

Oakland school problems larger than Ebonics debate

OUR OPINION:
The debate over Ebonics has overshadowed many larger issues for African Americans and the Oakland school system

Coming soon to a University near you — the infamous Ebonics debate. After the Oakland School Board made the “earth-shattering” claim that African-American children speak a separate language, self-named Ebonics, the entire nation became obsessed with the Ebonics debate.

Now, almost two months after the original bombshell was dropped, the debate is reaching the University level. Specifically, a forum at the University on Ebonics will be held on Feb. 17. With all the attention it’s getting, it is easy to think that Ebonics is an important issue. Relatively speaking, it isn’t.

Even some of the people who are talking about Ebonics don’t always have much of an idea what they’re talking about. While the debate first revolved around funding for Oakland schools, it has turned into discussions on everything from how African-Americans talk to the roots of the African languages. Many issues dealing with the African-American community were raised. Unfortunately, the most important issues were not.

The fact that the Oakland schools are run down, under-funded and in dangerous neighborhoods is much more pressing than what dialect the students who go there speak. The fact that

African-American poverty is still at epidemic levels in the inner-city, African-American college graduation rates continue to lag behind the national average and racism persists at every level is more important than Ebonics ever will be.

That the Oakland school board spent as much time and energy on Ebonics as it did is unfortunate. That the rest of the nation eagerly jumped on the Ebonics debate bandwagon is sad. From local commentators to Jesse Jackson, almost no one is free of guilt for blowing what could have been a one-week discussion into a national debate.

Because so many “important” people had so many “important” things to say about Ebonics, many people were fooled into believing that Ebonics was the most pressing issue of the day. And when that happened, the African-American community lost out. By focusing in on such a relatively insignificant issue, the real issues were pushed deeper under the rug.

It isn’t too surprising that this happened. As a society, we have a much easier time focusing in on small issues than dealing with big ones. Ebonics, as silly as the issue seemed to some people, was something people could sink their teeth into. Almost everyone has an opinion on the Ebonics debate, and

almost everyone is willing to express it.

Unfortunately, the same thing can not be said of the more important issues surrounding the African-American community in Oakland. Racism, poverty and the inner-city — these are big issues. They can’t be reduced to small little jokes like Ebonics can. It’s not as obvious to everyone what to do about them or why they are with us. In short, we don’t like talking about these issues because they aren’t easy.

The best thing that could possibly result from the Ebonics debate would be an new awareness that we, as a public, aren’t dealing with the real problems. Instead of worrying about the Oakland School Board’s decisions, we should be worrying about the conditions of the Oakland schools and education in general. Instead of concerning ourselves with how this African-American language developed, we should worry about why urban poverty persists.

The Ebonics debate has been a distraction from the real issues. And while solutions to the bigger issues are harder to find, it’s just as important that we find them. Enough time has been wasted on Ebonics. It’s time to move on to the real issues.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.

CONTACT US

What do you think? Write us a letter expressing your opinion or E-mail us at ode@oregon.uoregon.edu. Letters to the editor must be limited to no more than 250 words, legible, signed and the identification of the writer must be verified when the letter is submitted. The Emerald reserves the right to edit any letter for length or style.

The Drawing Board



Correction

Wednesday's edition of the Emerald incorrectly identified ASUO Constitutional Court Justice Dave Coffman in a photo on page one. He was incorrectly identified as Dave Holland.

Department of Forestry is keeping Oregon safe from landslides

For the second time in a year, Oregon and most areas in the West have been inundated with unprecedented rainfall. The rainfall has caused injuries, death and property damage in all areas of Oregon from the cities to the forests.

While the effects of the rainfall have impacted people in all areas of the state, the tragic deaths and destruction in Coos and Douglas counties raised a number of issues. Some of these issues relate to public safety, land use planning, clear cutting on steep slopes and forest practice regulations.

Recently, there have been a number of news stories and editorials regarding the relationships between timber harvesting and landslides. In some cases, information about past studies has been inaccurate. Some comments have left the impression that the state has not and is not will-

COMMENTARY

ing to take the necessary action on behalf of the public's safety. This is far from the truth. A number of actions are currently taking place and planned for the near future that will address many of these issues.

The Department of Forestry is currently conducting vigorous geotechnical investigations on the slides that originated from forest land and resulted in fatalities in Douglas County. The purpose is to determine the cause of the slides, if possible, and whether there were any forest practice violations that contributed to the events.

The Department of Forestry is hiring an independent geotechnical consultant to investigate the factors that led to the fatalities. Because of the significance of these events, it's important to provide an independent outside investigation in addi-

tion to our own to ensure that all possible factors are considered.

Governor Kitzhaber has asked several state agencies to assist in identifying actions the state can take to minimize the threat to public safety these events have caused. The Governor cited three major themes to be considered: the siting of homes in areas prone to natural disasters, the use of early warning systems for high risk areas and land use practices such as timber harvesting, which may contribute to landslides.

The Department of Forestry has added two more study areas from the November storm to the exhaustive ground-based study currently examining the effects of forest practices on last February's flooding. The results of this study will be completed later this year.

This study will provide accurate and practical management information to forest landowners and policy

makers so we can better understand relationships between forest practices and flood impacts. Our new study is even more critical now because climatologists are telling us that we are heading into a potentially wet weather cycle. Based on the study's findings, the Department of Forestry may make recommendations that could lead to changes in current forest laws.

While finding solutions to these problems won't be easy, they will be addressed through a constructive, open and fair process. The result will further the department's commitments to reduce threats to life and property promote sound forest policies which strive to minimize environmental effects.

James E. Brown is the Oregon State Forester and a guest columnist for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.