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# Board of Contributors: Are we talking Ebonics here?

**It's time to move beyond superficial Ebonics debate and address real issues**

*by Glenn Singleton*

Moments after the Oakland School Board announced its intention to recognize Ebonics as an official language of African-American students, celebrities and common folk throughout the world felt the need to voice their dissenting opinions. Ironically, moments before this historical announcement, few people had anything to say about Oakland's--or any other predominantly black school district's--pedagogical strategies. One must wonder why Oakland's decision is so important to the U.S. Senate and our Commander in Chief himself.

How can Maya Angelou, Bill Cosby and, until recently, Jesse Jackson be so opposed to Oakland's efforts when it is their own celebrated poetry, comedy and orations, respectively, that are melodically grounded in the "mythical" Ebonic structure? Why do countless critics who have never visited an Oakland classroom, believe that they, more so than Oakland teachers, parents and board members, know what matters most for Oakland students? Are we really talking Ebonics here?

Recognizing Ebonics as a means for improving African-Americans' ability with standard English may be insufficient. It may, however, also be a necessary step in understanding the linguistic and broader cultural patterns that prohibit African-American students in Oakland, and throughout the country, from developing standard English language skills.

Unfortunately, the debate among the less-informed critics has been focused on whether Ebonics is truly a language and not on the fact that African-Americans, by and large, continue to perform at the bottom of their class in Oakland, Washington D.C. and here in Palo Alto. Intellectuals and politicians would prefer to ponder so-called world-class standards, rather than commit resources and research to developing interventions specifically aimed at improving African-American student achievement. Finally, John and Jane Q. Public continue to ignore the disparity of educational funding, facilities and fame which typifies Oakland, Detroit, Baltimore

and New Orleans as they suggest to Oakland that they function like "good" districts. Are we talking Ebonics here?

I applaud Oakland for, perhaps unintentionally, giving the world a unique glimpse at America's greatest, but also greatly flawed experiment--public schooling. Oakland calls into question America's will to educate *all* children by asking its teachers to understand where their diverse students are culturally and linguistically located.

Oakland illuminates the severe inequities facing African-American students who currently struggle to derive confidence, intelligence and morality from a schooling model which at best tolerates them, and at worst, kills them. Why should the Oakland School Board, teachers, parents and students trust the judgment of a public that has previously cared so little about Oakland schools? What evidence might Oakland consider before trusting that the Department of Education intends to redesign the American school system so it intentionally and specifically meets the learning needs of African-American children? Are we talking Ebonics here?

So here we sit at another historic crossroads--a genuine and rare opportunity to improve teaching and learning for those children who, categorically, have never been successful in school. Whether or not we believe in Ebonics as the key to improve African-American student achievement, we must recognize that society will advance only when our least-served, least-productive citizens become educated, employed and hopeful. Thus, let us quickly transgress this superficial Ebonics debate and thoughtfully attend to the real issues. Because it is not about legitimizing Black English in Oakland; it's about African-Americans throughout this country acquiring the powers of language. It can't be about exclusive bipartisan politics any longer; it must be about equitable education. Finally, we must shift our focus from closed-minded adults refusing to relinquish power to innocent children struggling to seize that power. An educated, empowered Oakland child is the key to our collective future.

So I ask . . . are we talking Ebonics here?

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