

**Friday Memo**  
**January 10, 2020**

**Upcoming Events – Matthew Duffy**

January 13: CBOC Meeting, FOC, 6:15 - 8:15 PM  
January 14: Solutions Team Mtg, UTR Office, 11:00 - 3:00  
January 14: DLCAP Meeting, KHS, 6:30 - 8:30 PM  
January 15: Board of Education, DeJean, 6:30 PM  
January 16: End of 2nd Quarter  
January 16: Agenda Setting, Alvarado Room 1, 5:00 PM  
January 16: Governance Committee Meeting, Alvarado Room 1, 6:00 PM  
January 17: Secondary Work Day, No School for Middle and High Schools  
January 20: Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday, Schools and Offices Closed  
January 25: West Contra Costa Education Fair, RHS, 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM

**Next Week's Meeting - Matthew Duffy**

Next week's Closed Session will begin at 5:00 PM.

**CSBA Transitioning to New Agenda Format – Matthew Duffy**

CSBA has announced the launch of the new GAMUT platform, signaling the retirement of its Agenda Online and replacement with GAMUT Meetings and GAMUT Policy.

Beginning with the January 15, 2020 board agenda, we will fully transition to the new agenda format. Agendas will continue to be available through the district's website with a new, refreshed appearance. At a future date, CSBA will migrate the archive of agendas and minutes to the new platform to provide further accessibility to the public.

GAMUT Policy will provide access to the district policy manuals as well as provide CSBA's sample manual of more than 750 policies, administrative regulations bylaws and exhibits along with supporting legal references and management resources. This feature will also be available to the district in 2020.

Staff has trained on use of GAMUT Meetings and will continue to strive to provide the best service to the Board and community.

**Subject K-8 Schools in the Kennedy Family - Matthew Duffy**

Next year, we will be offering grade 7 to students and families in the six Kennedy Elementaries as we build toward K-8. Those schools are Wilson, Nystrom, King, Lincoln, Grant, and Coronado. As you know, we have considered this decision for a long time. After polling parents in all the schools and seeing that at least 80% of families in all schools want to stay for another two years in their elementary schools, we have made this decision. We have examined space and believe that we can make this work with potentially only one school needing facilities support for next year.

We have consistently lost students at DeJean in grade 7 and believe clearly the data shows parents want a different option. This will be communicated to the Board at the January 15 meeting and staff will also communicate to families as the January 21st enrollment period approaches.

West Contra Costa Unified School District  
*Office of the Superintendent*

We are very excited about this decision and believe students will thrive in these schools as we have seen recent successes in the district's other K-8 schools.

This will leave a bigger conversation about the future of DeJean Middle School. DeJean will have grade 8 students only next year and then open as a different model the following year, possibly housing a new program or a current school or program. There are several pathways for discussion to ensure that the school site is maximized for district use.

Budget Impact - Potential facilities cost of \$400,000 for additional portables would come from restricted facilities (either developer fees or one-time Fund 40, but will not utilize general fund or bond funds)

This is a potential revenue generator if more students stay in the district system due to the option to remain at their current elementary site. This aligns with providing options for choice for our community. If a family did want to attend a traditional middle school they could apply to other WCCUSD schools through open enrollment.

I look forward to sharing more with the Board at Wednesday's meeting.

**Media Stories of Interest – Marcus Walton**

The following news stories may be of interest:

<https://edsources.org/2020/questions-swirl-about-origins-of-40-million-deficit/621885> - Questions swirl about origins of \$40 million deficit

<https://californiaglobe.com/section-2/west-contra-costa-school-district-putting-a-half-billion-bond-before-voters-in-march/> - West Contra Costa School District Putting a Half-Billion Bond Before Voters in March

<https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2020/01/07/district-considers-renaming-richmond-school-after-michelle-obama/> - District Considers Renaming Richmond School After Michelle Obama

<https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2020/01/06/parents-students-want-to-name-school-after-michelle-obama/> - East Bay parents, students want to name school after Michelle Obama

<https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2020/01/08/editorial-broke-contra-costa-school-district-seeks-to-borrow-more-for-construction/> - Editorial: Reject nearly broke Contra Costa school district's deceitful plan for more construction bonds

<https://richmondstandard.com/richmond/2020/01/06/parents-students-want-to-rename-wilson-elementary-after-michelle-obama/> - Parents call to rename Wilson Elementary after Michelle Obama

## Questions swirl about origins of \$40 million deficit

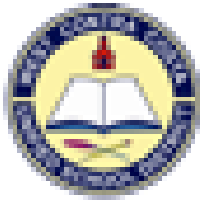
*Superintendent in San Francisco Bay Area district withheld a spring warning until the fall.*

JANUARY 10, 2020 | THERESA HARRINGTON

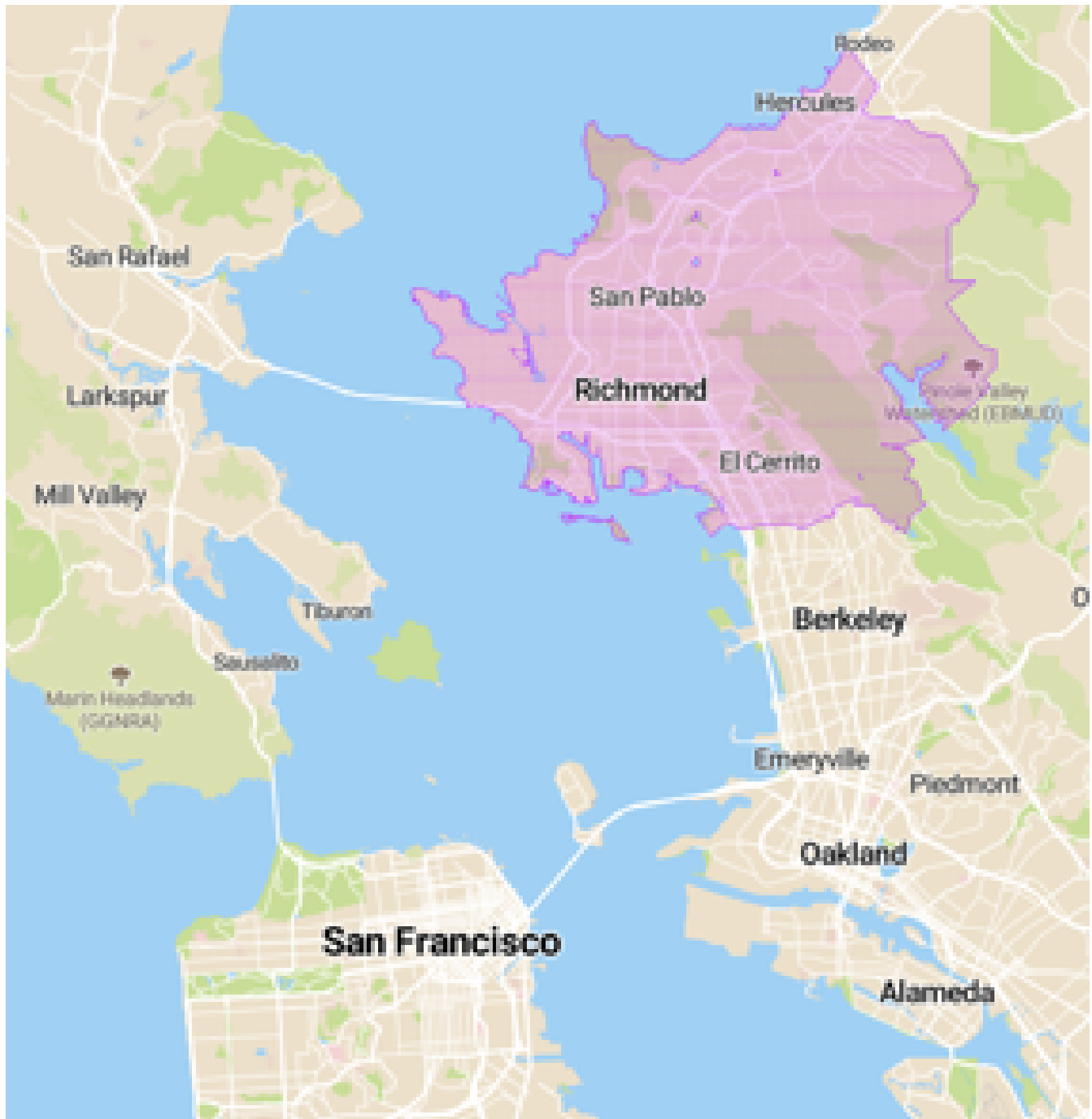


PHOTO: ANDREW REED/EDSOURCE

**R**esidents of one San Francisco Bay Area school district are struggling to understand how a budget deficit nearly quadrupled in a matter of months — and are questioning why the district board and public weren't alerted sooner about the magnitude of the problem.



# West Contra Costa Unified



Last June, West Contra Costa Unified, which includes Richmond and surrounding communities, was grappling with how to deal with a projected \$10 million budget deficit. But just a few months later, board members were shocked to discover that the budget deficit had soared to nearly \$40 million.

“Why weren’t alarm bells rung as soon as it was discovered?” asked elementary school parent Amy-Lynn Fischer, echoing questions from others at a recent school board meeting.

In fact, Superintendent Matthew Duffy, now in his fourth year as head of the 28,000-student school district, got an early warning of the problem last spring. He says he didn’t publicly report the deficit numbers then because he wasn’t sure they were accurate, due to turnover in leadership of the district’s business department.

### **Superintendent says deficit numbers were changing**

Duffy confirmed in an EdSource interview that he learned of the growing deficit last spring, but withheld the information from the public and the school board because he didn’t trust the estimates presented to him by the district’s fiscal staff, whose leadership has turned over four times in the last four years.

“What we did know is we were facing a really large deficit, but I needed to be much more comfortable about what was underneath those numbers,” Duffy told EdSource. “I think it may have been irresponsible to say, ‘Here’s a number,’ when we really weren’t totally clear about that number.”

He sought help from the Contra Costa County Office of Education to be sure he was getting correct information. “All throughout last year, the numbers were fluctuating,” he said.

The disclosure that the deficit had grown from \$10 million estimated in June for 2018-19, and no deficit estimated in 2019-20, to nearly \$40 million this school year, resulted in a closed-door school board meeting in November amid reports from some board members before the meeting who said they believed the meeting was being called to discuss Duffy’s possible ouster. No action was taken after several members of the public urged the board to allow the superintendent to help dig the district out of its fiscal quagmire.

Due to a one-time \$4.5 million state preschool grant received this year, the district’s deficit was reduced to \$35 million in December, but the ongoing structural deficit is still about \$39.5 million, said Tony Wold, the district’s associate superintendent for business services, who was hired in August.

## West Contra Costa Unified 3-year budget projections

\$ Unit: million

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Expenditures	\$ 404.8	\$ 420.3	\$ 424.6
Revenues	\$ 369.7*	\$ 377.7	\$ 387.6
Projected deficit	\$ 35*	\$ 42.6*	\$ 37
Cut estimates	\$ 0**	\$ 32-47.8**	\$ 0-16***

\*Includes one-time \$4.5 million state preschool grant

\*\*Cuts offset by use of reserves/retiree fund

\*\*\*Totals will depend on cuts made in 2020-21

Source: West Contra Costa Unified School District, as of Dec. 11, 2019.  
Chart by Yuxuan Xie.

EdSource

### Layoffs feared

Now, the district board, staff and community are demanding answers about how the deficit has ballooned so quickly. A former district business official has alerted the board that he warned Duffy about the massive deficit in May, and the mayor of Hercules — a small city in the northern part of the district — is calling for an outside fiscal crisis team to formally review the district's finances.

Meanwhile, union leaders and several community advocates worry that possible increases to class sizes next fall — and layoffs of staff members such as teachers, counselors, librarians and school administrators — could devastate student programs and services.

At the same time, district officials insist that they want to protect the most effective programs to help students succeed, and they may seek to begin or expand innovative programs that could help attract new students and revenues to the district.

Wold, the new head of district finances, said that the district now acknowledges it should have been more proactive in dealing with its budget situation.

“In hindsight, we should have made more cuts” last year, he said.

The district did make some budget cuts to offset pay hikes given to teachers and other staff members in 2018-19, but Duffy now says calculations for those increases — along with costs for reducing class sizes and hiring more assistant principals — were not accurate.

When the district analyzed its budget as the 2018-19 school year was coming to an end, district administrators realized cuts had not been deep enough to offset increased expenses.

Duffy and Wold said the district's budget predicament can also be traced to two other developments: failure to more closely track expenditures, along with the rising costs of salaries, benefits, contracts and supplies, which outpaced increases in state funding.

Multiple other factors also contributed to the widening deficit, including:

- Declining student enrollments and attendance rates, resulting in less funding from the state;
- More special education students, resulting in higher costs;
- Rising pension costs;
- Higher workers' compensation and property and liability insurance costs;
- Poor controls over overtime payments and positions hired;
- Inaccurate budgets that did not include vacant positions or some other costs;
- Changes in business department staffing.



THERESA HARRINGTON / EDSOURCE

*West Contra Costa Unified associate superintendent for business services Tony Wold, left, and Superintendent Matthew Duffy discuss the budget deficit during a Dec. 9, 2019 town hall meeting.*

## **Turnover in business office impacts tracking of deficits**

The revolving door in business department leadership contributed to the district's inability to keep track of its widening deficit, Duffy said.

Wold is the fourth associate superintendent for business services since 2016-17. Longtime chief business official Sheri Gamba retired in 2017, replaced by Christopher Mount-Benites, who left in 2018 to take a job in another district, and John al-Amin, who resigned in May due to personal reasons. In addition, the district's director of business services left last March to take on the role of chief business official for the Walnut Creek School District.

During this time, the size of the deficit has been at issue.

Wold agreed in an EdSource interview that the district's previous deficit estimates varied widely, from \$15 million to \$30 million projected for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2020. His predecessor, al-Amin, has sent an email to board members stating that his staff created an



initial 2019-20 budget in May that emphasized the larger budget gap of “over \$30 million,” according to a copy of the email obtained by EdSource.

Board member Tom Panas confirmed that he and other board members received al-Amin’s email, after the board met in November in closed session to discuss Duffy’s job performance.



THERESA HARRINGTON / EDSOURCE

*The West Contra Costa Unified school board and Superintendent Matthew Duffy, right, discuss the district’s budget deficit Dec. 11, 2019.*

Duffy told the board last month that the deficit problems started in 2017-18, when Mount-Benites estimated the district needed to cut \$12.3 million to pay for salary increases for teachers and other staff members, as well as for other items in a contract settlement reached with its teacher and staff unions in July 2017.

“That was the calculation that turned out to be wrong,” Duffy said.

However, he told EdSource the district is still not entirely sure how much larger the calculation should have been, in part because it was unclear how many staff vacancies existed in the district at that the time.

Duffy highlighted two areas that had an especially significant impact on the budget: increased costs for special education and declining student enrollment.

From 2016-17 to this year, the district's enrollment has dropped by nearly 400 students to 28,121. Meanwhile, the number of special education students it serves — along with the severity of their disabilities — has continued to rise, causing costs to jump from \$74.5 million in 2016-17 to \$84.4 million in 2018-19.

### **Help from the Contra Costa County Office of Education**

The county Office of Education worked with the district to come up with the \$360.7 million 2019-20 budget approved by the board at the end of June. But it removed line items for positions that were vacant at the time, as well as for some other operational and books and materials cost cuts that were anticipated, but not yet made. This was done to present a balanced budget and to give the district more time to figure out its true costs before amending its budget in the fall.

In essence, the adopted budget was a place-holder that the county and board knew would need to be updated after the “closing of the books” for 2018-19, Wold said.

After all known costs were added back last month, the board certified a revised 2019-20 budget of \$404.8 million as “qualified,” which according to state definitions means that based on current projections, the district may not be able to meet its financial obligations in any one of the next three years unless it makes deep cuts. The county agrees with this assessment, according to county office of education spokesman Terry Koehne.

Officials say the district will be able to cover the deficit for this year, but not for future years, based on its current revenue projections.

The board agreed to meet its deficit this year by using \$18.8 million from the district's reserve fund and tapping a fund that the district had created to pay for retiree benefits.

But those are just temporary fixes that will not erase the projected deficit for next year. Wold told EdSource the district was required to report its deficit for 2020-21 to the state in

December as \$42.7 million because it hasn't yet spent the one-time preschool grant, but the deficit will rise back up to nearly \$48 million after that expenditure is processed, he said.

Wold added that the district may take two years to close that deficit by slashing \$32 million next year and borrowing another \$15.6 million from the fund to pay for retiree costs, then cutting another \$16 million the following year.

At least two county office of education staff members are helping the district to implement better cost controls, county spokesman Koehne said. If the district fails to identify the budget cuts as promised, the county could ask the Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team, an agency established by the state to help districts in financial distress, to assume a greater role in helping West Contra Costa to get back on track.

"If we feel there isn't enough progress being made," Koehne said, "we can choose to alter course."

*Editor's Note: As a special project, EdSource is tracking developments this year in the Oakland Unified and West Contra Costa Unified School Districts as a way to illustrate some of the most urgent challenges facing many urban districts in California. West Contra Costa Unified includes Richmond, El Cerrito and several other East Bay communities.*

## Comments

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January 10, 2020



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### West Contra Costa School District Putting A Half-Billion Bond Before Voters In March



West Contra Costa Unified School District

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LOCAL

## West Contra Costa School District Putting a Half-Billion Bond Before Voters in March

*In case you're wondering, school bond measures almost always pass*

By Edward Ring, January 9, 2020 2:15 am

***Wouldn't saving \$37 million mean the deficit, at least for this year, would be reduced from \$39.9 million to \$2.9M?***

One of the most financially mismanaged school districts in California has found a solution to their financial challenges – borrow more money, and let the voters pay more in property taxes.

Scheduled to appear on the March 2020 local ballot for voters living within the West Contra Costa Unified School District, **Measure R**, a “classroom modernization and safety update measure,” will seek approval to “issue \$575 million of bonds, at legal rates, averaging \$34.48 million annually while bonds are outstanding, at 6¢ per \$100 assessed value, with strict citizens’ oversight, annual audits and all money for local schools.”

In case you’re wondering, school bond measures almost always pass. In 2018, for example, **data compiled by CalTax** indicates that over 90 percent of school bonds were approved by voters. A California Policy Center **analysis conducted at the time** estimated the total of these local school bond measures set California voters back another \$15.5 billion. This sum is typical per election cycle, and doesn’t include statewide school bond measures, such as the **\$13 billion state bond for school construction** planned for the 2020 California ballot.

That state bond proposal for \$13 billion will “supplement” the billions, or possibly tens of billions, offered via hundreds of local school construction bonds proposals, set to appear on local ballots in March 2020, with more to come in November.

### **Not An Exemplary Candidate for More Construction Borrowing**

West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) faces **declining enrollment**, but to-date has been unwilling to close schools. Instead, last month the district **denied the renewal application** of John Henry Charter High School, despite a huge turnout at the hearing where impassioned parents, students, and former students begged the district to keep the school open. While acknowledging the “academic increases” achieved by the charter school, the board, as one of the members put it, would not support the charter school staying open due to the “financial impact charter schools have on the district” as it faces a 2020-21 projected deficit of roughly \$48 million.

***If every Californian over the age of 60 collected a pension that big, it would cost \$563 billion per year.***

An **excellent recent report** on the financial travails of WCCUSD was published on December 10th in the local *Richmond Standard*. The report notes a 2019-20 deficit of \$39.9 million, then quotes associate superintendent Tony Wold, as saying if they cut administrator positions, mostly assistant principals, they would save \$37 million, which “won’t be nearly enough to solve the deficit.” But wouldn’t saving \$37

million mean the deficit, at least for this year, would be reduced from \$39.9 million to \$2.9M? Wold also identified “non-salary expenditures” that could be cut, which suggests there might be a pathway out of the red.

Also mentioned as presenting a dire challenge to the solvency of WCCUSD are the “skyrocketing employee retirement costs,” which would include pensions as well as supplemental retirement health insurance benefits. You can say that again. In the *Richmond Standard* article, a table entitled “District Expenses Trends” shows projected “Employee Benefits” costs rising from \$70.2 million in 2015-16 to \$102.3 billion in 2019-20. Similarly, total salaries (“Certificated” and “Classified”) rose from \$168.8 million in 2015-16 to \$220.2 million in 2019-20.

In just four years, salary and benefit costs for WCCUSD have risen by \$83 million, an increase of 35 percent. During that same period, the Consumer Price Index has jumped a mere 7.6 percent. Perhaps the WCCUSD board of supervisors should ask themselves why they’ve approved salary and benefit increases over the past four years at over *five times* the rate of inflation.

### **Are WCCUSD Teachers Overpaid or Underpaid?**

Viewing data from *Transparent California*, you decide. Administrators are certainly not underpaid, with the first 100 records – nearly all of them administrators, all reporting individuals who are earning total compensation of \$150,000 per year or more. As for pensions, the average reported by *Transparent California* for WCCUSD retirees with 30 years of service is over \$67,000 per year, not including supplemental insurance benefits.

You don’t think that’s a lot? If every Californian over the age of 60 collected a pension that big, it would cost \$563 billion per year. And the *maximum* Social Security benefit, which requires a lifetime of high income and a retirement deferred till age 70, is only \$45,480 per year. The top pensioner from WCCUSD is earning a pension of over \$170,000 per year; 45 WCCUSD retirees earned a pension in 2018 that was over \$100,000.

But few would suggest that *good* teachers, anywhere, are overpaid. So how well are WCCUSD teachers doing their jobs?

According to *Ed Data*, in 2017-18, the **most recent year reporting**, 65.6 percent of WCCUSD students did not meet basic state standards in English literacy, and 76.7 percent of WCCUSD students did not meet basic state standards in Mathematics numeracy.

It is in the face of this dismal performance that Contra Costa’s board of supervisors, instead of cutting non classroom personnel, or having an honest conversation with the employees about sharing the cost of benefits, are closing a charter school that had strong community support from the parents, students and alumni. But apparently that’s not the right community.

## The War On Charter Schools

According to the group *In the Public Interest* (ITPI), working “in partnership with California’s West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) staff, directly measured the financial impact of charter schools on students who attend the district’s traditional public schools.” This group concluded that “Charter schools cost WCCUSD \$27.9 million during the 2016-17 school year.”

ITPI further recommended that “each California school district should produce an annual report assessing the economic impacts of charter school expansion on district students.” There are at least two huge problems with this recommendation. First, most school districts in California have overflowing classrooms, and since district revenue is based on student attendance, more students cramming into traditional public schools would mean more hiring and more construction, which does not solve the financial problem. And if classrooms are half empty, close schools and consolidate.

The financial problem facing California’s schools can only be solved by eliminating non classroom positions, requiring employees to pay more towards their benefits via payroll withholding, and empowering more charter schools, not fewer, since charter schools seem to be able to operate without budget deficits while turning in better overall educational outcomes.

Which brings us to the next flaw in ITPI’s recommendation. Along with better understanding of the allegedly negative financial impact that charter schools have on traditional public school districts, equal priority ought to be given to seeing how charter schools perform academically vs traditional public schools.

## WCCUSD’s Incredibly Wasteful Construction Legacy

A lot could be said about how recent school construction bond proceeds were misused by WCCUSD. But again much of the problems at WCCUSD are mirrored throughout the state. **As reported** in the *East Bay Times*, after disagreements over how some of WCCUSD’s previous construction bond funds were applied, in 2016 the district board ousted Bill Fay, associate superintendent of operations. Fay was criticized for not staying within budgets, but in response he said “costs often exceeded original estimates because the scope would increase due to the district’s desire to give communities everything they want.”

Board President Charles Ramsey, on the other hand, said “This is driven by standards. It’s not driven by scope.”

Standards is an interesting concept that financial reformers – whether their concern is schools, market housing, affordable housing, or homeless shelters – need to examine closely. Standards, from CEQA and ADA compliance to renewables mandates, myriad set asides, and literally countless other regulations, are the reason everything costs more in California.

An anecdotal example of this might be WCCUSD's \$21 million athletic stadium planned for El Cerrito High School. First of all, didn't they already have a stadium? What was wrong with that stadium? And what happened to the stadiums that alumni born before, say 1970, can clearly remember – the ones that consisted of bleachers constructed out of wood planks and metal scaffolding, positioned on either side of a running track of crushed granite, that surrounded a field of natural grass? Would that cost \$27 million?

Of course not. And as for going back to these standards? Why not? Try to find a coach that prefers artificial turf to real grass. They're few and far between. Try to find an honest study that proves that artificial turf creates a heat island requiring sprinklers, and uses a lot of toxic materials, that utterly negates its alleged environmental, water saving benefits. You won't, because synthetic turf contractors pay for the studies.

***The financial problem facing California's schools can only be solved by eliminating non classroom positions.***

Still, WCCUSD cannot explain all their prodigious spending away based on unavoidable "standards." In 2015 a grand jury was convened in Contra Costa County to investigate allegations of inadequate oversight on WCCUSD's construction bonds. The grand jury's findings ought to make any taxpayer cringe, along with the parents and students in WCCUSD. Three of the most egregious findings were:

- Property owners in WCCUSD pay 291 percent of the state average in school bond assessments on their property tax bills.
- The cost per square foot of school construction is three times the state average.
- Twenty-nine percent of the \$1.1 billion (nearly \$300 million) spent through June 2015 went for non-construction costs – program management and architect's fees.

Imagine that, paying *three times* the state average per square foot for school construction. To get an idea of just how much potentially wasted money that equates to, consider this: The average **cost per square foot nationally** for school construction is between \$211 (elementary schools) and \$243 (middle schools). But the grand jury report referenced the "state average," and when it comes to construction costs, California is anything but typical.

For example, earlier this year construction was completed on a new high school in Pinole Valley, part of WCCUSD. The facility encompassed 267,000 square feet and cost approximately \$250 million. This is nearly \$1,000 per square foot. Sure, there were demolition costs and costs for temporary structures included in that \$250 million, but total project costs always include extras. The real question is why are these costs anywhere close to \$1,000 per square foot? Why can't California's policymakers and judiciary figure out how to restore California's construction costs closer to national averages?



## Even the Mainstream Newspapers Oppose WCCUSD's New Bond

California's taxpayers have already spent billions and billions on construction projects that are hobbled with mandates and "standards" that have become an engine of legalized corruption. The padded, broken budgets that result are going to break the finances of Californians without ever solving anything. From homeless shelters and supportive housing to affordable housing to public schools, construction costs in California are out of control. It has become a scandal that even the historically quiescent media can no longer ignore.

The title of an editorial published on January 8th by the *San Jose Mercury* says it all, "Reject nearly broke Contra Costa school district's deceitful plan to borrow more money for construction." Subtitle: "Fiscally reckless Measure R bonds would drive up West County taxes, building costs to staggering \$70,000 per student."

The San Jose Mercury dedicated a generous amount of space to their editorial. At over 1,100 words and filled with facts, it goes into considerable depth describing both WCCUSD's "jaw dropping" waste of school construction money over the years and the appallingly mismanaged district finances. Perhaps the fourth estate is waking up. Perhaps their belated embrace of numeracy will channel their innate but highly selective skepticism down new avenues. We may hope.

Meanwhile, what the mainstream press can also do – along with the board of supervisors of West Contra Costa Unified School District, along with every other school board, continuum of care office, housing authority, and planning commission in the state – is confront the byzantine gaggle of regulations that has made construction cost far more in California than it does pretty much anywhere else in the world.

The education establishment, and their watchdogs, might also end their war on charter schools, first by no longer pretending the recent "compromise" was anything less than a defeat for education reform. They might reopen a *Vergara* type case, so teachers would have to earn tenure instead of having it granted after barely a year and a half of classroom observation, and so incompetent teachers could be fired, and so great teachers could be retained in a layoff. They might even stop thinking the notion of school vouchers, which would solve most of California's educational challenges literally overnight, and save the next generation of K-12 students, is a political bridge too far.

We seem to be able to do anything, with no cost too great, whenever it's "for the children," except, of course, when it steps on the toes of the teachers union, the pension funds, or the underwriters.

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**Edward Ring**



Edward Ring is a senior fellow of the Center for American Greatness. He is a co-founder of the California Policy Center, a free-market think tank based in Southern California, where he served as their first president

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Tagged charter schools, school bonds, school construction bond proceeds, the war on charter schools, WCCUSD, West Contra Costa School District bond

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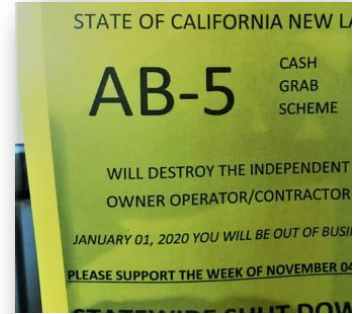
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December 18, 2019 8:11 pm

One thought on "West Contra Costa School District Putting a Half-Billion Bond Before Voters in March"



Showandtell

January 9, 2020 at 12:28 pm

Appreciate Edward Ring. From someone who has spent way too much time following how my local school district operates I see he has hit the nail on the head once again. It seems to me that has been written here about West Contra Costa School District can be generalized to apply to virtually every school district in California.

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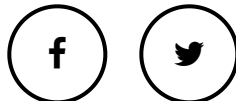
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**BREAKING NEWS** King tides rolling in along the coast Friday

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## **Editorial: Reject nearly broke Contra Costa school district's deceitful plan for more construction bonds**

Fiscally reckless Measure R bonds would drive up West County taxes, building costs to staggering \$70,000 per student



Visitors tour building B at the newly constructed campus at Dincolo

By **EAST BAY TIMES EDITORIAL** |

PUBLISHED: January 8, 2020 at 5:10 am | UPDATED: January 10, 2020 at 7:56 am

As West Contra Costa schools teeter on the brink of insolvency, district officials are seeking to raise taxes — not to address their budget crisis but rather to issue more bonds for an out-of-control school construction program.

It's fiscal recklessness.

Voters should reject Measure R on the March 3 ballot. The deceptively worded measure, which never mentions that taxes will rise, exemplifies district deceit that continues despite a new generation of administrators and school board members.

Bonds are not free money. They are a form of borrowing that must be repaid by raising property taxes. If school officials have their way, West Contra Costa homeowners will pay the East Bay's highest tax rates for school bonds.

In the past two decades, the district issued \$1.4 billion of school construction bonds. That's the fifth largest amount of any K-12 system in California, surpassed only by four much-larger districts. On a per-student basis, West Contra Costa Unified School District's construction program, at \$44,342 for each child, far surpasses the other four districts.

Yet school officials want more. They already plan to issue another \$200 million in bonds this year that voters previously authorized. With Measure R, they're seeking to add \$575 million, which would bring the total to a jaw-dropping \$2.2 billion.

That would be about \$70,000 — \$70,000! — for every student in the district. This at a time when the district's last review showed West Contra Costa schools are underutilized and enrollment is expected to decline. This for a construction program that has been rolling in dough, [lacked cost controls](#) and was plagued by [pay-to-play complaints](#) from vendors.

School officials are oblivious to the financial impact on property owners and, when landlords justifiably pass on the cost, tenants. Measure R would further drive up the price of housing in a district that stretches from El Cerrito to Hercules and includes some of the Bay Area's worst pockets of poverty in

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The timing is appalling. While asking voters for even more money for school construction, the district cannot afford its annual operations costs. If school officials were going to consider a tax increase, they should have thought first about one to retain teachers, who frequently leave because they are underpaid.

It's like a family trying to buy a fancy house when it cannot afford groceries, car payments and utility bills. New construction is nice, but West Contra Costa officials have lost track of the basics — teaching children. They don't seem to care that residents have limited resources for new taxes. They keep indiscriminately coming back for more.

In 2010, the district's then-superintendent, Bruce Harter, said that \$1.3 billion would be enough to meet the district's construction needs. Voters gave him what he requested and even more two years later. Now officials say they need another \$1 billion, for which Measure R is just the start. It never ends; it's outrageous.

Meanwhile, the district's operations budget has imploded. Two years ago, West Contra Costa granted raises to its teachers, lowered class sizes and added assistant principals. Then, Superintendent Matthew Duffy discovered that the district couldn't afford the additional costs.

This fiscal year, district spending will exceed income by \$40 million. Next year, the shortfall will reach \$49 million. Cuts must be made. To cover costs in the meantime, district officials plan to use more than half of the emergency reserves and nearly drain savings that were supposed to be used for future employee retiree health care benefits.

Yet Measure R would do nothing to help fix this mess. The money from a new bond measure would be for construction, not for operations.

## **What it will cost**

West Contra Costa school officials have a history of trying to pile on taxes. First, the district has two separate parcel taxes to help pay for operations. One is a fixed amount, the other is based on the square footage of a property's building. Added together, the owner of a district-average 1,361-square-foot home pays \$170 per year in parcel taxes.

Second, there are the much heftier taxes to repay school construction bonds. Since 1998, voters have approved new bond issues and accompanying tax increases six times. In 2014, they rejected the seventh request.



That means the owner of a single-family home assessed at a district average \$346,830 currently pays \$888 per year just to help retire school construction bonds. That would increase to \$1,082 each year if Measure R passes. As another example, the owner of property assessed at \$500,000 would see the annual tax for school bonds increase from \$1,280 to \$1,560.

Paying off the debt, which would not begin to significantly decline until 2035, would stretch through 2055, leaving the next generation to help cover the excesses of the current one.

## Ballot deceit

None of the past bond measures and current taxes are mentioned in the ballot wording, or in the official tax rate statement and county counsel's analysis in the booklet mailed to voters. It's as if Measure R existed in a vacuum. Voters are being asked to let the district take out a new credit card with no mention of the six they've already run up to their limits.

The deliberately manipulative ballot wording also never mentions that Measure R would increase taxes. It calls for "issuing \$575 million of bonds, at legal rates, averaging \$34.48 million annually while bonds are outstanding, at 6¢ per \$100 assessed value."

The district is banking on voters not deciphering that sentence. For those who miss it, the last clause is the expected amount of the new tax, which works out to \$60 per \$100,000 of assessed value each year. Neither the word "tax" or "increase" are used in the 75-word summary.

With the replacement of the entire school board in the past two elections and the hiring of a new superintendent, we had hoped to see responsible leadership and an end to the ballot deception. We're disappointed: Only Trustee Tom Panas has objected to Measure R.

At a certain point, this district needs to get its priorities straight. Sure, it would be nice to put every student in a brand new or refurbished school. But officials should first figure out how many schools they actually need and how they are going to pay their teachers and other staff.

The gluttonous spending on buildings must stop. Vote no on Measure R.

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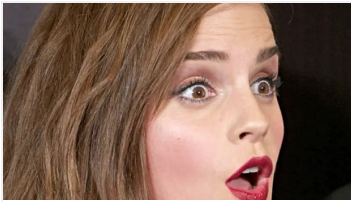
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## 25 Actors Who Turned Down Major Movie Roles



By **upbeat**

Some of the most iconic roles in films could've been played by different actors.

## District Considers Renaming Richmond School After Michelle Obama

January 7, 2020 at 10:43 am

Filed Under: [Michelle Obama](#), [Richmond](#), [West Contra Costa Unified School District](#), [Wilson Elementary School](#)

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RICHMOND (CBS SF) — School district officials in Contra Costa County will consider a request by students and parents to change the name of Wilson Elementary School.

An ad hoc committee will take up the request at 6 p.m. Thursday at a meeting at Grant Elementary School at 2400 Downer Ave. in Richmond, according to the West Contra Costa Unified School District.



Wilson Elementary School, Richmond (WCCUSD)

Wilson Elementary, which is currently being rebuilt with students using a temporary campus in El Cerrito, is named after Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the

United States. Wilson's legacy has come under increased scrutiny in recent years over his administration's race relations and segregationist policies.

Parents and students want to rename the school after Michelle Obama, the former first lady of the United States. At Thursday's meeting, members of the public and other people interested in the idea can voice their opinion.

A second meeting will be held on Jan. 23 and the location for that meeting will be announced soon.

Board policy 7310 outlines the process for renaming a school. Community members can also send their comments to the committee via email at [communications@wccusd.net](mailto:communications@wccusd.net).

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**BREAKING NEWS** King tides rolling in along the coast Friday

[News](#) > [Education](#)

## East Bay parents, students want to name school after Michelle Obama



Panel will consider request to rename Wilson Elementary in West Contra Costa Unified School District.



Former First Lady Michelle Obama takes the stage at the SAP Center during her “Becoming” book tour stop in San Jose, Calif., on Friday, Dec. 14, 2018. Obama’s memoir was released on November 13th. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group)

By **JON KAWAMOTO** | [jkawamoto@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:jkawamoto@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group  
PUBLISHED: January 6, 2020 at 5:29 pm | UPDATED: January 7, 2020 at 12:15 pm

RICHMOND — If students and parents at Wilson Elementary School have their way, their school will be renamed after former First Lady Michelle Obama.

A committee will meet at 6 p.m. Thursday to consider the request and to hear what residents think about the proposal. The meeting will be at Grant Elementary School, 2400 Downer Ave., Richmond, according to a news release from the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

Wilson Elementary's temporary campus is at 7150 Portola Drive, El Cerrito.

The committee will meet a second time on Jan. 23, district spokesman Marcus Walton said. The location of that meeting will be announced later.

Community members who want to weigh in should send comments to [communications@wccusd.net](mailto:communications@wccusd.net).

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Tags: [Barack Obama](#), [Celebrities](#), [east bay regional](#), [Education](#), [K 12 Education](#), [Michelle Obama](#), [Regional](#), [West Contra Costa Unified School District](#)

**Jon Kawamoto** is a reporter covering the Lamorinda area, Danville and San Ramon. He was the Hills weeklies editor, in charge of the Alameda Journal, Berkeley Voice, El Cerrito Journal, The Montclarion and The Piedmonter. He previously worked as an editor with the Los Angeles Times, the Contra Costa Times and the Oakland Tribune. Kawamoto is a central California native and a graduate of Fresno State University.

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these children's literary masterpieces are too funny not to be shared.

# Parents call to rename Wilson Elementary after Michelle Obama

January 6, 2020



*Wilson Elementary prior to the ongoing rebuild of the campus at 629 42nd St. in Richmond.*

Should Woodrow Wilson Elementary School be renamed after former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama?

Some parents and students at the school, which is operating on a temporary campus in El Cerrito while its permanent campus is being rebuilt at 629 42nd St. in Richmond, say yes. In a [September letter](#), PTA President Maisha Cole asked the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) Board of Trustees to consider changing the school's current name recognizing Woodrow Wilson, the nation's 28th president, to honor the influential wife of Barack Obama, the 44th president.

An ad hoc board committee is set to meet and consider the name change at Grant Elementary, 2400 Downer Ave. in Richmond, on Thursday, Jan. 9, at 6 p.m., according to WCCUSD. A second meeting on the issue will occur Jan. 23 at a yet-announced location.

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In recent years, President Wilson’s legacy has been under attack on school campuses over his [pro-segregation acts](#) while as president from 1913 to 1921. Students at [Princeton University](#) and also [Wilson High](#) in Washington D.C. have made passionate calls to scrub the name Woodrow Wilson from facilities. Princeton’s Board of Trustees ultimately decided to keep the name — Wilson was a president of the university. For a biography on the WWI-era president, a complicated figure famous for enacting antitrust laws, establishing the Federal Reserve System and winning the Nobel Peace Prize for helping form the League of Nations, go [here](#).

In her letter to WCCUSD, Cole said the upcoming state-of-the-art campus on 42nd Street provides a fresh start for the school, which deserves a new name.

“We are prepared to testify as to why we feel that the current name does not reflect who we are as a community, as well as why the name we are proposing is much more fitting,” Cole’s letter states.

As outlined by WCCUSD Board policy, district facilities can be renamed after individuals who are living or deceased, who have made outstanding contributions to the WCCUSD or the educational community, or who have made contributions of state, national or worldwide significance. Names can also recognize geographic areas in which the school or building is located. The policy also states the “renaming of existing schools or major facilities shall occur only under extraordinary circumstances and after thorough study.”

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**Mike Aldax**