

Friday Memo
April 8, 2016

Upcoming Events – Bruce Harter

April 11: Technology Committee, IT Center, 4:00 PM
April 11: LCAP Townhall, Helms MPR, 5:00 PM
April 11: Youth Commission, Helms, 6:30 PM
April 11: Special Education CAC, Cameron, 7:00 PM
April 13: Board of Education Meeting, DeJean, 6:30 PM
April 14: Solutions Team, UTR, 1:00 PM
April 14: 51st Annual Student Art Show Reception, Richmond Art Center, 5:00 PM
April 15: PVHS Drama Dept: *Heathers, the Musical*, DeAnza Theater, 7:00 PM
April 16: 10th Annual Parents as Partners Conference, DeJean, 9:00 AM
April 16: PVHS Drama Dept: *Heathers, the Musical*, DeAnza Theater, 7:00 PM

Next Week’s Board Meeting – Bruce Harter

Closed Session for Wednesday’s April 13 meeting begins at 5:30 PM.

Special Board Meetings – Bruce Harter

President Enos and Clerk Block have approved adding two workshop meetings to the Board Calendar. The joint meeting with the Contra College Board will be Wednesday, April 20 at 6:00 PM. A special workshop meeting on actions and services targeted to improve the learning outcomes for African American students will be Wednesday, May 18 at 6:30 PM. Both meetings will be at DeJean.

Bond Performance Audit – Bruce Harter

The District is currently under contract with Vavrinek Trine, Day & Company, LLP (VTD) for the examination of records and audit of the 2010 Measure D (2010) and 2012 Measure E (2012) bond funds. The contract was originally executed in 2014 after a Request for Proposal (RFP) was advertised and results were vetted. The contract was executed so as to include the audit of the fiscal years ending 2014, 2015 and 2016. The contract includes the legally required audit to ensure compliance with Section 1 of Article XIII A, Section 1(b)(3)(C) of the California Constitution (Prop 39). In addition, the District has requested additional “Agreed Upon Procedures” (AUP) be conducted to further vet specific areas of interest set forth by the Citizens Bond Oversight Committee (CBOC), the original AUP were agreed upon at the September 24, 2014 board meeting. Subsequently in 2015 the CBOC requested a change to the AUP resulting in a modification to the contract, including an increased cost. The contract included terms for the augmentation and re-engaged VTD through the final two years, including the AUPs (through fiscal year end 2016 records audit) The Contract was signed in November of 2015.

At the April 13th Board meeting the CBOC is presenting a resolution for discussion to the Board asserting that it wishes the Board to engage an audit firm to perform the additional (non-Prop 39 required) procedures using “Yellow Book” standards. The RFP and current contract do not include this standard, but does include the AUP requirement. The Board may wish to consider issuing a new RFP and engage an audit firm for the fiscal years ending 2017-2019 period to include additional procedures and standards for coordination with the legally required Prop 39

audit. (I would note that the State has declined to add such procedures, as suggested by CalBOC, to the 2015-16 Audit Guide) If the Board's direction is to assemble an RFP, the work on the RFP needs to be completed no later than December of 2016, with the selection of a new auditor in April of 2017. The final decision on what type of additional audit and the scope of such audit should have input from the CBOC and be vetted by the Board with a review by District Bond Counsel. However, I recommend that the Board conclude the current three-year audit contract with VTD as well as the additional audit on the "Clay Allegations" before committing bond and staff resources to acquire a new auditor and/or expand the scope of services currently in process.

Telling Our Story – Bruce Harter

As part of our enhanced communications efforts, I've started sending out a Monday Morning message to our employees about the successes our District. Often our employees don't have a good understanding of the progress we're making. Attached are the first two weeks. I'll put the others in the Friday memo beginning with next week's edition. I've also attached the [April Superintendent's](#) message available on our website which debunks the myth that our finances are not well-managed.

Candidate Applications for the Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee– Lisa LeBlanc.

There have been several applications received from candidates requesting to be on the CBOC, four of which will be on the April 13, 2016 agenda. As the Board may recall, several revisions were made to Board Policy 7214.2 regarding the composition and selection of CBOC members whereby the prospective candidates would be interviewed by the Facilities Subcommittee and thereafter a recommendation would be made to the Board. The CBOC currently has vacancies in the following categories:

- 1 individual representing the PTA/School Site Council
- 2 residents from the City of Richmond
- 1 representative from the WCCUSD Employee Unions

The Facilities Subcommittee made a recommendation at the March 15, 2016 for Mr. Peter Chau to fill one of the City of Richmond vacancies. The remaining three candidates, Mr. Don Gosney, Mr. Mark Howe, and Ms. Leisa Johnson have all been interviewed by the Facilities Subcommittee; however, with three individuals contending for only one open City of Richmond position, the subcommittee decided to move all three applications to the Board for their review. Mr. Peter Chau's recommendation for appointment is on the consent agenda while the review and appointment of one of the three remaining candidates for the second City of Richmond position is on the action agenda.

Pinole Valley High School Renamed "Hitsville High" in SF Weekly Article – Marcus Walton

In this week's edition of the SF Weekly, an alternative newspaper serving the Bay Area, reporter Jessie Schiewe explores Pinole Valley High School's musical legacy. The reporter names the school "Hitsville High," which is appropriate considering the number of musical artists who have attended and graduated from the school. While plenty of people are aware of Green Day and Primus, there are plenty of lesser known, but influential artists who attended the school.

West Contra Costa Unified School District
Office of the Superintendent

As always, the students (and former students) were the stars of the article, showcasing their ambition and talent. Principal Kibby Kleiman was instrumental in giving the reporter access to the temporary campus.

One note, the temporary campus must have made an impression: the reporter describes the portables as “bungalows.”

You can find the entire article at <http://www.sfweekly.com/sanfrancisco/hitsville-high-the-bay-areas-music-factory-music-pinole-valley-high-iamsu-heart-break-gang-metallica-primus-green-day/Content?oid=4596147> and a copy is included in this memo.

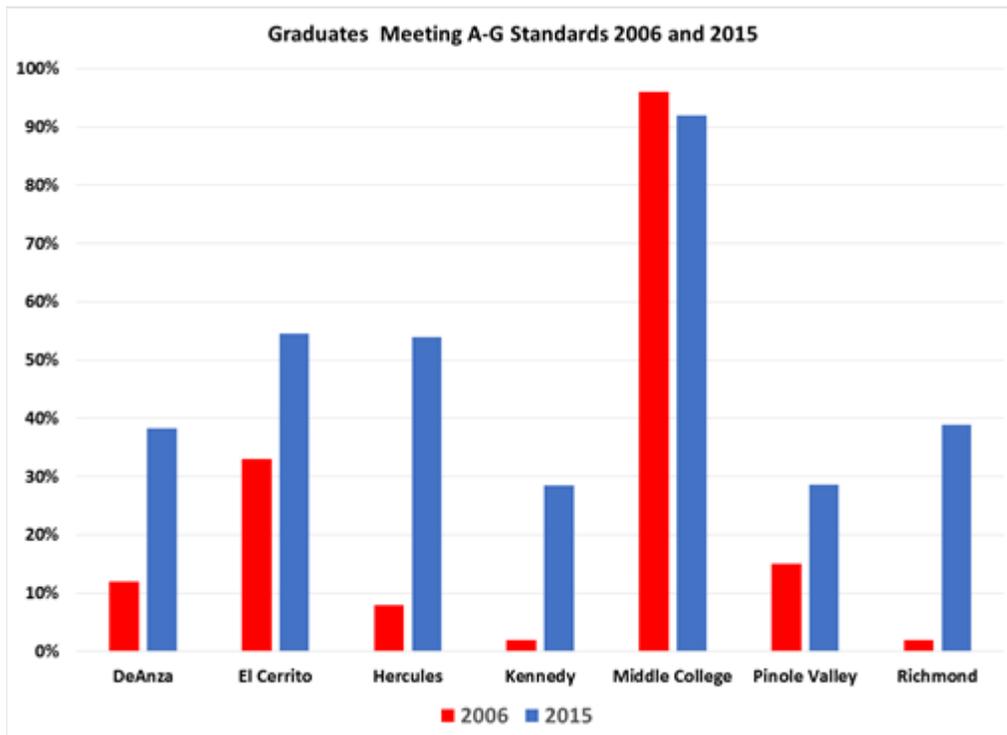


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Monday Morning Message
March 28, 2016

One of the things that makes the University of California system the best in the world is the high standards that UCs and CSUs require for admission. To get in to a UC or CSU, high school students must take 15 UC approved college preparatory classes including two years of lab science, three years of math, two years of history, four years of English, one year of visual or performing arts, two years of a second language and a year of a college preparatory elective. These courses are called the 'A-G' requirements. Students must also earn a 'C' or better or the course won't count. A huge barrier is the grade of 'D' for which a student gets credit toward high school graduation but not toward the A-G requirements.

So here's the Monday Morning fact for this week: **In 2006 only 14% of our graduates met the A-G standards. For the class of 2015, that percentage of students had increased to 42% -- or three times as many.** The chart below shows the increases for our seven high schools. While we want all of schools to be where Middle College is, we're encouraged by the progress our schools are making in getting our students college ready at the UC level.



Please distribute this message as widely as you can so that community members better understand the academic quality in WCCUSD.

Superintendent's Message

Financial Stewardship in WCCUSD

April 2016

[Español/Spanish](#)

It's time to separate the myth from the reality in the perception of the financial stewardship in WCCUSD. There's a perception that our taxpayer money isn't well managed or simply wasted. So I'm going to deflate the myths about our stewardship and provide the facts that indicate just the opposite.



Myth 1: The District wastes money that ought to be going to schools and students.

Fact: More than 90% of all general fund expenditures in WCCUSD are either spent at schools or directly on students. Of the \$331 million budget for 2015-16, 82% is spent on instruction or instruction related services with 11% going to plant & operations services – almost all of which is spent at our schools. Only 7% of the budget goes to general administration.



Myth 2: The District has too many highly paid administrators.

Fact: Public education has far fewer managers / administrators than is the norm in the business world. An average span of control in the business world is one manager for every 10 employees. In WCCUSD, the ratio is one administrator for every 25 employees. And when it comes to pay, the gap between business and education is much wider. And when compared to other districts, our administrator pay (like our pay for teachers) is lower than comparable districts in Northern California.

Myth 3: The District is still under state control from the near bankruptcy in 1991.

Fact: In 2012 State Superintendent Tom Torlakson lifted state control after the District paid off the state loan six years early. Payments to the state were scheduled to go on until 2018 but we were able to save funds to make the early payments. For the last ten years, our budget has had positive financial certifications from both the County and the State.

Myth 4: District finances are plagued by post-retirement health benefit liabilities.

Fact: The Board ended the guarantee of life-time health benefits in 2010. While we continue to pay for past retirees, over the past ten years, we have saved \$93 million in what we would have had to pay for those benefits if they had not been capped.



Myth 5: WCCUSD has a bad reputation in the investor community which causes the bonds that the District sells to be more expensive to taxpayers.

Fact: Over the past 8 years, the District has received rating improvements to where our bonds are rated at AA+ by one agency and AA- by another – the highest the bond ratings have ever been. These ratings increases are largely based on the rating agencies, Standard & Poors, Moody's and Fitch, analysis of our budgeting practices. In the early 2000's we had to buy bond insurance to even sell our bonds. Now we have investors lined up to buy our bonds because they know their money is safe and our budget is well managed.



Myth 6: The tax rates have been mismanaged and have exceeded the amounts promised in the bond measures.

Fact: The WCCUSD Board has completed several refinancing sales and has saved the taxpayers at least \$58 million by refunding bonds without extending the payback periods for any bonds. WCCUSD has never exceeded the tax rates promised in the bond measures. All have been within the tax rate limitations. As a result of our effective management practices, we've also been able to leverage \$165 million in state matching funds.

Myth 7: The WCCUSD building program is plagued by cost overruns and money has been spent for projects not authorized in the bond measures.

Fact: During the formative years of the bond, our Board implemented a system of checks and balances to ensure that the schools were built as envisioned and that the bond dollars were spent as intended. Annual external audits review the entirety of the program, from financial underpinnings to school construction, to the sale of bonds. Those audits have helped make the program better. Reports dating back more than 10 years are available on the district's web site.



Myth 8: WCCUSD school construction is much more expensive than other school construction projects.

Fact: Our construction costs are lower than averages in the Bay Area or Los Angeles.

It should be noted that the available Bay Area and Los Angeles data is through 2012 while the WCCUSD data is through 2014. Costs are presented per square foot (s.f.) of school space.

	Bay Area (2002-2012)	Los Angeles (2002-2012)	WCCUSD (2009-2013/14)
Elementary Schools	\$400 s.f.	\$504 s.f.	\$297 s.f.
Middle Schools	\$440 s.f.	\$506 s.f.	\$397 s.f.
High Schools	\$463 s.f.	\$523 s.f.	\$378 s.f.

Myth 9: The District doesn't share financial information.

Fact: All of our budgets, budget reports and both financial and bond program performance audits are available on our website. While there are always areas where we need to improve our practices, we use our audit findings to make those improvements. So you'll rarely see a finding in more than one year's report.



Myth 10: Bond funds and parcel tax funds are different terms with the same purpose.

Fact: Bond funds can only be spent on capital projects like renovating schools. Parcel tax revenues are in the general fund and are used for school operations like funding counselors, librarians and textbooks.

What I hope I've been able to demonstrate is that myth around the district's use of public funds are simply stories without substance. The reality is that WCCUSD has outstanding financial management and makes sure that the precious taxpayer funding goes toward our schools and students.

Bruce Harter
Superintendent

Mensaje del **Superintendente**

Administración financiera del Distrito (WCCUSD)

Abril de 2016

[Ingles/English](#)

Es hora de separar el mito de la realidad en lo que respecta a la administración de las finanzas en el Distrito (WCCUSD). Existe la percepción de que el dinero de los impuestos que la gente paga no es administrado de buena manera o que simplemente se malgasta. Por ello clarificaré estos mitos sobre la utilización de este dinero y proporcionaré hechos que indican exactamente lo contrario.



Mito 1: El Distrito malgasta dinero que debería ser utilizado en las escuelas y en los alumnos.

Hecho: Más del 90% de todos los fondos generales en el Distrito (WCCUSD) son asignados ya sea a las escuelas o directamente para los estudiantes. De los \$331 millones del presupuesto para el año escolar 2015-2016, el 82% se gasta en instrucción o en servicios relacionados con la instrucción, con un 11% que se asigna a servicios de planta y operaciones - lo cual es gastado casi en su totalidad en las escuelas. Sólo un 7% es asignado a la administración general.



Mito 2: El Distrito tiene muchos administradores que reciben salarios muy altos.

Hecho: La educación pública tiene muchos menos administradores que lo que es la norma en el mundo de los negocios. Un rango promedio en lo que respecta a la administración en el ámbito de los negocios es un administrador encargado por cada 10 empleados, y en el Distrito (WCCUSD) el promedio es 25 empleados por administrador. Además, en lo relacionado con el salario existe

una gran diferencia entre el mundo de los negocios y el campo educacional. Por otra parte, comparado con otros distritos, nuestros administradores (al igual que nuestros maestros) reciben una remuneración mucho más baja que otros distritos del Norte de California.

Mito 3: El Distrito se encuentra aún bajo el control del estado debido a que el Distrito casi se declaró en banca rota en 1991.

Hecho: En el año 2012 el Superintendente Estatal, Tom Torlakson, terminó con el control estatal después que el Distrito pagó el préstamo del estado seis años más temprano. Se suponía que los pagos al estado se realizarían hasta el año 2018 pero pudimos ahorrar fondos para hacer pagos más tempranamente. Por los últimos diez años, nuestro presupuesto ha tenido certificación monetaria positiva tanto del condado como del estado.

Mito 4: La situación financiera del Distrito está ligada a responsabilidades relacionadas con beneficios de salud después de la jubilación del personal.

Hecho: En el año 2010, la Mesa Directiva terminó con la garantía de los beneficios de salud para toda la vida. Aun cuando continuamos pagando por los beneficios del personal que se jubiló con anterioridad en los últimos diez años, hemos ahorrado \$93 millones con lo que hubiésemos tenido que pagar por estos beneficios si a estos no se le hubiese puesto un límite.



Mito 5: El Distrito (WCCUSD) tiene una mala reputación en el campo de las inversiones lo cual causa que los bonos que el Distrito vende sean más caros para aquellos que pagan impuestos.

Hecho: En los últimos ocho años, los bonos del distrito han sido considerados en uno de los más altos niveles, siendo calificados con AA+ por una agencia y con AA- por otra – la calificación más alta de los bonos que se ha recibido. Este incremento en las calificaciones se basa principalmente en la clasificación de las agencias, Standard & Poors, Moody's y Fitch, realizada a través de un análisis de las prácticas relacionadas con el presupuesto. A principios de los años 2000, tuvimos que comprar un seguro para los bonos para poder venderlos. Ahora tenemos inversionistas listos para comprar nuestros bonos ya que ellos saben que el dinero estará seguro y que nuestro presupuesto está bien administrado.



Mito 6: La tasa tributaria ha sido mal administrada y ha excedido la cantidad prometida en la medida de bonos.

Hecho: La Mesa Directiva del Distrito (WCCUSD) ha realizado varios refinanciamientos de ventas y le ha ahorrado por lo menos \$58 millones a aquellos que pagan impuestos, reembolsando el dinero de los bonos sin extender el periodo en que se deberían haber pagado, para ninguno de los bonos. El Distrito (WCCUSD) nunca se ha excedido en lo que respecta a la tasa tributaria prometida en las medidas de bonos. Todo se ha hecho dentro de las limitaciones de la tasa tributaria. Como resultado de las efectivas prácticas administrativas, también hemos podido hacer un buen uso de \$165 millones en subvenciones del estado.

Mito 7: El programa de construcción del Distrito (WCCUSD) se ha excedido en el costo y los fondos se han gastado en proyectos no autorizados en las medidas de bonos.

Hecho: Durante los años formativos del bono, nuestra Mesa Directiva implementó un sistema de balance y monitoreo para asegurar que las escuelas fuesen construidas como se habían diseñado y que el dinero de los bonos fuese gastado en la forma en que se había presupuestado. A través de una inspección externa anual se revisó el programa completo desde el financiamiento hasta la construcción de los establecimientos e incluyendo la venta de los bonos. Estas inspecciones de auditoría han ayudado a mejorar el programa. Reportes de más de 10 años se encuentran disponibles en la página de Internet del Distrito.



Mito 8: La construcción de los establecimientos escolares del Distrito (WCCUSD) es mucho más cara que otros proyectos de construcción escolar.

Hecho: Los costos de nuestras construcciones son más bajos que el promedio del costo de construcción en el Área de la Bahía o en el área de Los Ángeles. Se debería notar que los datos disponibles para el Área de la Bahía y Los Ángeles son hasta el año 2012 mientras que los datos del Distrito (WCCUSD) se presentan hasta el año 2014. El costo se expone de acuerdo a un pie cuadrado construido en los establecimientos escolares.

	Área de la Bahía (2002-2012)	Los Ángeles (2002-2012)	WCCUSD (2009-2013/14)
Escuelas primarias	\$400 pie cuadrado	\$504 pie cuadrado	\$297 pie cuadrado
Escuelas intermedias	\$440 pie cuadrado	\$506 pie cuadrado	\$397 pie cuadrado
Escuelas secundarias	\$463 pie cuadrado	\$523 pie cuadrado	\$378 pie cuadrado

Mito 9: El Distrito no comparte información sobre su situación financiera.

Hecho: Todos nuestros presupuestos, reportes de los presupuestos y los resultados de las inspecciones de auditoría referentes a la situación financiera y al programa de bonos se encuentran disponibles en la página de Internet del Distrito. Aunque existen aspectos en que tenemos que mejorar, usamos los hallazgos de las inspecciones de auditoría con el objeto de instituir estas mejorías. De manera que raramente se va a encontrar un hallazgo en dos reportes de años consecutivos.



Mito 10: Los fondos de los bonos y el dinero del impuesto a los bienes raíces son términos diferentes que tienen el mismo propósito.

Hecho: Los fondos de los bonos pueden ser utilizados solamente en proyectos capitales, como por ejemplo la renovación de establecimientos escolares. Los ingresos del impuesto a los bienes raíces son fondos generales que se utilizan para la operación de las escuelas, como por ejemplo para pagar posiciones de consejeros, bibliotecarias y textos de estudio.

Lo que espero que se haya podido demostrar es que los mitos sobre el uso de los fondos públicos del distrito son simplemente cuentos sin una base sólida. La realidad es que el Distrito (WCCUSD) tiene una increíble administración financiera y se asegura que los importantes fondos de los contribuyentes de impuestos se destinen para nuestras escuelas y nuestros estudiantes.

Bruce Harter
Superintendente

Hitsville High: The Unlikely Music Factory at Pinole Valley High School

By **Jessie Schiewe** Wednesday, Apr 6 2016

Comments



- The original Pinole Valley High School



The lunch bell rings at Pinole Valley High School, and hordes of teenagers swarm out of squat, rectangular bungalows.

Since the fall of 2013, Pinole Valley's 1,200 students have been learning out of 83 portable buildings placed on what used to be a baseball diamond next to the school's track. The old school, a one-story building dating from 1967, was torn down two years ago to make way for a substantially larger replacement, replete with palm tree-lined walkways and enough classrooms to house 400 additional students. The estimated opening date is 2019, which means three classes of Pinole Valley students will spend the entirety of high school at a campus that lacks an auditorium, cafeteria, gym — or buildings in general.

But on this Friday in March, aside from the facts that there are no lockers on campus nor hallways (other than the outdoor paths between bungalows), Pinole Valley could be any other suburban high school in California. In the central eating area — a collection of cement picnic tables partially covered by an awning, the main hang-out area for students — students dine on packed lunches or meals purchased from one of the two cafeteria kiosks. Seagulls hover nearby to swoop up stray bits of food as a delighted senior hugs a plush white teddy bear while telling a gaggle of girls how her boyfriend asked her to the prom.

A combination of pop and hip-hop songs play from a lone speaker connected to a cell phone carted out to the lunch area by the student government — a weekly tradition, Principal Kibby Kleiman says, that has rolled over from the old school.

As T-Pain's "I'm Sprung" blares, I wander around the lunch area, dodging wads of discarded bubblegum and piles of carelessly abandoned backpacks. I'm searching for one student in particular: a junior by the name of Laconte Watson, a rapper who released a six-track EP in February.

Unbeknownst to most people — even the teachers, school staff, and members of the school board — Pinole Valley High has a history of churning out professional musicians. Billie Joe Armstrong and Mike Dirnt of Green Day attended the school, as did all four founding members of the Heart Break Gang, the Bay Area hip-hop crew fronted by Iamsu!. So did Larry LaLonde, the guitarist for Primus; Jeff Becerra, the vocalist for Possessed; '90s Top 40 pop singer Jocelyn Enriquez; and

millennial rapper Young Bari. The list of musical graduates goes on, and, from my count, includes more than two dozen — more than any other school in the area I can name. (Even more than neighboring El Cerrito High School, which counts the members of Creedence Clearwater Revival and the George Kihn Band as graduates.)

This is why I'm here, trolling for Watson. I want to figure out why so many artists have gone to school here — and who is next to make it big out of Pinole Valley.

Watson, widely known on campus as both a rapper and producer, seems the most likely.

Watson grew up in South Richmond and claims to have written his first rap in the third grade. Through an after-school program in middle school — taught by producer Oliver "Kuya Beats" Rodriguez, himself a Pinole Valley alum — Watson learned how to craft beats and produce music.

He grew up listening to early releases from Young Bari and the Heart Break Gang, and was inspired by them. And he still is: When I see a student with short dreads and a goatee wearing a royal blue Heart Break Gang hoodie and ask him if he knows Laconte, it turns out I've asked Laconte himself.

"They're basically my Kanye," he says of Young Bari and the Heart Break Gang.

In fact, it was because of Pinole Valley's musical legacy that he decided to attend the school, even though he lives out of the district in Vallejo. (Like the parents of other out-of-town students who attend Pinole Valley, Watson's mother had to apply for an inter-district transfer.)

"I felt like this was a great place for me to start my career," he says. "And I'm going to make a name for myself, just like they did."

Before 2001, when the high school in neighboring Hercules was built, Pinole Valley was the northernmost high school in the West Costa Contra County Unified School District, which encompasses Richmond and four smaller cities nearby, including Pinole. Around 2,400 students attended the school then, but once Hercules High opened, enrollment dropped by half.

For its first few decades, the school was predominantly white. ("Look through the yearbook," Kleiman says. "There weren't too many black and brown faces.") But as the population in Pinole began to change, and more students from neighboring Richmond and Hercules started commuting to the school, the demographics shifted.

Today, by Kleiman's count, roughly 40 percent of the student body is Latino, 18 percent is African-American, 17 percent is white, and 15 percent is Asian. Over half of the students are low-income enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, according to state data, and SAT scores are below the state average.

While Pinole Valley was never known for academics, it is known for its sports teams — the girls soccer team frequently wins championships, and this year, its girls basketball team made it deep into the state championship playoffs. In the past, the school was also known for its theater department, which produced "big, rousing, crowd-pleasing shows," Kleiman says. But after budget cuts in the mid-2000s, private music lessons funded by the district were cut, and now that the school has relocated to bungalows, its theater productions are much smaller (and sometimes performed in one of the bungalow classrooms).

The school does still employ two full-time music teachers who teach guitar, jazz, piano, marching band, symphonic band, and concert band courses. However, most of the alumni who became musicians never set foot in a music class while at the high school. Instead, they pursued music in other ways.

In the '80s and '90s, musicians like Dan Abbott — who later went on to form the folk-rock duo Bobby Ebola and The Children MacNuggits — dragged their instruments around campus for impromptu jam sessions. Iamsu! and the rest of the Heart Break Gang — who, at the time, were called The Go Gettaz — often played their freshly recorded songs through the school's public-use speaker system, then set up in the campus' quad area.

In the early-to-mid-aughts, freestyling and battle rapping were popular on campus, and it wasn't unheard of for students to bypass the public-use sound system and bring their own portable speakers from home on which to play their music. The rapper Azure performed at a senior send-off event, and Young Bari would often play sets at pep rallies.

"There was a level of musicality to the school," says composer Dave Tweedie, who graduated in 1986. "It was like a movie — we were all musicians."

These days, it's not uncommon for Kleiman to hear a huddle of students rapping during lunch.

"I don't know why [music] is such a big deal here," he says, "but those things tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Once you have somebody good come out of the school, people aspire to do the same."

On a Monday evening, I meet the rapper Iamsu! (né Sudan Ameer Williams) and his mother Hilda Harris, who also graduated from Pinole Valley, at a soul-food restaurant in downtown Berkeley. He's wearing a black cardigan and all-white Air Jordans, and looks visibly drained from a busy day of interviews and photo shoots. In a few days, the 26-year-old will travel to New York to play the first of many shows promoting the release of his sophomore album, *Kilt III*.

Iamsu! grew up in Pinole and learned how to play the drums and piano at a young age. By middle school, he started making beats on his computer using free software programs from [download.com](https://www.download.com). By the time he entered high school, he was a full-fledged producer — but he was by no means the only musically active student on campus.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Pinole Valley was a hub for burgeoning rappers. In addition to Iamsu!, a number of students who had also started rapping and making music in middle school, like AKA Frank and Young Bari, also attended

the school. (A slew of students also started rapping once they got to Pinole Valley, like Hollywood Keefy, P-Lo, Azure, Show Banga, Wantmore N8, Lil Terry, and Mani Draper, to name a few.)

"We were all fans of hip-hop — it was something we could all tap into," Iamsu! says. "Especially living in a suburban area, we weren't going to walk outside our house and see what the typical rap star would see. So maybe that gave us inspiration to write our own music that we could relate to."

Along with P-Lo, Show Banga, and Hollywood Keefy, Iamsu! formed The Go Gettaz around 2005. After school — and sometimes even during school — they'd congregate at Iamsu!'s home studio (his bedroom) to craft songs or burn mixtapes they'd sell on campus for \$5.

"School was basically for testing out the music," Show Banga says. "Whatever reaction we got, then we would know if we should upload [the song] on Myspace and put it out."

Search "Pinole Valley High School talent show" on YouTube and you'll find footage from an infamous Go Gettaz talent show performance in 2007 that was almost shut down because the crowd got too rowdy. (Look up "Iamsu! battling" and you'll also find a video of the rapper as a backpack-wearing 17-year-old as he battle-raps another student while at school.)

"At Pinole, we had the freedom and space to be able to be ourselves and pursue our music," Hollywood Keefy says. "It wasn't like we wanted to be the next big thing and blow up. I think our biggest goal was just getting a song on 106 KMEL. We had fun with it before we realized that it could become a career or something serious."

But all four former Go Gettaz attest that there was external motivation that drove them to work harder and try their best: competition. Before they formed, there was another dominant rap crew on campus, The Diligentz, comprised of three upperclassmen, Damey, Star (now AKA Frank), and Pranksta The Kidd, plus one Hercules High student, Jay Ant. While still in high school, they released a total of four mixtapes, and in 2007, their single "Punk Rock" — which was later remixed to feature members of The Pack, the Berkeley rap crew helmed by Lil B, himself a grad of nearby Albany High — got airtime on KMEL and WiLD 94.9, as well as a mention on *SPIN*'s website.

"The spirit of competition was a really big factor," says the rapper and DJ Azure (né Justin Park), who graduated from Pinole Valley in 2007, a year before Iamsu!. "When [The Diligentz] got a song on the radio, it kind of caused everybody to be like, 'If they can get on the radio, I can get on the radio, too.' So it just started this domino effect that inspired all these students who were trying to rap."

Competition has long been an inspirational force on Pinole Valley's campus. In the late '70s and early '80s, students from nearby De Anza High School in Richmond formed some of the earliest — if not first — thrash metal bands in history. A 16-year-old Kirk Hammet formed Exodus in 1979 before joining Metallica in 1983. Exodus's drummer was a De Anza student, Tim Hunting. Metal band Blind Illusion was formed in 1979 by a De Anza High School student named Marc Biedermann. Les Claypool, who formed the rock band Primus with Pinole Valley student Todd Huth, also attended De Anza in the late '70s and '80s.

As a result, metal dominated the local music scene, and many copycat metal bands formed at Pinole Valley over the course of the next decade.

"We were aware of what the other kids were doing, and that inadvertently influenced all of us," says composer Tweedie, who played drums in the marching band as a Pinole Valley student in the mid-'80s. "There was a competitive spirit that was never spoken about, but it was definitely known. People went home and practiced. People really wanted to be great."

Among Tweedie's classmates were Larry La Londe, the current guitarist for Primus, and Jeff Becerra, the vocalist for Possessed, who formed the band while in high school. Inspired by the music and success of Exodus and Metallica, La Londe and Becerra, along with two other classmates, formed the speed-metal band Blizzard around 1984. While at Pinole Valley, La Londe also joined Blind Illusion, but quit the band shortly after graduating in 1986 to join Primus.

La Londe's and Becerra's ambition and success, Tweedie says, was inspiring, if not infectious.

"The crazy reality was the tangibility of it. There was the possibility that you could actually be a rock star. We were seeing it happen," he says. "Larry and Jeff were signed and they would go away for weeks to tour. I know it inspired me and set a precedent for me to be like, 'Hey man, I can do this.'"

In the '90s, it was the success of Green Day that inspired future generations of students. As freshmen in 1986, singer Billie Joe Armstrong and bassist Mike Dirnt formed the first iteration of Green Day (then called Sweet Children). The following year, the band signed to Lookout! Records, and in 1988 they released their first EP, *1,000 Hours*. During Armstrong's senior year in 1990, on the day he turned 18, he decided to drop out of high school to pursue music full-time.

Two months later, the band released their debut album, *39/Smooth*. By Foreign Foods Day in 1990 — an annual school event now called the Multicultural Food Fair — Green Day, who performed 15 songs in the quad as part of the festivities, was famous enough to entice multiple students to film the event. (Videos of that day can still be found on YouTube.)

"I think all Pinole Valley High School bands hoped in some ways to match Green Day's early success," says Corbett Redford III, a Pinole Valley alum who graduated in 1993 along with the Filipino pop singer Jocelyn Enriquez.

It was Green Day's success that led Redford and Dan Abbott, then an underclassman, to form the folk-rock duo Bobby Joe Ebola and the Children MacNuggits in 1995.

"I grew up in the shadow of Green Day," Abbott says. "And whether you were into their music or not, it was inspiring."

There are 19,000 people in Pinole, a small town hugging the Contra Costa hills along the coast of San Pablo Bay approximately 30 miles northeast of San Francisco. The only highway running through town is Interstate 80 (meaning it's no coincidence that the city's population ballooned from 1,000 to 6,000 after its construction in 1958). The nearest BART stations are in Richmond and El Cerrito, each about a 30-minute bus ride away.

"If you don't have a car, [Pinole] might as well be on the moon," Abbott says.

Terms like "bedroom community," "commuter town," and "suburbia" are commonly used to describe Pinole, which aside from Hercules, is the farthest city from San Francisco in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, and the smallest city by population.

It's not uncommon for people to own horses — or to occasionally ride them around town — although, in recent years, the city has made an effort to be less rural.

Pinole Valley Shopping Center, down the road from the high school, was upgraded around 2009 to include big-name, national retailers like Trader Joe's, Chipotle, Peet's Coffee, Walgreen's and Jamba Juice. (Plans are also underway to build another shopping mall in the downtown area that would include a Sprouts Farmers Market and a drive-through Starbucks.)

Before the shopping mall was revamped, it consisted of primarily small, family-owned businesses, like non-chain grocery stores, barber shops, nail salons, and Fiat Music Company (which is still around).

Abbott, who grew up in Pinole in the '80s and '90s, was especially disenchanted with the city. "Pinole always felt like a pretty desperate place," he says. "For someone like me who never really fit in, it felt like a place that you really wanted to escape from."

Students at Pinole Valley were especially unlucky. Whereas high school students in larger cities may have congregated at malls or at Taco Bells, the closest business to Pinole Valley is a storage facility. (The public library is a short walk away, but, as you might expect, it's not a popular spot for high school students.) For decades, easily the most exciting thing to do in downtown Pinole was go to the bowling alley (also still around).

Overcome with ennui, Abbott turned to music as a way to cope. "When you're a creative person, that kind of frustration is inspiring in a way and can be sort of like the grain of sand that irritates the oyster," he says. "I wrote more than my share of songs about wanting to get out of Pinole when I was in high school, and I'm sure I'm not alone."

With so few distractions around, music was an especially popular diversion for Pinole Valley students in the '80s and '90s. "People just wanted to hang out, get fucked up, and play music together," says Becerra, who graduated in '86. "There was nothing else to do."

Twenty-one years later, Abbott still recalls how he would regularly walk five-and-a-half miles to his friend's house with his guitar and amplifier in tow, "just to connect with someone."

But Pinole is not *that* remote — especially if you have a car. Portuguese singer Angela Brito would regularly travel around the Bay to play shows, and Jocelyn Enriquez, who formed the band Pinay Divas while in high school, was a member of the San Francisco Girls Choir and the San Francisco Opera Company.

Abbott concedes Pinole's removed-but-not-too-far-away location had an impact on the area's burgeoning musicians.

"You were within striking distance of one of the richest cultural hubs in the world," he says. "So, if you could reach escape velocity from Pinole, there was a whole world of possibilities that wasn't that far away."

The proximity to the big city motivated some students. For Oliver "Kuya Beats" Rodriguez, who attended Pinole Valley during the height of the E-40-powered hyphy rap movement in the early 2000s, watching rappers sprout up from nearby cities imbued him and his fellow musician friends with a hunger to do the same.

"I think being on the outside of what was happening, as far as music goes, encouraged us," he says. "We were kind of like, 'Let's put our city on the map. Let's make a name for Pinole.'"

Principal Kleiman's office is stuffed with high school memorabilia from days of yore. Pictures and banners from past championship sports teams and art from former students line the walls of the bungalow, and a stack of old yearbooks leans forlornly on a shelf.

Kleiman — who at 52 is the oldest high school principal in the district — has been in charge of Pinole Valley since August 2013. Before this, he was the vice principal at Richmond High School for four years, and, before that, he was a history teacher at Kennedy High School in Richmond for close to 20 years. But, despite being in the same school district, the three schools are demographically different from one another. Because of this, Kleiman was "terrified" before he came to Pinole Valley.

As much as 85 percent of Richmond High School's student body is Latino, and Kennedy High School's student population is a mix of black and Latino. Pinole Valley's diverse student body, on the other hand, lacks an obvious racial majority. (In the mid-2000s, Latinos, whites, blacks, and Asians were equally represented on campus.)

Kleiman's fear, he says, stemmed from this pure diversity. "What happens at a school when there's a supermajority of one culture is that that culture predominates," he says. "The places where there are fights and conflict are where there is no majority, but a plurality instead."

For whatever reason, Kleiman was wrong about Pinole Valley being prime for fighting. Though the school has had a few altercations between students, it is, for the most part, a relatively peaceful campus. Though I only visited the school a handful of times, I never witnessed any drama. Instead, I frequently saw students of different races hanging out and socializing.

It's worth noting that Pinole Valley's diversity is not a reflection of the city of Pinole, which is predominantly white. Its diversity comes from the many students who commute to the school from nearby cities. Out of the 1,200 students who attend Pinole Valley today, 30 percent hail from Richmond, San Pablo, and Vallejo.

"In terms of ethnic diversity, this place truly is that," Kleiman says. "I think something cool happens when you have that mix. For instance, there's cross-germination in terms of what the students listen to."

The school's storied diversity came up regularly in the conversations I had with the musical graduates. (Incidentally, the alumni that I interviewed were also representative of Pinole Valley's eclectic student body. Though the majority of them were white and black, they were also Portuguese, Filipino, and Korean.)

As a result, students at Pinole Valley were (and continue to be) exposed to a broader range of influences than students at other, less diverse high schools. Cliques are more homogenous and cultural appropriation is less of an issue. One of the members of The Heart Break Gang is Filipino, and Azure, who got his start rapping in high school, is Korean.

"It was just an example of how you don't have to wear Academic and FUBU or a throwback jersey and a pinstripe hat to be a dope rapper," he says, adding that one of the best battle rappers at the school was from Pakistan. "You could be anybody, and I think that was a big booster of confidence."

The cross-pollination of different ethnicities also likely contributed to the creation of wholly new and unique sounds from Pinole Valley's students. And, once those sounds were created, it provided multiple avenues through which the music could be dispersed.

"The music got listened to by so many different people coming from so many different places that it was able to spread further," says the rapper Jay Ant, who was the lone Hercules High School student in The Diligentz. "There were so many different kinds of people that took that shit home and told others about it, and I think that had a lot to do with it."

Like a lot of things in life, it's likely that money also played a role in Pinole Valley's musical output.

Most students, it seems, have historically had just enough, especially if they were from Pinole. Pinole is what passes for middle-class in the Bay Area. Between 2010 and 2014, Pinole households brought home around \$78,000 a year on average, matching Contra Costa County's median household income during that time. You can buy a house here for under \$500,000.

"The average family that has kids that go to this school are not rich enough to hand down luxury cars to their kids, but they're not so poor that they can't afford to give their kids a laptop with a keyboard," Azure says. "We're kind of in that middle ground, where your mom is still able to give you a microphone for Christmas because you're not flat broke. There was just enough privilege and just enough opportunity for the talent to actually blossom."

In the early-to-mid-aughts, alums like Iamsu!, Rodriguez, and Damey from The Diligentz were able to create studios in their bedrooms or basements, using computers and production software that they either purchased on their own or received from their parents. I even heard a story about one enterprising student who bought a CD burner so that he could sell and disseminate music at the school.

Before computers, students would splurge on instruments. Becerra bought his first bass from Fiat Music Company at the age of 16, as did Denzil Foster, the founder of the girls' group En Vogue, who bought his first keyboard there. Armstrong of Green Day, raised by a single mom who worked as a waitress at a barbecue restaurant in El Cerrito, took voice lessons at Fiat and recorded "Look For Love," his first song, there. While in high school, La Londe also took guitar lessons from the Fiatrone family, who still run the music shop.

The current student body at Pinole also seems to be firmly middle-class. Both Watson and Jaylin Walker, another known rapper on campus, make music using laptops they received as gifts from their parents.

"This is what middle-class looks like," Kleiman says. "There are people who are a little more affluent and have horses, and there are people who are poor, but I don't think we have the extremes."

Back at Pinole Valley on Friday after-noon, the lunch crowd is amping up. Montell Jordan's platinum-certified 1995 debut single, "This Is How We Do It," is ricocheting from the speaker and seemingly everyone is singing along. A trio of students and one substitute teacher show off their dance moves on the semicircle dance floor formed by hordes of students and faculty gathering to watch.

Watson and I stand on the sidelines, equally enthralled with the dancers. I spot Kleiman in the distance watching as well. A few months ago, Watson made "Poppin'" — one of his most popular songs, streamed over 1,000 times on SoundCloud — which showcases the young, baritone-voiced MC dropping bars over a slappy, staccato beat. I ask him if he's ever considered signing up to play one of his songs at lunchtime, just like The Heart Break Gang did when they were students here.

He smiles and says he hasn't, but that he might consider doing it the next time he makes a banger. The stakes are high, he adds, and he wants to make sure that he's putting his best work forward.

"A lot of student want to do what we do," he says. "People are looking at me and Jaylin [Walker] and thinking that we're going to be somebody in the near future, so they want to learn from what we're doing. We're setting the bar for this generation."