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**NEW STATE OF DEBATE:** Hundreds of Bay Area high school students are taking part in a national movement to bring the academically rigorous tradition of argumentation to urban areas



RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF PHOTOS

Mya Whitaker, left, and Oakland City Councilwoman Libby Schaaf get ready for an education debate Thursday in Oakland.

## In a league all their own

By Katy Murphy

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William Hampton, 16, describes high school debate as “the most elite of elite sports.” He and hundreds of other Bay Area students spend many a weekend and school holiday training for it — researching policy, crafting arguments, preparing rebuttals and, finally, going up against other teenagers who have been doing the same thing.

“I’m loving it, even though it’s like a job almost,” said Kwodwo Moore, a senior at Emery Secondary School who moved to the Bay Area from Philadelphia two years ago.

The Bay Area Urban Debate League is part of a national movement to bring the academically rigorous tradition to urban schools — an

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Rodney Brooks, left, chief of staff for Supervisor Keith Carson, and Kwodwo Moore, a senior at Emery Secondary School, take part in a debate.

### HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE

The Bay Area Urban Debate League has teams at six high schools in Oakland, four in San Francisco, one in Emeryville and one in Berkeley. For more information, go to the organization’s website at <http://baudl.org> or call 510-517-0069.

### MORE ONLINE

To read the Education Report blog, go to [ibabuzz.com/education](http://ibabuzz.com/education).

“Don’t throw any softball questions. They’re ready for the hard ones.”

— Perry Green, Bay Area Urban Debate League director



RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

Student debater William Hampton, 16, left, makes his point as Jillian Settle listens during an education debate Thursday at the Oakland law offices of Meyers Nave.

## Debate

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effort fueled by the 2007 film “The Great Debaters,” starring Denzel Washington. Oakland’s new teams launched in August 2008, just before the economic downturn began, but the league’s supporters managed to keep the fledgling program alive.

“It definitely helped our cause that there were so many debaters from back in the day that know how it changed their lives,” said Dmitri Seals, executive director of the Bay Area Urban Debate League.

The league has since grown from 24 students to about 350. A dozen schools in Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley and Emeryville now have debate teams, coached by teachers. This season, beginners are debating community and police relations in the context of the Occupy movement. Space explora-

tion and development are the issues at hand for their more advanced teammates.

Also this year, three of the league’s captains — Moore, Hampton and Greg Belvin, of Oakland’s Skyline High — have tested their proposals for a different subject, improving public education, in a series of roundtable discussions.

Last week, Moore and Hampton met in the Oakland law offices of Meyers Nave with a small group of community leaders, including Oakland City Councilwoman Libby Schaaf and Rodney Brooks, chief of staff for Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson.

“Don’t throw any softball questions,” program director Perry Green told the group. “They’re ready for the hard ones.”

Moore argued for more cross-curricular courses and for placing a second teacher in some classrooms to help more students learn at their own pace. Hampton’s pro-

posal called for easing up a “one-size-fits-all” high school graduation requirement to pass the courses needed to be eligible for a state university, a policy in place at his Berkeley charter school, California College Prep.

Hampton said that, as the event began and all eyes were on him, his heart raced, and he could feel his whole body pounding, like it always does before a competition. But then he felt the bass in his voice, he said, and his confidence took over.

Debate doesn’t just teach you about the issues, he said. “It teaches you how to win.”

Persuading his school to actually change its graduation requirements, however, might be Hampton’s biggest challenge yet. He presented his case to the administration, but he said the response so far has been, “Get over it.”

*Read Katy Murphy’s Oakland schools blog at [www.IBAbuzz.com/education](http://www.IBAbuzz.com/education). Follow her at [Twitter.com/katymurphy](https://twitter.com/katymurphy).*