

# The Oakland Tribune

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## High school debate makes a comeback in Oakland

May 17, 2009

Section: My Town

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OAKLAND — It would be politically and economically disastrous for President Barack Obama to try to set federal standards for renewable energy, argued 16-year-old Jessica Winsey, a senior from Street Academy. Individual states, she contended, "are fully capable of leading a renewable energy revolution." She added, "With federal action long overdue, it is important that states become key innovators."

It was the final debate tournament of the season, and two of the most formidable duos — one from Skyline, Oakland's largest public high school, and another from Street Academy, an alternative school north of downtown — had squared off again Saturday on the Fremont High School campus.

Next to piles of manila envelopes containing evidence for their arguments, Jessica and her partner, Tevah El Ehmet, 18 — also a hip-hop artist known as V — rapidly presented their case and rebutted the arguments of their Skyline rivals, Mya Whittaker and Zach Seidl.

Debate, an extracurricular activity often associated with the suburban and affluent, is making a comeback in Oakland. Since August, 100 Oakland teens from 10 high schools have competed in the Bay Area Urban Debate League, infusing the wonky high school activity with their own perspectives and style. Similar leagues are operating in urban centers such as Boston, Atlanta, New York City and Los Angeles.

"What's shocked me most is just how quickly debate has taken hold," said Blake Johnson, the league's executive director.

Johnson said the nonprofit organization does not recruit valedictorians, though students of all academic backgrounds are welcome to participate. Instead, the league targets students who have struggled academically or who may have been disruptive in class. Debate is fast-paced and competitive, but it also requires a great degree of research, analysis and reading, skills critical to academic success.

Johnson said the recognition young debaters receive can be appealing, and that the policy problems — such as abandoned toxic waste sites in poor neighborhoods — were chosen with urban youths in mind.

"Very seldom are they listened to in their schools," Johnson said. "Very seldom are they rewarded for innovative thought."

El Ehmet — who has written a song about global warming titled "Gettin' hot" — said debate is another creative outlet for him, one that has improved his reading comprehension, diction and vocabulary. He said he also loves the competition.

"You have to come up with new ideas and figure out how to smash on their ideas," he said, referring to his opponents. "It's a fusion between adrenaline and creativity and competitiveness."

When the judge announced the winner of Round 2 on Saturday afternoon, both teams kept their composure. Jessica and El Ehmet waited until the other team had closed the door behind them. They counted to three before they jumped up and down, hugged each other and cheered.

To learn more about the Bay Area Urban Debate League, go to [baudl.org](http://baudl.org).

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