

West Contra Costa Unified School District
Office of the Superintendent

Friday Memo
September 13, 2019

Upcoming Events – Matthew Duffy

September 15: El Sobrante Stroll and Parade, 11:00 AM
September 18: Board of Education, DeJean, 6:30 PM
September 24: Agenda Setting, Superintendent's Office, 4:30 PM
September 24: AASAT Meeting, DeJean Library, 6:00 PM
September 25: Governance Committee, Alvarado, 6:00 PM
September 26: County Teacher of the Year Awards, Concord Hilton, 7:00 PM
September 27: Helms Internationals Academy Grand Opening, 9:45 - 11:15 AM
Sept. 29-Oct. 1: WASC Visit, Richmond High School
October 1: International Baccalaureate Verification Visit, Richmond High, 8:00 AM

Upcoming Agenda Items September 18 - Matthew Duffy

Budget
Mindful Life Project

Unaudited Actuals Presentation - Matthew Duffy

This note outlines important information about documents and information that will be posted today and next week.

When the agenda is published tonight, we will publish a set of SACS forms that give final information about our final spending in 2018-2019. This is the "closing of the books." You will see that the projected budget for 19-20 has not been revised at this time on the SACS form. We are still working to finalize projected expenditures for the 19-20 school year now because the closing of the books helps drive and determine the projected spending for the current year. Our final figures from last year give us the best look at anticipated spending for this year. We will be working on this data and presentation all the way until the Board meeting.

On Wednesday, we will bring projected expenditures for the 19-20 school year including numbers that represent the size of the structural deficit we will be facing. The projected expenditures for 19-20 and the current revenues will be shared in the PPT which will tell the story of where we are and outline our next steps.

The County Office of Education continues to fully support our work and the process and timeline that we are outlining. Our report will be very thorough and comprehensive with a full set of slides that tell the story. I have worked very closely with Tony Wold and our team to be fully prepared, share our story and have next steps laid out. After the Board presentation, we will be sharing the story with all of our major stakeholders through a series of meetings. I am looking forward to a very productive session on Wednesday and I firmly believe that we can conquer the road ahead.

West Contra Costa Unified School District
Office of the Superintendent

Media Stories of Interest - Marcus Walton

The following articles may be of interest to the Board:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-wall-street-flips-municipal-bonds-towns-and-schools-pay-the-price-11568302887> - When Wall Street Flips Municipal Bonds, Towns and Schools Pay the Price

<https://richmondstandard.com/richmond/2019/09/06/richmond-high-issue-statement-in-wake-of-charges-against-colleague/> - Richmond High teachers issue statement in the wake of charges against colleague

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/09/10/richmond-bans-sale-of-e-cigarettes/> - Richmond bans sale of e-cigarettes

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/As-Trump-vows-to-halt-sale-of-flavored-vaping-14431866.php> - As Trump vows to halt sale of flavored vaping products, two more Bay Area cities ban e-cigarettes

<https://richmondstandard.com/richmond/2019/09/12/assassins-creed-creator-ubisoft-brings-virtual-museum-to-kennedy-high/> - Assassin's Creed creator Ubisoft brings virtual museum to Kennedy High

Letter of Support for SB 328 - Marcus Walton

The attached letter was submitted in support of SB 328.

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-wall-street-flips-municipal-bonds-towns-and-schools-pay-the-price-11568302887>

When Wall Street Flips Municipal Bonds, Towns and Schools Pay the Price

A Journal analysis of trading data suggests new bonds often are underpriced, which means taxpayers will pay more in interest

By Tom McGinty and Heather Gillers

Sept. 12, 2019 11:41 am ET

When the West Contra Costa Unified School District in California needed money to repair and upgrade deteriorating classrooms, it hired Piper Jaffray Cos. to sell \$191 million of municipal bonds.

As far as school officials knew, the March 2016 sale went off flawlessly, enabling the district to refinance older debt and tackle tasks such as removing asbestos and upgrading science labs.

However, within a day of the initial sale, the original buyers sold, or “flipped,” \$35 million of the district’s bonds for a profit of \$306,000, a Wall Street Journal analysis of trading in the bonds found.

Within 10 trading days, the post-offering trading had generated \$1.24 million of market-adjusted profits. Piper Jaffray participated in some of that trading, buying back bonds and reselling them.

Newly issued municipal bonds, which are marketed as long-term investments, aren’t supposed to trade like that. The post-offering buying and selling suggests West Contra Costa’s bonds—sold in what is called a negotiated offering—were initially underpriced. That means the district will pay more in interest over the life of the bonds than it would if the bonds had been priced closer to what subsequent investors paid.

“That’s money being left on the table that costs taxpayers and rate payers and governments,” said Patrick Clancy, who recently retired after 30 years as a financial adviser to local governments issuing bonds. “That’s not the way it’s supposed to go.”

A Journal analysis of municipal-bond data found such post-offering trading to be routine. About \$60 billion, or roughly 5%, of newly issued bonds in negotiated offerings between

2013 and 2017 were sold to customers who turned around and sold them to dealers within a single day of the initial offering, usually for a profit, the Journal found.

Prices on those flipped bonds were then marked up further as they were sold to longer-term investors, bringing the total market-adjusted profits to more than \$900 million. The Journal's investigation found that those profiting from the flipping often include the banks hired to price and sell the bonds.

Piper Jaffray, which was paid about \$500,000 to act as the lead underwriter, said in a written statement that the California school-district bonds were priced "fairly and successfully." It said: "Our secondary market trading was a small fraction of the total trading volume."

The district's financial adviser, Blake Boehm of municipal advisory firm KNN Public Finance, briefed the school board not long after the bond sale, deeming it "very successful." After the Journal shared its findings about post-offering trading with the West Contra Costa district, then-Associate Superintendent John al-Amin said that those findings "are deeply concerning and would undermine the faith bond issuers have in the municipal market."

Although underwriters often make money by reselling flipped bonds, that doesn't appear to be their primary motive.

Underwriters are obligated to purchase any bonds they can't place with customers, which ties up cash and exposes them to risk. So they have an incentive to price the bonds to move—and, if necessary, to sell them to customers who have no intention of holding them for long. When those customers want to sell, the underwriter often will step in to buy.

Under federal rules, underwriters have a duty to set prices that are "fair and reasonable" taking into consideration all relevant factors, including their "best judgment" of the fair market value. In recent years, the Securities and Exchange Commission has begun enforcement efforts aimed at protecting issuers during the pricing and sale of bonds.

In June, the SEC announced a settlement with an underwriter for selling bonds for the public library in Harvey, Ill., "at a price which was below market price for comparable bonds." The SEC said the underwriter, IFS Securities, failed to make a sufficient effort to market and place the debt. The settlement marked the first time the SEC has determined that underwriter pricing behavior violated the fair dealing standard, even though there was no fraud or misrepresentation. IFS, which didn't admit or deny the findings, didn't respond to requests for comment.

The identity of buyers and sellers of municipal bonds isn't public information. The Journal identified some using regulatory reports insurers file with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, or NAIC.



The Securities and Exchange Commission has begun enforcement efforts aimed at protecting issuers during the pricing and sale of bonds. PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

During the period of the Journal's analysis, insurers bought and quickly sold \$3.7 billion of newly issued municipal bonds, the filings show. Of that total, \$2.6 billion, or 70%, was sold back to the underwriter that had just priced and sold the bonds. The underwriter paid the insurer more than the initial price 88% of the time.

That pattern played out with a \$3.7 million bond that was part of the West Contra Costa offering:

In recent months, municipal-bond prices have risen following years of decline in borrowing by state and local issuers due to changes in tax law and financial constraints on governments.

When cities and school districts decide to sell municipal bonds, they engage securities firms to underwrite them. Generally, the public entities have two options. They can put the bonds up for competitive bids and award them to the securities firms that price them with the lowest interest cost. Or they can choose an underwriter in what is known as a negotiated offering. Negotiated offerings account for about 75% of the money raised in bond offerings.

Suppose a town needs to raise \$20 million to build a new town hall. The securities firm it selects as lead underwriter examines the town's finances, as well as interest rates for U.S. Treasuries and other municipal bonds. Then it gauges investor appetite for the town's bonds at different interest rates and maturity dates.

The underwriter, after consulting with the issuer, slices the total amount to be raised into a series of bonds with different interest rates and maturity dates, then buys the bonds at a discount to their offering prices—typically less than half a percentage point. The difference between the discounted price and what the underwriter sells them for is the underwriter's pay.

The underwriting process sets up an obvious conflict. The municipal issuer wants to pay the lowest possible interest rate. The underwriter wants to ensure the bonds will be attractive enough to easily resell to investors and bond dealers. The Municipal Securities Rulemaking Board, or MSRB, which writes rules for underwriters, requires them to disclose that they have “financial and other interests that differ from those of the issuer.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How closely should local governments monitor municipal-bond underwriters? Join the conversation below.

Many issuers engage advisers to help navigate the process and monitor the underwriters.

Prairie-Hills Elementary School District 144, which serves pre-kindergartners through eighth-graders in Chicago’s economically struggling south suburbs, didn’t hire an adviser when it issued bonds in 2016. It needed money to add vestibules to school entrances so its staff could see and talk with visitors before buzzing them in, the superintendent said. An elementary-school roof needed to be replaced. School board members were eager to add air conditioning to classrooms.

The district hired Oppenheimer & Co., which priced and sold about \$20 million of municipal bonds on March 22, 2016. By the end of the first trading day, one-quarter of the bonds had been flipped, some of them back to Oppenheimer itself, according to the Journal’s analysis.



The Prairie-Hills school district near Chicago, which includes the Fieldcrest Elementary School, hired Oppenheimer & Co. to sell about \$20 million of municipal bonds. PHOTO: PICTOMETRY

Oppenheimer, a unit of Oppenheimer Holdings Inc., bought back about \$1.6 million in bonds it had sold to insurer Continental Casualty Co. just hours earlier, then resold them for a profit of

\$10,969, NAIC and MSRB trading records show. Continental made \$10,530.

Trading in the first 10 days after the offering netted Oppenheimer and traders at other firms nearly \$700,000, or about \$540,000 when adjusted to account for movements in the broader market.

Continental Casualty flipped bonds with underwriters 845 times between 2013 and 2017, the most of any insurer appearing in the Journal's analysis. A spokesman declined to discuss those trades, saying by email: "We are not going to share any insights into this practice at this time."

The trading profits suggest the bonds were underpriced, meaning taxpayers will wind up spending additional money for interest payments.

Oppenheimer said in written statements it had followed its standard protocol and is "confident that the pricing of the bonds was fair, reasonable and equitable to the district."

It said 2016 was a difficult financial year for Illinois and Cook County, and there was "significant uncertainty as to whether state aid would be available to fund the district's budget."

The district's bonds, however, were somewhat insulated from those concerns because they were insured, earning them a rating of AA by Standard & Poor's, now S&P Global. Oppenheimer said that while it "sought buy-and-hold market participants, traditional buyers except for one, did not participate."

Last year, the Prairie-Hills district discussed issuing another bond to turn an old junior-high school into a building that could house a magnet school and alternative school programs. If the district decides to issue bonds, it will hire a municipal adviser, said Superintendent Kimako Patterson.

The Journal's analysis "is of intense interest and concern," the superintendent said. "Districts pretty much depend on companies like Oppenheimer to be honest and do what's in our best interest."

The MSRB, a self-regulatory organization overseen by the SEC, established the rule saying that underwriters have a duty to set "fair and reasonable" prices, but its rules also say the underwriter isn't required to "exert its best efforts to obtain the 'most favorable' pricing" unless it tells the issuer it will do that.

In an interview, MSRB senior adviser and former general counsel Michael Post said: "We have longstanding rules that require underwriters to treat issuers fairly and to purchase the bonds in an underwriting at a fair price." He declined to comment on specific trades in the Journal's analysis.

In 2017, the Washington Economic Development Finance Authority sold \$134 million of tax-exempt bonds on behalf of a private company building a facility that would convert farm waste to paper pulp. The company, Columbia Pulp I LLC, paid Goldman Sachs & Co. \$3.8 million, or about 2.9% of the money raised, to underwrite the bonds.

The unit of Goldman Sachs Group Inc. set prices so the bonds would generate annual interest of 7.75% for buyers—a high yield indicative of the speculative nature of the company’s new technology. Goldman sold the bonds in 25 trades, all at 11 a.m. on July 25, 2017.

A little more than an hour later, some of the original buyers sold \$10.75 million of the bonds to dealers at 5.3% more than they had just paid, generating profits of \$571,000.

Later that day, according to NAIC filings, Goldman bought back \$6.6 million of bonds it had sold to insurers for \$376,000 more than the buyers had paid. Trading records show Goldman then resold those bonds for a \$42,000 profit.

Within 10 trading days of the initial sale, \$32 million of the bonds were flipped by initial buyers, the Journal analysis showed. Goldman and the dealers and customers who bought and resold them made market-adjusted profits totaling \$2.2 million.

Columbia Pulp declined to comment. In a written statement, the Economic Development Finance Authority said it “does not assume responsibility for or monitor secondary market trading in its bond issues.”



The post-offering buying and selling suggests bonds sold by the West Contra Costa school district, where John F. Kennedy High School is located, were initially underpriced. PHOTO: BRIAN L. FRANK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After the West Contra Costa bond offering in 2016, the underwriter, Piper Jaffray, said in a report to the school district that 23 financial firms and 16 smaller investors had bought \$180 million of the \$191 million in bonds. The report identified those firms as “going-away” buyers.

The district's financial adviser, Mr. Boehm, later told the school board: "The term 'going away' means that...these are true buyers. These are not dealers looking to just buy the bonds for purposes of putting [them] in the trading inventory."

A Piper Jaffray spokeswoman said the firm didn't intend to give school officials the impression that the \$180 million worth of bonds wouldn't be resold.

Write to Tom McGinty at tom.mcginty@wsj.com and Heather Gillers at heather.gillers@wsj.com

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Richmond High teachers issue statement in wake of charges against colleague

September 6, 2019



Richmond High at 1250 23rd St.

Teachers at Richmond High released a statement Thursday in the wake of sex crime charges against one of their colleagues.

Israel Ayala Lopez, 26, the school's P.E. teacher since 2017, was arrested last week and charged with four counts of unlawful sexual intercourse with a 15 year old student, and four counts of lewd/lascivious acts upon a child for sexual gratification (where the child is 14/15 and the suspect is 10 years or older than the child.).

The student reported the information to a school resource officer, who followed up and communicated with the principal and district and determined an arrest needed to be made, police said. The criminal counts allegedly span back to April, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

In response to the charges, the West Contra Costa Unified School District placed Lopez on leave.

Like the district, teachers expressed sadness and disappointment over the charges in their statement Thursday.

Israel Ayala Lopez

"We must take responsibility for the wrongs this teacher has been charged with and support the students and families," according to the statement, which is posted full below. "As educators of Richmond High School, we will not tolerate victim blaming or cyberbullying, and we will work to help our students understand the complex power dynamics that were abused to harm one of our students."

The United Teachers of Richmond, the union representing Richmond High educators, added, "When one person make a horrible decision others, in this case many others, are left to repair the damage done to the community, especially to the students."

The RHS teachers' statement in full:

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To the Richmond and San Pablo community:

This long overdue letter comes after multiple days of anguish, grief, confusion, sadness, anger and disappointment. The recent events surrounding Mr. Israel Ayala Lopez and a student of ours have left us shaken to our core. As a school community, we believe it is our responsibility to believe and support our students.

At Richmond High School, we have been working diligently to create safe and academically enriching spaces that provide students with the best opportunities for fulfilling their own potential. This includes building trusting and appropriate relationships among students and staff. The actions that Mr. Ayala has been charged with is causing great harm to the progress we have made as a Richmond High Staff. We recognize that our school's trust with the community, and most importantly our students, has been broken. Mr. Ayala was a member of our family and the actions he is charged with abused the immense privilege we have as educators. This incident jeopardizes the relationship we work tirelessly to build with students, families and staff. We recognize it will take time to restore the harm that has been done.

The process of restoring the harm committed is not simple. We must take responsibility for the wrongs this teacher has been charged with and support the students and families. As educators of Richmond High School, we will not tolerate victim blaming or cyberbullying, and we will work to help our students understand the complex power dynamics that were abused to harm one of our students. We are dedicated to improving the academic, social and emotional being of our students throughout our training in Restorative Justice and culturally responsive teaching.

We encourage you to ask your students about the conversations they are holding in our classrooms. Some of these discussions include:

- Resources available at school for student safety and mental health
- How to report inappropriate behavior
- Victim blaming and shaming
- Cyberbullying
- Power dynamics and teacher responsibility

We welcome all questions, concerns, and suggestions from the community as we ground ourselves in an effort to build a truly community based school with community interests at heart.

Wholeheartedly,

Concerned Teachers from Richmond High School

Mike Aldax

Business

Richmond bans sale of e-cigarettes

The city follows in the footsteps of San Francisco, which was the first city to ban the controversial products



FILE – In this April 23, 2014 file photo, a man smokes an electronic cigarette in Chicago. A House panel is again trying to exempt increasingly popular e-cigarettes from new Food and Drug Administration rules. The legislation approved July 12, 2017, by the Republican-controlled Appropriations Committee would prevent the FDA from requiring retroactive safety reviews of e-cigarettes already on the market. It would exempt some premium and large cigars from those same regulations. E-cigarette products introduced in the future would face the safety reviews. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File)

By **ALI TADAYON** | atadayon@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
PUBLISHED: September 10, 2019 at 10:09 pm | UPDATED: September 11, 2019 at 3:29 pm

Richmond City Council members voted unanimously Tuesday to give final approval to the ban, which would go into effect at the start of 2020. The council initially OK'd the ban July 23.

The ban applies to all e-cigarette products that have not obtained a premarket review order from the FDA, which is most of them, according to the proposal from Mayor Tom Butt. [San Francisco](#) became the first city to ban e-cigarette products that have not been approved by the FDA back in June. Michigan, last week, became the first state to [pass the ban](#).

At Tuesday's council meeting, Butt said the issue was personal. Butt's mother died from emphysema, and his father died of lung cancer. Both were smokers.

He also said the issue is important to Richmond, which he said has been targeted by the e-cigarette industry "as a place that's ripe for e-cigarettes." Earlier this year, he said, Juul gave the Richmond Police Athletic League an \$89,000 grant to discourage children from smoking. Butt said Juul's true intention is "to build legitimacy for this product" in Richmond.

Several Richmond High School students testified to the popularity of vaping at their school, despite it being illegal to sell the products to minors. One student said that her 12-year-old cousin was recently caught smoking an e-cigarette.

"They think it's harmless," said junior Andrea Rosillo.

U.S. federal government survey figures show that last year, one in five U.S. high school students reported vaping in the previous month. The [U.S. surgeon general](#) has called the surge in youth e-cigarette use an "epidemic."

Shop owners at Tuesday's meeting urged the City Council not to pass the ban, saying they refuse to sell to minors and thus should not be punished for the products getting into the hands of children. Merchant Evan Curry said the products would still be sold illegally in the city just like menthol cigarettes and other flavored tobacco products that [Richmond banned last year](#).

"All you're really doing is taking money out of the pockets of hard-working shop owners," Curry said.

Activist Cheryl Sudduth said people should think of the ban in terms of how it will prevent children from vaping, not in terms of money.

"It's disappointing to hear people equate the loss of revenue with the lives of young people when we know that the chemicals that are in these products can cause irreversible lung damage," Sudduth said.

"These chemicals can stunt the growth of brain tissue. We can bring in new products, new revenue but we cannot bring in new children, we can't bring in new lives for young people and adults," she said.

products, two more Bay Area cities ban e-cigarettes

Catherine Ho

Sep. 11, 2019 | Updated: Sep. 11, 2019 12:02 p.m.



Owner Amit Oli at Haight Street Tobacco shows Juul products on his shelves. San Francisco is seeking a ban on e-cigarettes, which Juul is challenging with a ballot measure.

Photo: Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

As President Donald Trump vowed Wednesday to force companies to stop selling flavored vaping products, two Bay Area cities this week moved forward on legislation banning the sale of e-cigarettes altogether, regardless of flavor.

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had the option to either repeal its ordinance or put the referendum on the ballot; it did the latter. Now, voters will decide whether to ban the sale of e-cigarettes in their city.

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Both cities modeled their legislation after San Francisco’s ordinance, which passed in June. The actions, intended to curb rising rates of teen vaping, are significant because while many U.S. cities are banning the sale of flavored e-cigarettes — such as the fruit- and candy-flavored nicotine cartridges popular among teens — few are banning the sale of all e-cigarettes, which also come in unflavored versions that taste like regular tobacco.

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BIZ & TECH

BY CATHERINE HO

SF campaign to measure gets su

Meanwhile, concerns are mounting over at least 450 cases of vaping-related lung illnesses nationwide; there have been six confirmed deaths so far. The cases involve people who used both cannabis vaping products and nicotine vaping products, but officials have yet to pinpoint an exact substance that caused the illnesses.

In San Francisco, Juul is behind a high-profile push to overturn the city’s e-cigarettes ban. It has

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Richmond by sponsoring a ballot measure or referendum.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt, who authored the legislation, said Juul “would have to have a lot of balls to do another one of these challenges.”

Butt said the recent reports of vaping illnesses helped convince other council members, some of whom were initially skeptical about stopping adults who can legally buy the products from accessing the products, to unanimously support the legislation.

“There was a lot of information out there about the danger of vaping but a lot of it was still tentative,” he said. “Just in the last month, there’s just been a landslide of new information coming out. Hundreds of people are getting sick all over the country, suffering lung damage...It’s just all bad.”

Richmond is one of a handful of U.S. cities where Juul sponsored school programs or after-school programs — which Juul says it has since discontinued — to tell students about vaping, according to a an investigation by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

In 2018, Juul gave the Richmond Police Activities League an \$89,000 grant to help design a youth program for middle and high school students who had been suspended for vaping. Juul also paid a charter school in Baltimore \$134,000 to create a five-week camp to promote healthy living, and visited students at a New York City school and told them Juul products were safe, according to testimony from students.

Butt said Richmond may be an attractive market to Juul because it has many residents of color. Tobacco companies have long been criticized for targeting poor black communities, particularly by marketing menthol cigarettes.

Bruce Harter, a retired superintendent for the West Contra Costa Unified School District, served as a consultant for Juul to help coordinate the curriculum for schools, according to emails obtained by lawmakers as part of the congressional investigation.

Catherine Ho is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: cho@sfchronicle.com Twitter:

@Cat_Ho

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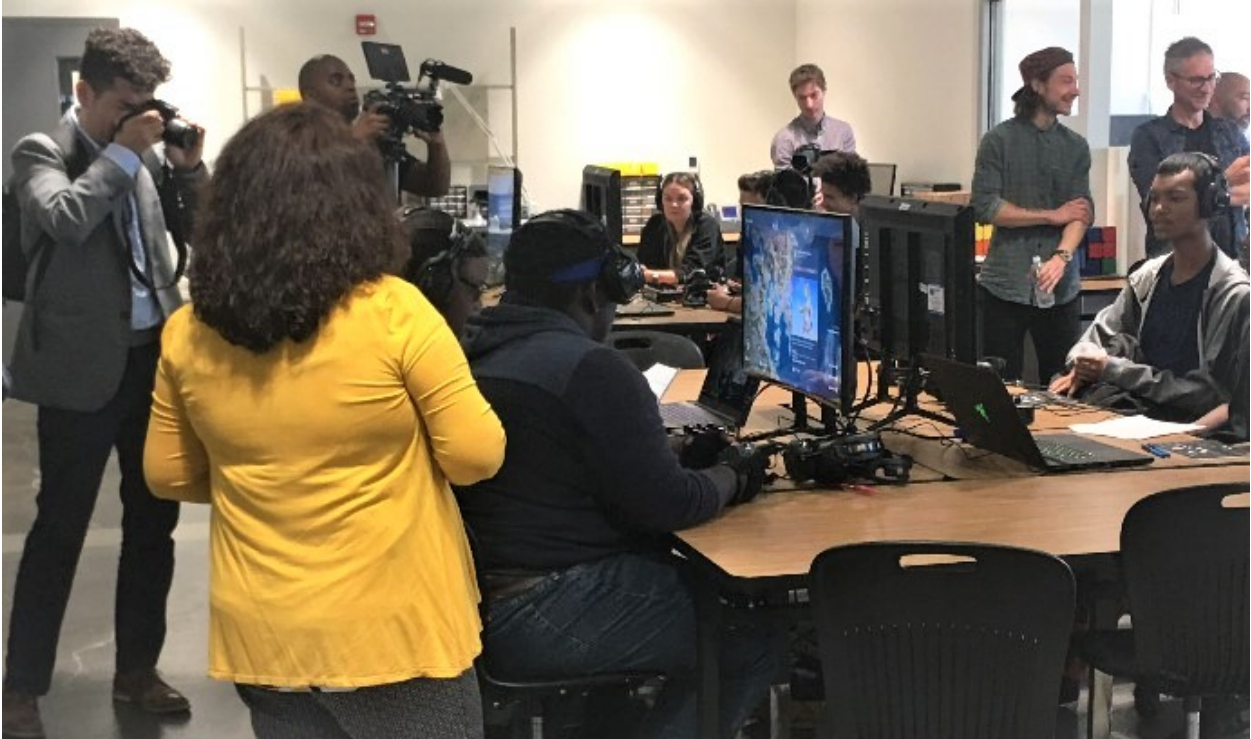
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Assassin's Creed creator Ubisoft brings virtual museum to Kennedy High

September 12, 2019



Kennedy High students test out the new Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece educational gaming program, a partnership between game maker Ubisoft and the West Contra Costa Unified School District on Wednesday, Sept. 11, 2019.

Maxime Durant has spent a good part of his career working on the popular Assassin's Creed series, but he's not a computer programmer. He's a historian who was tapped by game maker Ubisoft to ensure cultural and historical accuracy in the gaming world.

The result is an incredibly rich, detailed and authentic virtual world, which led Durant and Ubisoft to a clever idea: Why not use these worlds to educate students about history?

On Wednesday, Durand visited the Fab Lab at Kennedy High in Richmond to launch Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece, a new dedicated mode of Assassin's Creed Odyssey that allows people to explore Ubisoft's recreation of Ancient Greece "free of conflict, time pressure or gameplay constraints."

"Players can roam freely or explore the world through guided tours made with the help of specialized historians that encourage players to learn more about its history and daily life, as it stood in 431 BC," according to Ubisoft.

The update is free and available to anyone who owns the game.

The new partnership between Ubisoft and the West Contra Costa Unified School District will feature activities throughout the year involving the game project. Ubisoft provided several teachers with licenses to use in their classrooms.

"We're really excited about this," WCCUSD Superintendent Matthew Duffy said at Wednesday's launch event. "You are going to get a really amazing opportunity to look at video game software and design, but not in the usual ways that you look at it."

Duffy said the new educational gaming technology further enhances the the 4,000 square foot Fab Lab at Kennedy High, a center of technology funded by a Chevron Richmond grant that allows students and local residents to innovate, design and produce pretty much anything using advanced technologies such as computers, 3D and laser printers, vinyl cutters and a mini mill.

During Wednesday's launch of the Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece, Durant expressed the extent to which creative directors behind Ubisoft's globally popular games strive to achieve historical and cultural accuracy.

"We work with historians, with technologists, archeologists, architects," Durant said.

In the creation of Assassin's Creed Origins, which also features a Discovery Tour option, an Egyptologist from UCLA helped "us understand how the cities work, their political systems," the historian said.

The game makers go beyond academic experts, reaching out to members of communities to ensure accuracy.

"It's not only about having historical information," Durant said. "History is not only about the past, it's also about the present, about the way people see and understand the past."

Members of those communities even help write the game script to ensure accuracy in language and respect for culture and beliefs. The game makers go on site when possible as part of the research process.

Photos and reporting by Rafael Lima
