top* has pushed a reform agenda to answer a call by civic, higher education and business leaders: our schools are falling behind the rest of the world and something must be done.

June 2, 2010 will remain a landmark date in the annals of education. It was the day the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association launched the *Common Core Standards*, an initiative that seeks to normalize English Language Arts and Mathematics Standards across the country, and ensure college and career preparedness. What makes the standards so credible is that they weathered an extensive review process that included feedback from educators at all levels (including community colleges), and civil rights organizations. The standards are sensitive to students with disabilities and English language learners, and draw from the most effective models from across the world. The core standards define knowledge and skills aligned to college and work expectations, emphasize high-order learning, and are research and evidence-based. They do not identify specific content to be taught; that is left up to individual schools, districts, and states. As of August 11, 33 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core Standards ([corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)).

These standards mandate skills and understandings in speaking and listening that are cornerstones of forensic education, which tie the forensic discipline to the field of communication. The standards document explains: "New technologies have broadened and expanded the role that speaking and listening play in acquiring and sharing knowledge and have

tightened their link to other forms of communication." It continues later: "Technology itself is changing quickly, creating a new urgency for students to be adaptable in response to change." (p. 48).

In a nutshell, the Speaking and Listening Standards call for proficiency in collaborative discussions; pulling from multiple information media, and evaluating the credibility of those sources to make informed decisions and solve problems; evaluate a speaker's perspectives, and use of evidence and logic in argument; present information in an organized, clear manner, sensitive to purpose and audience; harness digital media in presentations to aid in understanding and interest; and adapt to a variety of contexts and tasks (49).

The central question decision makers in education must ask is this: if reading and writing are taught as formal core skills that are used across the curriculum, then why are listening and speaking often subsumed within other areas, and trivialized? The NFL has partnered with the Elementary and Secondary Education Section of the National Communication Association (NCA) to propose a resolution at its legislative assembly in November that asks the NCA to lobby state and national education agencies to require a course in speech communication as a high school graduation requirement, and to require that those courses be taught by teachers licensed/certified in the field of communication. Additionally, the resolution asks that NCA member higher education institutions more aggressively recruit students into speech education licensure programs. The proposed resolution is featured in the appendix.

This is important from the forensics perspective, because traditionally forensic coaches most commonly emerged from the ranks of speech communication teachers, and with the dearth of teachers licensed in that field, schools now struggled with recruiting new coaches. Additionally, mandating education in this critical content area will create more demand. Forensic competition breeds motivation to succeed and improve, and the interscholastic tournament model creates an ongoing, multi-institutional assessment environment that is unlike any other content area. Students benefit from traveling and building cultural literacy while encountering people from diverse walks of life and experiences.

When discussing mastery of learning, current practice in pedagogy centers on two core principles: objectives and outcomes. Objectives describe intended achievement of specific tasks as dictated for an entire group, whereas outcomes describe measurable success in a broader sense as experienced by each individual. While those cynical may complain that this is merely an exercise in semantics, the inherent connotation represents a paradigm shift, and one for which we must take note. Outcomes require assessment,

the means by which decision makers understand the relative value a program provides.

At the National Developmental Conference on Individual Events, held August 6-7, 2010, several collegiate directors of forensics discussed the importance of assessment as it pervades the accreditation process for their institutions. This process involves peer review and self study as part of larger strategic planning institutions – and several organizations and corporations today – undergo to ensure achievement of desired outcomes. Measurement of these outcomes directly affects job performance evaluations and informs decisions made within the institution. Devising assessable outcomes gives a forensics advisor a formidable tool for defending added value a speech and debate program offers a school. With tighter budgets and accountability, forensic sponsors must be proactive in establishing outcomes and assessing those on a regular basis.

Dr. Kattie Grace of Hastings College in Nebraska developed an impressive approach to measuring the cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes of her forensics program that includes specific goals for everything from recruitment and retention to individual tournament success to competition preparedness (K. Grace, personal communication, August 6, 2010). This illuminates the important benefits forensics provides beyond even the obvious cognitive skills of critical thinking and linguistic prowess. The social benefits of the activity do, indeed train youth for leadership as the NFL motto suggests, and those are just as important as the higher-level skills speech and debate engender.

The NCA moved its headquarters of operations to Washington, D.C. to facilitate advocacy efforts, including lobbying of government agencies. While resolutions examining torture and similar social issues are noble in their intent, those measures often fail passage at the NCA legislative assembly, because their communication focus is not apparent. While the NCA is dominated by higher education institutions, scholar members are encouraged to embrace the importance proper secondary education holds in preparing students for further student in communication, as well as recruiting potential majors to the field in the future.

#### References

- (2010). *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Common Core State Standards Initiative.  
<http://www.corestandards.org>  
 Wagner, T. (2008). *The Global Achievement Gap*. New York: Basic Books.

#### Appendix

##### **Proposed Resolution Regarding High School Speech as a Graduation Requirement**

Whereas, The National Communication Association serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, the NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems; and

Whereas, The venue in which all students are exposed to communication and communication instruction and in which all students may benefit from the Mission of the NCA is the elementary and secondary level of education in this country; and

Whereas, The fifty states have differing policies regarding the requirement of communication instruction in the elementary and secondary schools, with only a few states either requiring a course in communication in order to graduate from high school or have standards which focus on communication; and

Whereas, Licensure to teach communication has declined in the fifty states; and

Whereas, The NCA Strategic Plan 2010-2015 states as its third goal that it will support disciplinary pedagogy through three objectives: 1. Increase resources for communication course development, 2. enhance resources for developing instructional practice, 3. increase dissemination of communication pedagogy beyond the discipline, and as Goal 2, Disseminate knowledge about communication through its second objective, improve public understanding of communication research, the NCA stands committed to improving the state of elementary and secondary communication education; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the National Communication Association actively pursue the implementation of a required communication course for graduation from all secondary schools in this country and that it promote the enhancement of communication offerings throughout the K-12 curriculum and that it strongly recommend that such courses be taught by communication-trained professionals.

Respectfully submitted,  
 Jean Ann Streiff, Elementary and Secondary Education Section  
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