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Bellaire's debate team members Shanna Chu, 16, left, Jenny Fan, 16, Satish Vemuri, 17, and Chris Fan, 17, are in the "final four" of a national tournament in New York City on Saturday.

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'INTELLECTUALLY BRUTAL'

Bellaire debate team readies for national finals

Students going to competition for the third time in a row

By ERICKA MELLON

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Bellaire High School teacher Russell Rach talks about debate tournaments as though they're football games. The arguments, he says, are "full contact," the matches "brutal."

"Intellectually brutal," that is.

And pardon the basketball metaphor, but a handful of Rach's students have made it to the "Final Four" of a respected national debate competition.

The battle — known more dryly as the National Public Policy Forum — takes place this weekend in New York City. This is the third straight year Bellaire students have made it to the finals.

"It's kind of like going to the Super Bowl back to back," said Rach, who has been a debate coach at Bellaire, in the Houston Independent School District, for four years.

Debate classes in high schools across the nation are becoming rarer, as districts cut funding for fine arts and try to cram in more time for core academic classes, said J. Scott Wunn, executive director of the National Forensic League.

Texas, he said, is one of a dwindling number of states that still requires students to take a speech or debate course in order to graduate.

"We feel strongly that debate curriculum is crucial to the development of our future leaders," Wunn said. "If speech education is not occurring across the curriculum — meaning in the English classrooms, the social studies classrooms — then where is it being taught?"

Googling not the answer

That brought Wunn to another question: Are today's Internet-dependent teenagers getting enough instruction on how to do good research? With so much information online, he said, students, whether they are involved with debate or not, spend less time in libraries digging through books and periodicals.

"I don't know that's all that bad considering the Internet is full of some great, credible resources," Wunn said. "But it does require effective skills in determining what quality evidence is."

And sometimes, as the debaters from Bellaire learned, the Internet doesn't hold all the answers.

In the first round of the National Public Policy Forum contest, all the teams had to write a 2,400-word paper arguing that the U.S. government should create a policy that substantially boosts the number of people participating in the Peace Corps or the military.

The Bellaire students decided to write about a reverse Peace Corps program from the 1960s that brought foreign nationals to the U.S. to volunteer, Rach said.

Google just didn't cut it.

"At one point," said Jenny Fan, one of the Bellaire debaters, "we went to the University of Houston library, and we had to look through archives. We learned to use the — I think it was microfiche. It was pretty old."

"Considering our type of learning today," the 16-year-old continued, "I think that was the first time in my life I'd actually gone to a library to do research."

The field trip paid off. Judges selected the Bellaire students' paper as one of the 16 best, out of more than 100 entries nationwide. The students then won another two rounds, against schools in Kansas and Hawaii.

Unlike most debate tournaments, which require students to present their cases orally, this contest emphasizes written arguments. The students e-mailed their papers to their competitors, who volleyed back a response.

Four going to NYC

In the finals, however, the top four schools will come face to face for an oral match in New York City. Four students will represent Bellaire: juniors Jenny Fan, Chris Fan (no relation) and Satish Vemuri and sophomore Shanna Chu. The tournament is administered by New York University and the Bickel & Brewer Foundation, an offshoot of a Dallas law firm.

Rach's team is getting in some last-minute practice this week. In the past, Bellaire got knocked out in the semifinals.

"The last time they lost on a heartbreaking 3-2 decision against the Florida school, Dreyfoos School of the Arts," Rach said. "But Dreyfoos is also back in the Final Four, so there is a potential for a rematch."

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