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MEMORANDUM

TO: School District Superintendents

FROM: Jacob Oliva

DATE: February 28, 2020

SUBJECT: Florida Civics and Debate Initiative

Contact Information:

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DPS: 2020-24

On January 27, 2020, Governor DeSantis announced a \$5 million grant from the Marcus Foundation to enrich civic literacy in K-12 schools through speech and debate programs. The Florida Department of Education is pleased to announce the creation of Florida Civics and Debate Initiative (FCDI), which is designed to promote critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills across the state by increasing students' access to competitive speech and debate teams. Beth Eskin, a nationally recognized debate coach with two decades of experience coaching and growing debate programs in the Central Florida area, has been named FCDI Director.

The high-level critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills fostered through competitive speech and debate supplement education in ways that transcend what traditional classroom experiences provide. Speech and debate students have better career and college placement, are more mature, and have greater reading retention and analytical skills. Specifically, research shows that:

- 98.5% of debate students attend college, and debate participation increases the chance of being offered college scholarships (Billman & Christensen, 2008);
- Students who participate in debate score 25% higher than their peers on literacy tests (Mezuk, B., 2010);
- Academic debate improves performance at statistically significant levels on reading test scores, diminishes high-risk behaviors, and improves academic success and student attitudes toward higher education (Collier, 2004); and
- Debaters are significantly more likely to participate in the democratic process through voting, volunteerism and participating in social activism (Rogers, J.E., 2002).

We encourage your district to reap these profound benefits by participating in the FCDI.

JACOB OLIVA
CHANCELLOR OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

From June 2020 through June 2021, the FCDI will support the creation and development of 60 new middle and high school debate programs in 30 school districts with the goal of expanding to every public school in the state. Each school selected will receive membership in the National Speech and Debate Association including the supplemental resource package. Additional curriculum resources will be provided to programs as well as funding to help cover transportation to monthly regional competitions on weekends. In addition, each new coach will receive professional development related to competitive speech and debate programs and other assistance as appropriate.

Since the goal of the FCDI is to increase access to speech and debate programs so that more students are able to reap their benefits, district selection for initial participation will be prioritized based on Civics and U.S. History End-of-Course Assessment scores, socioeconomic and population demographics, and willingness to provide additional support to the growth of new debate programs. The department encourages participating schools to offer speech and debate courses to complement this new extracurricular, after school program.

If your district is interested in participating, here are the next steps:

1. Identify one middle and one high school in your district that may wish to participate.
2. Share this information with those schools' principals.
3. Identify 1-2 teachers in those schools who are interested in learning how to coach a speech and debate team. No prior debate experience is necessary.
4. Provide contact information by March 31, 2020, using this Google form:
<https://forms.gle/YNDKzouNnwc86EjC7>.

Thank you for considering and sharing this exciting opportunity to enrich the educational experiences of Florida students.

JO/aj