

Minutes for MFL Board meeting on May 7, 2005
Milton Academy

The meeting was called to order at 1:20 pm by the president, Mark McNeil.

Board members present: Joyce Albert, Beena Koshy, Deanie Goodman, Lisa Honeyman, Mark McNeil, Debbie Simon (briefly) and PJ Wexler.

Also present: Lynne Coyne, Sarah Donnelly, Nicole Serrano and Chris Sheldon.

This was a special meeting of the board to address issues regarding the qualification process for debate events to the State Championship tournament. Discussion extended to other issues regarding debate in Massachusetts, with a special focus on Policy Debate.

After considerable discussion, the board unanimously voted to approve the following requirements regarding debate for the 2005-2006 season:

- 1. The MFL will provide at least 4 tournaments at which students may earn bids in all debate events. (This does not mean that all events must be offered at the same 4 tournaments, just that there will be at least 4 opportunities in each event at which students may earn bids.)*
- 2. Students can earn a bid in a debate event by placing in the top 30% of entries, with a minimum of 8 bids granted in each event at each tournament.*
- 3. Debate students need one bid to qualify for the State Championship Tournament.*
- 4. Every MFL member school will receive 4 wild card entries in Policy Debate plus two additional wild cards to be used in LD and/or PFD. Wild cards can be awarded to students who have not earned a bid for States. However it is STRONGLY encouraged that students awarded a wild card in debate have debated in at least one MFL tournament during the season.*
- 5. Schools may use student judges in novice debate events provided that the students are at least 3rd year debaters.*
- 6. We will revisit this policy at the end of the 2005-2006 season to evaluate its effectiveness.*

The board voted unanimously to define novices in debate in this manner:

After a student enters a debate event at a second tournament, he/she loses novice status for the following academic year in all debate events (LD, PFD and Policy.)

General outline of discussion follows.

Mark McNeil (MM) opened the meeting with a general question about what the purpose of the MFL was. He asked, "If a school pays dues and joins the MFL, what do they expect of the league?"

Various individuals suggested that the league

- sets standards for events and tournaments
- provides tournament oversight to assure consistency and fairness
- provides for an appeals process
- provides a place for invitations to be posted so that everyone knows where to find information

A number of significant issues emerged with regards to debate in the MFL.

1. There are not enough schools participating in Policy Debate to run tournaments with enough judges and teams to provide for satisfactory competition and fair judging. (There are only 6 schools in the MFL that currently enter students in Varsity Policy Debate.)
2. There are not enough tournaments offered during the season at which debate students can earn bids to State Finals, especially considering many programs choose to send students to TOC qualifying tournaments rather than MFL tournaments that fall on the same weekends.
3. It is important for local schools to support the local league to improve quality of competition within the state so that students/schools that can't afford to travel, or choose not to travel, still have tournaments within the state that are worth attending.
4. Local teams rely on hosting tournaments to raise money. MFL schools need to support each other in this effort. If schools offer events and buy trophies for them, other schools need to bring students to the tournaments.
5. Policy Debate programs are angry and do not feel heard by the MFL board.

With these issues in mind, we held discussion of the bid process to States. It was generally agreed that the standards for IE's and debate events did not need to be the same. Sarah Donnelly (SD) reminded us that quite a few years ago Congress was a very small event and the league took steps to increase participation by modifying the bid process. She suggested that one reason Congress grew was because all MFL sanctioned tournaments were required to offer it. MM added that PFD and LD have been offered at more MFL tournaments and thus more students have begun to participate. Those events do not seem to be having the same participation issues that Policy Debate seems to be having.

Lynne Coyne (LC) expressed concern that many debate schools are too small (physically) to offer all debate events. She said that some schools may choose to forgo MFL sanctioning rather than meet the requirement that all MFL sanctioned debate tournaments must offer all debate events.

SD suggested that by limiting entry sizes perhaps that issue could be addressed. At the Holly tournament (at Natick in December) they have had to limit entries in order to accommodate all MFL IE events plus the special events they choose to offer and it has worked.

Lisa Honeyman (LH) suggested that maybe schools could pair up, one offering PFD and LD and another offering Policy so that all events are offered, but not necessarily at the same place or on the same weekend.

MM pointed out that even though Sacred Heart has offered Policy Debate at the Heartbreaker Tournament during the past two years, no one registered for that event. He said they will offer all debate events again this year (on a date separate from the speech events) if debate teams will come.

Acton-Boxborough has expressed interest in hosting the Hall of Fame tournament this year. That school is large enough to offer all speech and debate events on the same date.

LC said that Lexington can offer all debate events at both the Little Lex and Big Lex tournaments if necessary.

PJ Wexler (PW) said that if there was interest, Needham could host a debate tournament offering all debate events as well.

LC suggested that perhaps results from scrimmages could be counted towards the bid process. We discussed this for a little while and reached no conclusion.

With a commitment from the league to offer all debate events at at least 4 tournaments, we proceeded with discussion about what the bid process should look like.

Nicole Serrano (NS) spoke for many of the debate coaches who were not present at the meeting. She remarked, "The decided sentiment among all Policy coaches is that we don't need a qualification process for States." She pointed out that some debate programs chose not to participate in States as a protest to the system that was instituted for the 2004-2005 season and would probably do so again if there was still a bid requirement next season. She said that Policy schools were so upset that they are ready to remove themselves from the MFL and form their own league.

We discussed what kind of qualification process would be appropriate, if one were to exist. Joyce Albert (JA) suggested that we set some standards and then waive them until such a time as participation in debate increased to a level that would allow for a reasonable bid process. She pointed out that the league needs to set some standards, but also needs to be reasonable about how they are applied. "The MFL needs to stand for something."

There was discussion about whether or not there should be a State Championship tournament for an event with such limited participation. NS commented that schools depend upon coming home with a title to ensure funding.

LH pointed out that when congress was small, the way the league dealt with it was to require all MFL tournaments to offer the event (referring back to SD's earlier observation) and to allow 4 wild cards in the event to encourage more participation at the State Finals tournament. It seems to have worked. Perhaps we could do something similar with Policy Debate until the numbers grow.

NS suggested 4 wild cards could be allowed in Policy Debate until such a time as we have some reasonable number of teams entered. Then we could cut back to two.

LC suggested that instead of placing at a tournament, maybe debate students should simply need to attend an MFL tournament once during the season to receive a bid.

LC brought up that an Urban Debate League was forming in Boston and the league would need to do some outreach to help students and coaches of new programs. This might be a way to encourage more participation in the events.

The judging requirement for Debate events at states was also an issue. Debate schools felt it was impossible to provide enough qualified adult judges to judge novice events. There was general agreement that varsity level students should be allowed to judge novices, as long as they are experienced enough. We agreed that a 3rd year debater possessed the necessary knowledge to judge novices.

LC brought up the issue of how to define novices. We discussed this for a long time. Evidently some students debate in one debate event as a novice for a year and then switch to another debate event and compete as a novice again. There was general agreement that the skill sets needed in all debate events are similar enough that students should be able to transfer them without too much difficulty. Students who switch events may not win in the new event right away, but they should be able to adapt in a reasonable amount of time. Novice status was intended to make it possible for brand new debaters to have some success before competing with more experienced students. Some were concerned that a student who entered only one debate tournament during his/her 9th grade year would lose novice standing without really gaining much experience. PW introduced a scenario where a student attended one debate tournament in one event and decided it wasn't for him. The following year he decided to try a different debate event, but had to enter the varsity division even though no skills were gained from attending a single tournament the previous year. In order to address this sort of situation, we decided that a student could enter a single tournament without losing novice status. But, once a student attended a second debate tournament, that became his/her novice season.

The board voted about a number of issues (results at beginning of this document) and then the meeting was adjourned at 3:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Honeyman
(Acting Secretary)