



HOUSE BILL 268:

2026 Budget Technical Corrections - II, Sec. 3.26:

Competitive Speech Debate and Grant Program

2025-2026 General Assembly

Analysis of: S.L. 2026-61, Sec. 3.26

Date: September 8, 2026
Prepared by: Legislative Analysis
Division Staff

Section 3.26 of S.L. 2026-61 (House Bill 268) enacts Section 7.64 of S.L. 2026-41 (Senate Bill 257) and establishes the Competitive Speech and Debate Team Grant Program (Grant Program) for the 2026-2027 school year to allow public schools serving students in grades 9 through 12 to form competitive speech and debate teams to participate in speech and debate competitions. Any public school unit that has a school that serves students in grades 9 through 12 is eligible to apply for a grant to develop, maintain, or expand a competitive speech and debate team.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) must administer the Grant Program by developing and publishing an application process. Applications must contain a proposed budget for the speech and debate team. DPI is directed to determine the amount of each award up to a maximum of \$10,000 per team per school year and must award grants to the selected applicants by October 31, 2026.

Awarded grants can be used for any of the following purposes:

- To provide stipends for coaches. However, each team award can only include two stipends, one lead team coach stipend of up to \$2,500 and one assistant team coach stipend of \$1,500.
- To make payments associated with participation in a speech and debate league or competition.
- To travel to and from speech and debate competitions.

Speech and debate teams receiving funds through the Grant Program are required to participate in the Tarheel Forensic League and the National Speech and Debate Association.

If a student is enrolled in a school that does not offer a speech and debate team, the student is eligible to participate on the speech and debate team at the public school located geographically closest to where the student resides that has a team and is participating in the Grant Program. A student joining a team under this provision is responsible for transportation to and from the school where the team meets.

A school can enforce guidelines for student participation on the speech and debate team, such as academic performance requirements. Furthermore, a speech and debate team can conduct a selection process for the team as long as the student is able to participate in the selection process as if the student were enrolled in that school.

By May 15, 2027, DPI must report the following information to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee and the Fiscal Research Division:

- The public school units that received grants and the amount of each grant.
- A description of how the grants were used.
- The public school units that applied for grants but did not receive one.

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- The extent to which students participating in speech and debate programs funded by the Grant Program experienced measurable improvement in academic performance.
- Any other information DPI deems relevant to evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the Grant Program.

This section became effective July 1, 2026.