

Schools dropping provider over racist and sexist lessons

Reed district joins decision after parents elsewhere discover offensive content

By **EMILY LAVIN**
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The Reed Union School District has abruptly dropped its long-term distance-learning program just one week into the 2020-2021 school year after discovering several of the platform's lessons contained "inappropriate content expressing racism or sexism," according to district Superintendent Nancy Lynch.

Lynch said the district late last week began hearing reports and seeing social-media posts from educators and parents across the country highlighting offensive content within the curriculum of the Acellus Learning Accelerator. The Reed district selected the online K-12 program for use by the 73 kids across its three schools who have signed up to distance learn all year, even after public-health officials have deemed it safe for kids to return to class amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Those students had only been using the program for about five days, as the new school year began Aug. 24. Lynch said none of the lessons being highlighted as inappropriate had been used within the district, though she did note Reed district teachers who had been exploring the curriculum came across a primary-grade math lesson that specifically mentioned mothers needing to use math when

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Dozens weigh in on police incident with Black merchant

Response from 140 speakers, letter-writers at online forum show community sharply divided

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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Strong rebukes of racial injustice and calls for police reform were countered by staunch support for law enforcement at a special Aug. 27 online commu-

nity forum, which drew more than 450 listeners and dozens of commenters about the recent late-night encounter between three Tiburon Peninsula police officers and a Black business owner working inside his downtown store.

Read the letters: Residents write to The Ark, Tiburon Town Council in support of police or Yema owners — but rarely both, *pages 3, 24*

At the nearly four-hour joint meeting of the Tiburon Town and Belvedere City councils, of-

ficials listened as more than 50 residents expressed shock and outrage over the incident at Yema, an "action fashion wear" boutique at 10 Main St. owned by Yema Khalif and his partner,

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ELLIOT KARLAN / FOR THE ARK

Berry Accius of Sacramento, a community activist and founder of Voice of the Youth, was among the speakers who addressed a crowd of hundreds protesting for social justice and police accountability at the Tiburon Police Department on Aug. 29.

Rally calls for change, police accountability

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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More than 200 people gathered at the Tiburon Police Department Aug. 29 to challenge officials to take steps to end systemic racism within the community and in law enforcement. The protest was a public show of support for two Black business owners who say they were racially profiled by police

while recently working after hours in their downtown clothing store.

The protest came just over a week after the Aug. 21 incident at Yema, a Main Street boutique owned by Tiburon resident Yema Khalif and his partner, Hawi Awash, who are the designers and models for the brand. The encounter, in which three officers as-

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Town releases police body-camera footage of complete encounter

By **KEVIN HESSEL**
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Tiburon officials last week released body-camera footage from the first officer at the scene of a late-night confrontation between police and Black business owner Yema Khalif, who asserts he was racially profiled when questioned at his downtown shop.

The nearly 11-minute recording includes about 5 previously unseen minutes of the incident, which occurred about 1 a.m. Aug. 21 at Yema, the "action fashion wear" boutique at 10 Main St. owned by Khalif and partner Hawi Awash, Tiburon residents who are also the designers and models for the brand. The couple say they had received a large shipment of merchandise and that they and a visiting friend and business associate had been restocking the store to prepare for the weekend shortly before a patrol officer knocked on the door and

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watch online

- **Watch the body-cam footage:** arkn.ws/tib_bodycam
- **Watch the cellphone footage:** arkn.ws/yema_video



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100 YEARS AGO ... *Sausalito News, Sept. 4, 1920*

Ratification of Woman Suffrage

Washington, D.C. — The crowning glory for the women of America who led the bitter struggle for suffrage came at 8 o'clock Thursday morning, August 26, when Secretary of State Colby signed the proclamation officially announcing ratification of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution.

The Secretary performed this official act at his home without ceremony and thus brought disappointment to members of the National Woman's party, who had planned to be present at the important function and to have the scene preserved for all time in camera and moving picture film.

While the Secretary of State was moved to act so early in the morning chiefly by a desire to proclaim the amendment before threatened court proceedings to restrain him could ensue, he was influenced to exclude representatives of the suffrage organizations from the actual scene of action by a recurrence of the old fight between the National Woman's party, the militants of America, headed by Alice Paul, and the National Woman Suffrage Association, of which Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt is president. The former thought that they had it all fixed for the proclamation to be signed in the presence of their representatives, when women of the national association induced Secretary Colby to change his plans.

It took 70 years to ratify the right for women to vote. It required three quarters of the existing 36 states to support it before it could be added to the Constitution. Many states quickly approved the amendment, and by the end of March 1920 only one additional vote was needed. On Aug. 18, 1920, after calling a special session of the legislature, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the amendment. The certificate of Tennessee's action arrived in Washington by train in the early morning on Aug. 26 and was delivered to Colby. Conscious of the possibility that opponents may affect some sort of court injunction to prevent completing the act of ratification, Colby acted promptly, and the 19th Amendment became part of the Constitution.

Giant Airplanes

Airplanes of the future, required to make long journeys, will be specially built for this purpose, probably multiple engined, with fuel capable of 24 hours or more. Indeed it is possible to build such a type of craft at the present time, flying hundreds of miles with unflinching regularity over deserts, mountains, cities and villages in all kinds of weather with an absolute freedom from danger, which is more or less prevalent in war type airplanes in use at the present time. The cost of the upkeep of an airplane and the salaries of the pilots and mechanics to keep the machine in order would soon be paid for out of the sums now given for slower rail and boat transportation. For horses, carts, pack trains, etc., necessary for desert transportation.

Mother was All Right when She Selected Young Soldier For Husband

Ann Douglass, formerly Mrs. Anna Feutram of

Sausalito, was hailed before Judge Edward Butler last Saturday morning by members of her family, charging her incompetent. Mrs. Douglass is 60 years of age and recently married a soldier aged 27 years. The sons and daughters of Mrs. Douglass testified that their mother must be incompetent, otherwise she would not have married a soldier of 27 years of age, while she was 60 years. The judge thought different and dismissed the case. Mrs. Douglass left the court room with a faced wreathed in smiles. The darling of her heart walked along gallantly beside her as proud as ever. It appears that Madame Douglass has about \$6000 worth of property.

All Ready For Big State Fair

Sacramento is gaily decorated and ablaze with purple and gold lights of the sixty-sixth State Fair. Her citizens stand ready to extend a brand of hospitality to her guests that approximated the famous Southern courtesy of the home. All will be made to feel at home and enjoy the holiday and festival spirit that dominates the big annual event in the State's capitol.

World News Tersely Told

There are claimed to be 4,000,000 citizens of Polish descent in the United States.

Today there are about 9 million Americans who claim Polish ancestry, or about 3 percent of the population. Illinois is the only state with a holiday celebrating Polish-Americans: Casimir Pulaski Day, named in honor of the Polish-born cavalry officer in the Revolutionary War.

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Italy has an oversupply of men and wants to send 800,000 immigrants to the United States.

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According to the United States housing corporation the nation is now short 5,000,000 dwellings and apartments. This means that over 15,000,000 persons are now living in make shift quarters. Building operation on a large scale stopped three years ago and for many reasons is still checked in returning to normal.

Curiosity Rewarded

Walking along the sands of Weymouth this autumn (writes a correspondent), I saw a corked bottle which had been washed up by the tide. There was a piece of paper inside, so I drew the cork and tried to extract it; but at last, getting impatient at the way it eluded me, I broke the bottle and the message was revealed: "Whoever finds this bottle will find the beer gone." — London Post.

Contributor Hillary Don, a Tiburon-Belvedere historian, began writing this column May 7, 1992 — and he hopes to one day include history from his birth year, 1932. Contact him at hdon@thearknewspaper.com.

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they go to the grocery store.

Lynch also said she received no direct complaints from parents about the curriculum, though one parent did express concerns about Acellus on online neighborhood forum Nextdoor.com last week after seeing news reports from other states.

The majority of the district's students started the school year under a district-designed distance program that will be used to eventually transition kids back to in-person lessons and did not have access to Acellus.

In an Aug. 31 interview, Lynch said the district decided to immediately terminate access to the program after viewing some of the content in question; parents were informed in an email over the weekend.

"The things that were shared in the media aren't consistent with the goals and priorities of our district," where "equity and inclusion are paramount," Lynch said.

Schools in Hawaii, Chico and San Diego were among those to drop the program over the last week amid parent complaints after posts about the curriculum began circulating on social media.

In one animated lesson posted to Facebook, a bear and a duck dressed as school kids are seeking help from their teacher, a blonde pig named "Sweetie Lips" who is wearing makeup and sitting behind a desk adorned with an apple.

"Hi Sweetie Lips ... Where did you get that name?" the bear and duck ask.

"Don't ask, we're not even going there," the pig replies, blushing.

Another question posted to Facebook asks third-grade students, "Which image in your opinion best depicts Harriet Tubman's escape from slavery to freedom in Philadelphia?" and gives students two choices: A picture of a white man, clad in a beanie and eye mask and carrying a bulging brown sack over his shoulder, and a picture of a Black woman, clad in a green dress and head-wrap carrying a small sack attached to a stick.

A subsequent screenshot appears to show the program accepting the first picture as the correct answer.

A video posted to YouTube by a user who said her son is in first grade showed the same bear from the "Sweetie Lips" video asking the duck, "Why do you run so much?"

The duck replies, "The reasons I run so much are highly confidential." Police sirens then begin blaring in the background, and the duck says, "Oops, gotta run" and takes off.

When the bear calls after the duck, pointing out the duck was supposed to teach him how to read his book, the bird calls back, "Run with me, and I'll teach you when it's safe."

In addition, a multiple choice question for students asking which terrorist group was led by Osama Bin Laden included the answer choice "Towelban," while another video posted by a parent to Facebook shows Walt Disney naming off the seven dwarves from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," referring to Grumpy as "the woman-hater." The parent who posted the video said it was part of a social-studies lesson for her 5 year old.

The posts and news articles caught the attention of Tiburon resident Michelle Guchereau, who posted a screenshot of the Tubman question to Nextdoor.com on Aug. 24, along with news articles about schools dropping the program, and asked if anyone else had concerns.

In an Aug. 21 post on its Facebook page, Acellus said about a dozen of the 985,000 lessons it offers were tagged as having racist and sexist content, and those tagged lessons "have been reviewed and revised to reflect current attitudes and usage." The post listed five examples of lessons that had been revised, including the Walt Disney video, with Acellus saying the reference to hating women had been edited out of the clip. None of the other examples posted on social media were listed, and it's unclear if those were among the lessons tagged and revised. The program did note that any other lesson tagged as racist or sexist would be "reviewed and revised, usually within one business day."

Lynch said she did not reach out to Acellus before dropping the program, saying that after viewing the content examples, "it didn't matter to me what their response would be." She said she's currently in conversations with an Acellus representative about getting a refund, minus the five days the program was used and the teacher training time. The district paid about \$11,000, for the minimum of 100 licenses and 10 teacher trainings.

Though all students in the Reed district started the school year with distance learning, the vast majority are using a district-created program that combines teacher-led lessons and asynchronous learning in an effort to mimic a typical class day. When it receives the go-ahead from state and local public-health officials, the district plans to transition to a hybrid model in which all students would spend two days on campus and three days distance learning. The district would gradually ramp up the number of students on campus and the length of the school day until a full return to pre-pandemic school is possible.

However, in crafting that plan, the district also decided it wanted to offer a long-term distance-learning option to families who didn't feel safe sending their students back to campus before therapeu-

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tics or a vaccine are available. Families who chose the long-term program were asked to commit to the entire year so the district could plan appropriate staffing, but Lynch previously said there would be flexibility for those students to return to the classroom later in the year if comfort levels change.

The long-term program groups students into multi-grade cohorts based on their school, with one district teacher assigned to each of the three cohorts. The district selected the Acellus Learning Accelerator as the foundation of the long-term distance program, with teachers offering live instruction 2-3 hours per day and supplementing the Acellus curriculum with district content.

The Acellus program was created in 2013 by Roger Billings, the CEO and chairman of Billings Energy Co., which says it focuses on development of hydrogen energy technology. The learning program is a project of the International Academy of Science, a nonprofit created by Billings that is based in Kansas City, Mo. The International Academy of Science also operates the Acellus Academy, an online K-12 school that uses the learning accelerator and is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

Lynch previously said the district looked at several long-term online programs, and Acellus had several advantages. Among them, she noted, was that Acellus was one of the few that provided content for elementary-school students; the program also allows students to stay enrolled in the Reed district while participating, something Lynch said the district wanted to offer to families.

Lynch noted the Acellus content aligns with Common Core standards and would save teachers from having to create lessons across three different grade levels each day in all content areas.

When Lynch presented the Acellus program to the district's board of directors at its Aug. 6 meeting, board members did express some reservations about the program's academic rigor and whether it measured up to the district's standards. The board approved using the program but recommended the long-term distance learners start the year under the district-created program to give teachers extra time to dig into and supplement the Acellus curriculum.

However, at a subsequent meeting later that month, Lynch noted the teachers assigned to the program had been proactive about completing their trainings and all agreed it would be better for the long-term distance learners to start the year under the Acellus program, in part to help establish camaraderie with their cohort and teacher. Board members at that meeting raised no objections to that plan.

Lynch said she first learned about the Acellus Learning Accelerator at a national conference for school superintendents she attended just before the coronavirus shutdowns were imposed in California and across the country.

She said at the Aug. 6 board meeting she was intrigued by a presentation on Acellus that showed "tremendous gains" among students in schools who used the program compared to those, sometimes in the same district, that did not. According to Acellus, some 6,000 schools nationwide use its lessons.

Lynch said the district's principals and teachers spent time vetting the program over the summer, and "none of this came to



Parents across the country have been posting screengrabs and videos from online lesson plans by Acellus Learning Accelerator that depict racist and sexist content. The Reed Union School District started the year using the lesson plan for some of its students but has dropped it as the controversy surfaced. Clockwise from top, kids are shown a picture of a single-parent Black family and a what appears to be a two-parent white family and asked to choose which one is a family; one of the options for which terror group was led by Osama Bin Laden is 'Towelban'; a teacher named 'Sweetie Lips' blushes and says 'We're not even going there' when two cartoon-animal students ask her how she got her nickname; and the apparent correct answer depicting Underground Railroad leader Harriet Tubman's escape from slavery is not the image of the Black woman but a man dressed as a criminal with a bag of stolen goods.

said, noting she didn't think the district could have done anything differently to find the controversial content on its own and pointing to the fact that school districts in Hawaii were only just now receiving complaints despite the Hawaii Department of Education reporting schools there have used Acellus for about a decade.

Now that it's dropped the Acellus program, the district will need to choose a new platform to serve as the foundation of its long-term distance learning. Lynch said district staff this week are revisiting some of the other programs they previously looked into over the summer. Lynch said the district is requesting increased access to any program staff examines in an effort to better spot any curriculum issues in advance.

"We won't choose them if we don't get that," she said.

In the meantime, she said, the teachers in charge of the long-term program will be supplementing live teaching with learning apps and other district resources while a new program is selected. Lynch said she wasn't sure how quickly the program would be chosen but added the district has four to five staff members working on the issue full-time.

"It's frustrating, but we need to move forward, and we are," she said.

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light," referring to the offensive content.

That vetting also did not reveal any concerns among other educators or users of the program about Billings, whose credentials are not without controversy. Billings has touted his own accomplishments in hydrogen energy technology; as a high school student, he reportedly converted his father's Model A Ford to run on hydrogen, winning him first-place in an international science fair. The prize was a scholarship to Brigham Young University.

In the mid-1980s, Billings established the International Academy of Science, an unaccredited organization "for the advancement of applied science and scientific education." In addition to developing the Acellus Learning Accelerator and the Acellus Academy, the nonprofit offers undergraduate and graduate applied science degree programs, according to its website. The academy granted Billings his only advanced degrees.

In 1991, Billings made news for filing

patent-infringement charges against now-defunct software company Novell. Billings claimed the company had stolen his idea for connecting computers to a single-file server so they could communicate and share files; he sought \$220 million in damages.

According to a 1994 article in the Los Angeles Times, Novell during the trial brought up a 1985 pamphlet Billings wrote, titled "The True Dream of Zion," to explain to friends his break from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the pamphlet, the article notes, Billings endorses polygamy and criticizes the Mormon Church for abandoning the practice.

Novell would eventually win the protracted legal battle.

Lynch said she felt the district had done its due diligence in vetting the program given the limitations it was up against. She noted many online learning programs cite proprietary content to only allow a certain level of access before purchase.

"That's the catch-22 with these," Lynch