



DEBATING FOR DEMOCRACY 2012 LEGISLATIVE HEARING REQUEST FOR LETTERS TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL

OVERVIEW: Debating for Democracy (D4D)TM is a distinctive campus-based co-curricular program that represents the mission of Project Pericles (www.projectpericles.org) in action. On each campus, Periclean students research, develop, and advocate their opinions and positions on current public policy issues. The primary goal of D4D is to inspire and encourage all participants to become successful and resourceful advocates in their community.

On March 22 and 23, 2012, student leaders from each of the 29 participating Periclean colleges and universities are invited to attend the 2012 D4D National Conference at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York City. The conference will consist of workshops, keynote addresses, and panel discussions that will introduce the students to leading figures in civic engagement, education, environment, politics, public policy, and social entrepreneurship. One of the activities at the national conference will be a legislative hearing. The legislative hearing will allow students the opportunity to discuss their policy ideas with a panel of current and former elected officials and other public policy experts.

To participate in the legislative hearing and to encourage students to write their elected officials, Project Pericles is requesting an original letter to an elected official from groups (two or more students) at Periclean colleges and universities. Five of these letters from five different colleges will be selected by a panel of judges to be presented at the legislative hearing. **The two lead authors of the five finalist letters will travel to New York to present and defend their letter and its subject at the legislative hearing.**

ELIGIBILITY: In order to be eligible to participate in the legislative hearing and attend the D4D National Conference, a student must a) be a full-time undergraduate at one of the Periclean campuses; b) be a freshman, sophomore, or junior as defined by their college or university; and c) write and mail a letter to an elected official. **Students selected to participate in the legislative hearing will be asked to present proof that they are a freshman, sophomore, or junior during the Spring 2012 semester.**

SELECTION PROCESS: Students must submit their letter to their Project Pericles Program Director by Wednesday, February 1, 2012. The Program Director will review each letter and select the four strongest letters to forward to Project Pericles. Each college must email their package (Word or PDF) of up to four letters to Jan Liss jan.liss@projectpericles.org by 5 pm EST on Monday, February 6. The names of all of the students who worked on each letter must be sent to Project Pericles with the **two students** who played the leading roles in preparing each letter clearly identified. These students must be able to attend the conference in New York City on March 22 and 23. All letters should be mailed by the students to the appropriate elected official by February 6.

A committee consisting of people with significant experience in public policy will review the submitted letters using the criteria below. Based on this review, Project Pericles staff will select the five finalist teams. By February 16, the announcement of the five finalist teams will be shared with the Periclean campuses. Project Pericles will contact the two students from the five finalist teams to arrange for them to attend the National Conference on March 22 and 23.

JUDGING CRITERIA: The evaluation of each letter will rest on the students' success at conducting high quality policy analysis and research; clarity of presentation; and adherence to the rules detailed in the Letter to an Elected Official Guidelines (pages 3-4). The five letters that do the best job of meeting the following criteria will be selected to be presented at the legislative hearing:

1) Policy Analysis and Research: The most important aspect of the letter is the quality of the analysis and research, which determines 80% of the evaluation. The evaluation will rest on each team's success at identifying a federal or state policy problem in their letter, proposing a solution to the problem they identified, and conducting and interpreting research to bolster their letter.

- Does the letter identify one public policy problem to be addressed and explain how this problem impacts the students?
- Does the letter recommend one legislative solution? Is the legislative solution feasible economically and politically?
- Does the letter contain logical judgment and analysis?
- Does the letter focus on a federal or state public policy issue that impacts the students and their community?
- Does the proposal demonstrate the use of primary and/or secondary resources to bolster their argument?
- Does the letter demonstrate an understanding of the historical context of the problem and solution being discussed?

2) Clarity of Presentation: Although the ability of the students to prepare a letter that meets all of the criteria discussed in the previous section is important, the clarity of the letter will also be considered. This section is worth 20% of the total evaluation.

- Is the written material clear and grammatically correct?
- Is the letter effective in communicating the significance of the problem and the solution?

AWARD:

- The ten lead authors from the five finalist teams most responsible for writing each of the five letters will attend the 2012 D4D National Conference at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York. Project Pericles will pay for the transportation, hotel, and meals for the ten students.
- Project Pericles will provide a \$3,000 award to the students at the college that submits the best letter to an elected official as determined by the panel of judges during the legislative hearing. In consultation with Project Pericles, the students can use this money to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and workshops. Teams that have won this award in the past have travelled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Members of Congress and their staffs to discuss the issues raised in their letters. The four semi-finalist teams will each receive a \$500 award that can be used to fund advocacy and education activities including lobbying trips and workshops.
- Project Pericles staff will work with the winning team and the semi-finalist teams to develop their advocacy and education activities.

IMPORTANT DATES:

February 1, 2012 — All letters to an elected official are due to the Project Pericles Program Director. Program Directors may set an earlier deadline. Students should consult with their Program Director to confirm this deadline.

February 6, 2012 — Each college or university must submit up to four letters to an elected official to Project Pericles by 5:00 pm EST. A copy of the letter must also be mailed to the appropriate U.S. Senator, U.S. Representative, State Senator or State Representative.

February 16, 2012 — By this date, a panel of experts will review the letters and five teams (of two students) will be selected for the legislative hearing. All Periclean campuses will be notified.

March 22 and 23, 2012 – 2012 D4D National Conference and Legislative Hearing at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York City.

LETTER TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL GUIDELINES

“Letters are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.”

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Many federal and state policy issues are suitable for this letter. Possible issues include:

*Campaign Finance * Climate Change * Federal Budget Deficit * Funding for Higher Education (Grants and Loans)
Gun Control * Immigration * K-12 Education * Pension Reform * U.S. Involvement in Middle East*

In the letter, students must identify one national or state public policy problem to be addressed and analyze how this problem impacts them personally, people in their community, people in their state, and, if a federal issue, people across the United States. In the letter, students must recommend at least one legislative solution. The students may recommend an original legislative solution (fund a NASA mission to Jupiter) or they can support or oppose a portion of a bill that is currently pending before Congress or their state legislature. In both cases, the students must support their solution with data and examples from at least two outside sources (books, journals, reliable internet sources) and discuss why their solution is better than other options. ***All outside research must be properly cited.***

Basic Letter Writing Tips

- The first step in writing a letter to an elected official is to identify the student’s elected official and their address. Since they will be urging their elected official to support or oppose a legislative solution, they will want to select the official who will be most responsive to their letter. The following website will help them identify their federal or state elected officials. <http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml>
- The student must address the letter correctly.
- The letter must begin with the phrase "Dear Representative (last name)" or Dear Senator (last name)".
- The letter should begin with a sentence that tells the elected official exactly what the student wants them to do. The first sentence in the letter on page 5 provides an example.
- The letter should contain the student’s mailing address so that the elected official can confirm them as a constituent and the elected official can write back.
- The student must sign and date their letter.

Guidelines: All letters must meet the following guidelines:

- The body of the letter may not exceed 1000 words (excluding footnotes). Please note that this is different from prior years.
- All primary and secondary sources used in preparing the proposal must be cited.
- The letter must be on a state or federal issue. Letters on local issues will not be eligible. The majority of local issues are also important federal and state issues.
- Two or more students **must** work on the letter.
- A copy of the letter must be mailed to each student’s elected official by February 6, 2012.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

The following resources will assist the student in writing their letter:

- A letter written by students at Carleton College that was selected as the winner at the 2011 D4D Legislative Hearing appears on pages 5-7. **This letter is an excellent model.** The five letters that were selected for the 2011 legislative hearing can be viewed at <http://www.projectpericles.org>
- THOMAS was launched in January of 1995, at the inception of the 104th Congress. The website provides detailed federal legislative information to the public. <http://thomas.loc.gov/>
- C-SPAN is a private, non-profit company, created in 1979 by the cable television industry as a public service. Its mission is to provide public access to the political process. The C-SPAN website contains a wealth of information including video of Congressional hearings related to a number of federal policy issues. <http://www.c-span.org>
- National Journal Group is the leading source of nonpartisan reporting on the current political environment and emerging policy trends. <http://www.nationaljournal.com/njonline/>
- The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. The NCSL website provides research and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. <http://www.ncsl.org/>

Letter to an Elected Official Example
(This letter was presented at the 2011 D4D Legislative Hearing)

Anna Fure-Slocum and Nick Welna
Carleton College
300 North College St.
Northfield, MN 55057

The Honorable John Kline
2439 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

February 6, 2011

Dear Representative Kline,

We write to urge you to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind, with an emphasis on greater student input and influence in the classroom and in the broader school structure. As you have previously stated, Democrats and Republicans hope to restructure the ESEA to improve student achievement, rather than simply to label our schools as failures.¹ We believe that some of the most promising educational innovations are taking place where students are given the opportunity to become active participants in their learning experience. Additionally, researchers and policy makers are discovering that students, who are at the center of education reform, can offer valuable feedback and guidance about how to serve them best. Rather than continuing to impose more unrealistic standards and rigid federal mandates, we hope that you will help our public education system to focus on meeting the needs and interests of its students.

Our desire for this change in education policy is rooted in our experiences as students and educators. From kindergarten to Carleton College, our most rewarding and useful learning experiences have been those that have encouraged us to be creative, to ask questions, and to direct our own learning. Now, as we prepare to become public school teachers, we are developing methods to engage and challenge students in similar ways. Anna directs an after-school program in nearby Faribault, Minnesota, focused on expanding college access for immigrant youth. Nick volunteers as a teaching assistant in a college access program for low-income and Latino students in our college's town of Northfield, Minnesota. Both of us have also worked as interns at innovative urban public schools that look beyond standardized definitions of proficiency to focus on meeting community needs. Through this work, we have been incredibly impressed with how responsible and excited students become when their ideas help guide the learning experience.

Standardized Education in the Current ESEA

In 2001, when the ESEA was last authorized as No Child Left Behind, both parties praised the law's commitment to make all students proficient in all subjects. Ten years later, however, too many schools across the country are struggling to make what the ESEA defines as adequate yearly progress toward total proficiency. President Barack Obama's administration has released a blueprint for reauthorizing the law that focuses on helping schools improve, rather than simply labeling them failures.² But much of the blueprint follows the federally imposed standardization seen in 2010's "Race to the Top" for education stimulus funds.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/us/politics/12education.html?_r=1&ref=nochildleftbehindact

² <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>

As you, sir, have noted, many local leaders and educators have begun to complain that “the federal government has gotten too deeply entrenched in the schools.”³ Your leadership as the chair of the House of Representative’s Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee has already earned you accolades such as the “Star of Education,” so we believe that you can lead the push to reauthorize the ESEA with bipartisan measures to focus education reform on our students.⁴

Student-Centered Classrooms

The Obama administration’s blueprint for reforming the ESEA takes important steps away from the rigid standardization of the current educational system. As President Obama explained in his State of the Union address, “Our students don’t just memorize equations, but answer questions like ‘What do you think of that idea? What would you change about the world?’”⁵ Northfield, Minnesota, our local community, is home to two innovative schools that, rather than teaching to the test, are embracing this approach via student-centered curricula.

At Prairie Creek Community School, a K-5 charter school, students’ interests are the basis for lessons.⁶ One example of student-centered curricula is the “Village Project.” The youth at Prairie Creek create their own town, including a village government, the buildings, and the economic system. Through projects like these, students master practical applications of higher-order skills in social studies, math, and science. The reauthorized ESEA should encourage new assessments that better measure higher-order and interdisciplinary skills that schools like Prairie Creek develop.

The Northfield School of Arts and Technology (ARTech), another local charter school, offers students in grades 6-12 the opportunity to determine their own curriculum while still meeting standards for career and college readiness.⁷ Students explore their passions through critical thinking strategies and problem solving they have learned from the school. Recently, the Gates Foundation rewarded ARTech for their innovative approach to project-based learning with the EdVisions grant.⁸ The reauthorized ESEA should embrace these successful models of student-centered curricula with more local innovation grants.

Student-Centered Schools

Neither the current ESEA nor the Obama administration’s blueprint for reform recognizes that local students can help guide reforms. Researchers and educators, however, have successfully incorporated student input into their reforms. For example, kids can help adults with teacher assessment, because they understand who the best teachers are and why. The Gates Foundation recently found that students’ assessments of their teachers’ abilities – such as caring for students, challenging students, and controlling the classroom – produced ratings positively correlated with external evaluation criteria.⁹ Accordingly, the ESEA’s system of teacher assessment ought to include student surveys in the teacher evaluation process.

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/us/politics/12education.html?_r=1&ref=nochildleftbehindact

⁴ <http://kline.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=3§iontree=3>

⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>

⁶ <http://www.prairiecreek.org/>

⁷ <http://artech.k12.mn.us/>

⁸ <http://northfieldnews.com/news.php?viewStory=40023>

⁹ <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/college-ready-education/Documents/preliminary-finding-policy-brief.pdf>

Independent community groups have also harnessed students' knowledge to improve education policy. In our nation's capital, DC Voice interviewed high school students across the district to learn about how well their school was run and what needs were not being met. These interviews have helped reformers provide repairs, staffing, and professional development where and when they are most needed.¹⁰

The Philadelphia Student Union is also a model for community-based reform, working to equalize funding and staffing in the city's schools. Most notably, the student-led group helped create a new school, West Philadelphia High School, by designing small schools and curricula to meet the needs and interests of local students.¹¹ We hope the ESEA will better utilize the energy and insight shown in these examples by asking the "effective school quality review teams" that reform struggling schools to interview focus groups of students and to present their plans for reform to each school's student government.¹²

A Student-Centered ESEA

In its attempt to ensure that every child has access to a quality education, the ESEA has too often overlooked the unique qualities and insights of the students that it serves. After reauthorization, the ESEA should encourage schools to take student voices into consideration when creating their curricula and policies. This should include:

- Innovation grants for schools with student-centered curricula,
- Assessments that measure higher order skills that are developed through project-based learning,
- Teacher assessment that takes student feedback into account, and
- Review teams that collaborate with students to find solutions for struggling schools.

Representative Kline, if we hope to better meet the needs of our students, the ESEA must include them in the conversation. Please put forward a law that advances the countless possibilities of American public education for each individual student. We urge you to reauthorize the ESEA with a focus on students' potential to help improve our classrooms and schools.

Thank you for your attention and your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

Anna Fure-Slocum, '12

Nick Welna, '12

¹⁰ <http://www.dvoice.org/>

¹¹ <http://home.phillystudentunion.org/>

¹² <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>