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Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Annessa Lopez of Skyline High School takes part in a weeklong debate camp in Oakland.

SCHOOLS

Return of debate teams is helping urban students find their voices

By Jill Tucker
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Gregory Belvin III doesn't look like the stereotypical star on a high school debate team.

He doesn't wear starched white shirts with ties or attend an elite private school where everyone goes on to college and then into politics

Learn more

Find information about the Bay Area Urban Debate League and how to support the program at baudl.org.

or high-paying careers.

Gregory, 17, is an African American kid living in Oakland, a city where boys like him are more likely

to go to jail or die than go to college.

Debate teams, more often than not associated with upper-crust academic settings, are seeing a revival among urban high school students, a positive trend seen by educators as a valuable tool to keep struggling students in school and

Debate continues on A10

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FROM THE COVER

Debate helps students find their voices

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on track to move on to higher academic achievement.

"It's one of the great tools to hook kids who are not being served by the current institutional model," said Eric Wilcox, a 12th-grade English teacher at San Francisco's Balboa High School.

Kids who like to talk a lot — often perceived as a negative in class — thrive in debate, he said. "I've seen lives profoundly changed."

College hopeful

It can be seen in Gregory's story.

"If I wasn't in debate, I'd probably be talking to military recruiters," he said. "I might have dropped out of high school."

Instead, the Skyline High School senior is researching colleges with competitive teams that will allow him to continue the artistic form of arguing that he began as a sophomore.

The move to bring debate teams back to local urban high schools began about three years ago, when the newly created Bay Area Urban Debate League started recruiting students.

Debate competitions and clubs had dissolved years or even decades earlier from many of those schools, but today about 350 students participate at 17 schools, with more added each year.

The organization uses a competitive format called policy debate, which differs significantly from a Lincoln-Douglas-style debate featuring two individuals taking turns speaking clearly and succinctly at podiums.

In a policy debate, two teams of two take turns presenting their arguments and counter-arguments on a specific topic within a set amount of time.

The debaters often speak as fast as they can to present as many salient points as possible during the time allowed. They cite long sentences from relevant research, their clipped delivery resembling a horse-race announcer or the guy who rattles off the legal disclaimers at the end of a radio commercial.

Rigorous preparation

The intensity requires physical training. Pre-debate drills include speaking with a pen in the mouth to encourage enunciation and reading sentences backward to keep from tripping over words.

Gregory, a pretty fast talker, is one of his team's best, al-



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Skyline High School alumnus Rashid Campbell, now a student at University of Oklahoma, judges a debate at the camp in Oakland.



Left: Annessa Lopez takes part in a debate on the last day of a camp sponsored by the Bay Area Urban Debate League at Oakland's Westlake Middle School. Above: A participant uses a timer to track a debate.

though his academic grades are mediocre.

"High school is not very appealing to me," he said. "Debate is a bright part to me in the institution."

For many young debaters, though, the correlation between participation in debate and higher test scores, grades and graduation rates appears to be strong, according to the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues.

African American males, who are most at risk of failing in school, are 70 percent more likely to graduate from high school when they participate in organized debate, according to a 2009 peer-reviewed study of the Chicago Debate League.

Rashid Campbell graduated from Skyline High School in Oakland and went on to college using his gift at debate as his ticket to the University of Oklahoma.

"It gave me a voice when other people wouldn't listen," he said.

That's invaluable to inner-city kids, who take that power and say, "Now I want to be a senator or president," said Campbell, who spent a week this summer coaching local teens during the summer institute.

About 45 Bay Area high school students participated in the weeklong camp at Westlake Middle School in Oakland, learning new skills

and competing against one another.

Should be required

Gregory, who was among them, said he thinks debate should be mandatory like Algebra I, both of which can foster critical thinking skills.

"People fall asleep in algebra," he said. "It's hard to fall asleep when you're talking out loud."

Debate teams found a way into urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s as the civil rights era blossomed, said Dmitri Seals, executive director of the Bay Area Urban Debate League.

But those programs faded in the subsequent decades,

"lost with every other extra-curricular activity other than sports teams," he said.

Ultimately, "urban kids thought the only way to excel was through sports," Seals said.

They're wrong, though, he said.

"The way you excel and get glory even socially should be, and can be, from your intelligence and your eloquence," he said. "Debate has been a channel to power for affluent young people for decades and decades and decades. We're opening that channel."

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