

STUDENT CONGRESS

Nature & Purpose of Student Congress: A vital part of our governmental system is policy making through legislative assemblies. Student congress attempts to replicate the workings of an official legislature within the confines of a competitive speech activity. The purpose of a student congress is to formulate legislative bills and resolutions, debate them, and adopt or reject them by casting votes. A student congress can be composed of both a house and senate, or all representatives may form a unicameral or single house, legislature. A house has a presiding officer, elected by the delegates, to call on members to speak. Other congress officials include a parliamentarian to make final decisions on matters of parliamentary procedure, a timekeeper to keep speeches on time, a clerk to read bills and amendments, a judge to award points, and pages to deliver messages from one member to another.

Conducting the Contest: Speaking in legislative debate, or in student congress, is done within a structured environment of specific procedural rules known as parliamentary law. The attributes necessary to be a competent student congress member are attributes necessary to survive in the “real world” of politics, political science, and persuasion. In addition to practicing a variety of public speaking events, from oratory to extemporaneous to impromptu speaking, student congress calls on skills necessary for successful participation in discussions, debates, and parliamentary situations. An added flavor is provided by the fact that student congress mimics real-life legislative assemblies and presents its participants with an insight into some of the issues and problems that actually confront our lawmakers. Students must not only invent the argument and find the data to support it, but also must also understand parliamentary rules and the application of those rules in the student congress. They must be sensitive to the shifting weight of opinion within the group and be prepared to offset arguments that are given in opposition to their position. This activity allows students to extend the skills of extemporaneous speaking, debate, and interpersonal communication.

Popularity and Background: Student congress is one of the major events of the National Forensic League. Mock legislatures are also sponsored by many civic organizations, 4-H, Future Farmers of America, the American Legion through Boys’ and Girls’ State and Nation, Junior Statesmen of America, Youth-in-Government (sponsored by the YMCA), and Model United Nations.

Proposed Time Structures: Most practice and district congresses hold a one-day session; many others, such as statewide or invitational congresses, hold two-day sessions.

Sample Time Schedule for a One-Day Student Congress

8:00 am — 8:30 am	Registration and verification of entries
8:30 am — 11:30 am	Morning session, break for lunch
12:30 pm — 2:30 pm	Afternoon session
2:30 pm — 3:30 pm	Elections and Awards

Sample Time Schedule for a Two-Day Session

3:00 pm — 3:30 pm	Registration and verification of entries
3:30 pm — 7:30 pm	Session I

Second Day

8:30 am — 11:30 am	Session II, break for lunch
12:45 pm — 3:00 pm	Session III
3:30 pm — 4:30 pm	Joint meeting, elections, awards

Quote from a librarian — *Of all the students who use the school library for research—forensic students or otherwise—the ones most astute, most politically aware, and most knowledgeable about the techniques of research are the student congress competitors.*