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Back of the Yards Spanish debaters win national championship, a first for Chicago



Winners of the 2025 Urban Debate National Championship en Espanol Wendy Depaz, 17, and Angel Tierrablanca, 16, hold up their trophies as their fellow students and faculty line the hallways at Back of the Yards College Prep in Chicago, April 11, 2025, to celebrate them and their team. This was the first time students from a Chicago high school won the Spanish-language title. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)



By **NELL SALZMAN** | nsalzman@chicagotribune.com | Chicago Tribune

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Ángel Tierrablanca and Wendy DePaz stood at the front of a jubilant group parading down the halls Friday morning at Back of the Yards College Preparatory High School wearing orange shirts and blaring Queen's victory anthem "We Are the Champions."

Last weekend, the two became the first-ever high school debaters in Chicago to win the Spanish-language title in the Urban Debate National Championship. Amanti Washington and Kate'lynn Shaw of Kenwood Academy won the English national championship.

The new Spanish debate program — a chapter of Debate en Español started in October at Back of the Yards College Prep — underscores the school's commitment to supporting dual language amid increased reticence towards bilingualism, made even harder by [local budget constraints](#). It was the first time a Spanish-language division was included at the national competition, hosted at Emory University in Atlanta.

DePaz moved to Chicago from Mexico three years ago, she said, and wanted to find an extracurricular program in Spanish.



"Joining this one allowed me to express myself without being afraid of what others might think," she said.

Mary Carmen Moreno, the school's vice principal, founded the Spanish debate program in partnership with Chicago Debates, a nonprofit that serves more than 1,000 middle and high school students across more than 50 schools and neighborhoods, primarily on the South and West sides. Chicago Debates has provided the trajectory-shifting activity of debate to communities and teachers for nearly 30 years.

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Tierrablanca and DePaz were successful despite the \$169,000 in total contract cuts the program faced this year after Chicago Public Schools scaled back its funding, according to Chicago Debates. The end of pandemic federal relief money in large part contributed to the district's fiscal cliff. The organization said it received \$320,000 in total and had to raise additional money on its own to make up for the gap.

CPS did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the cuts.

'We can take different perspectives'

But the Back of the Yards College Prep's Spanish-language debate program is growing in the face of slashed funding. The team had four members when it started last year, Tierrablanca said. By the next year, that number had doubled.

The 16-year-old said he likes the debate program because it allows him to be creative — to “try different things” and “shape arguments however you want.”

“We can take different perspectives, and there are different ways to argue your points,” he said, adding that he found this year's topic of climate change important.

Vice Principal Moreno said “political challenges” coming from President Donald Trump's public threats toward CPS programs that promote diversity, equity and inclusion might make it “challenging to tap a lot of the funding sources that we've been able to in the past.”

Trump issued a directive April 3 requiring some school districts to certify that they comply with federal civil rights laws by not operating programs to “advantage one's race over another.” CPS receives \$1.3 billion in federal funding. Over \$400 million is in grants under Title I, which targets students who fall below achievement standards.

"We're going to have to keep a close eye on how we protect our students and our families," he said.

Back of the Yards College Prep is one of three dual-language schools in the district and the only dual-language school on the South Side. "Dual language" instruction refers to academic programs taught in two languages rather than just English.

"We were determined to prove that dual-language education works, that it is necessary for our students to meet their needs, to be responsive to their academic needs and to make a space of belonging for all of our students," Moreno said of her school's triumphant duo.



A group photo is taken April 11, 2025, of the Back of the Yards College Prep debate team. The winners of the 2025 Urban Debate National Championships en Espanol were Wendy Depaz, 17, kneeling second from left, and Angel Tierrablanca, 16, kneeling. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

Bilingual education helps students not only develop linguistic skills, but also form "self-esteem and an appreciation of their own cultural background," according to Laura C. Chávez-Moreno, a researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her recent book, "How Schools Make Race," explores how schools implicitly and explicitly shape their students' concept of identity.

"Although the research shows bilingual education is a way better approach than the subtractive approaches, like English as a second language ... there is not the political will for schools to provide that type of education for students who are seen as unworthy — immigrant or Latino students," Chávez-Moreno said in a recent interview with the Tribune.

On March 1, Trump's administration sent out a press release designating English as the

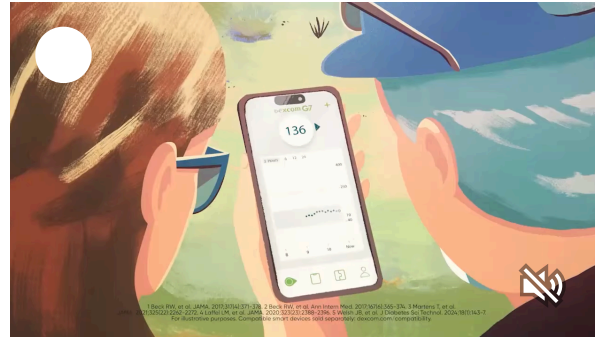
"To promote unity, cultivate a shared American culture for all citizens, ensure consistency in government operations, and create a pathway to civic engagement, it is in America's best interest for the Federal Government to designate one — and only one — official language," the administration said in the release.

CPS did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the cuts. The district said in a statement that to deal with a looming deficit, "CPS sought efficiencies and reductions in some programming costs. "Despite these reductions, and to be clear, CPS continues to provide for Chicago Debates to administer the program and ensure it remains in the participating schools," according to the statement.

On Friday morning, Tierrablanca and DePaz both said they wanted to go to college and that they hoped programs like Debate en Español would help them get there. They were able to tour Emory while competing in Atlanta.

They advocated for more Spanish-speaking opportunities, both in Chicago and nationally.

"I really like (debate) because we get to ... learn about Hispanic or global issues. It's also great to learn how to express yourself and receive feedback from others — to learn from each other," DePaz said.



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Tierrablanca said more students deserve the chance to "show what they can do in their own

"I think they'd appreciate having the resources to do what we did and explore something new."

Tierrablanca was proud, but a little camera-shy, he admitted.

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