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## **Ballmer gives teens the dirt**

### **CEO takes the hot seat during Blacks @ Microsoft student day**

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If you could face the CEO of Microsoft and ask anything in the world, what would it be?

A few Seattle-area minority students got a shot Friday morning at the company's annual Blacks @ Microsoft student day. Despite a 40-minute speech from Chief Executive Steve Ballmer and a lengthy demo of the Zune digital music player's capabilities, the first question from a Tacoma student concerned the software giant's archrival, Apple.

"When the iPhone comes out, how will it affect the sales of the Zune and the different developments coming up for Microsoft?" asked Christopher German, 15, of Stadium High School.

"We'll see," Ballmer told him. "I'm sure a lot of people are going to think there's at least one or two things in there that are cool, and I think a lot of people, I don't know, 500 bucks for a phone? ... That's a little pricey to me. ... I mean, I wouldn't want my kids carrying it around."

Then he polled the audience: "Anybody here ever happen to lose a cell phone besides me?"

Competition is a "good thing," Ballmer said. But when it comes to Apple, he said, Microsoft is "going to work very hard to knock their block off."

Sixteen-year-old Hannah Geiger of West Seattle wasn't sure what that phrase meant. "Knock their block off?" she whispered. Judging by her giggles, she found Ballmer, and all of his animations, hilarious.

Blacks @ Microsoft, an employee group, organizes minority student day each year to invite various Seattle-area high school students to tour the Redmond campus and learn about career opportunities.

This year, Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League and a former mayor of New Orleans, attended. Ballmer announced that the company would give the civil rights organization a \$5 million grant, intended to help close the digital divide in urban communities.

After accepting the gift, Morial told the students that computers are essential.

Then he broke it down: "You know what the bottom line is? If you don't know how to use a computer, well, you ain't going nowhere. It's a tool of necessity. It's no longer a nicety."

He turned to Ballmer to tell him the Zune has one more fan. "I got to get me one of these music things," he said.

The students laughed, especially when Morial sprinkled some more soul into the conversation. "He's a bad dude," Morial said of Ballmer. "He's pretty cool too, right?"

Dressed casually in a red V-neck sweater and gray slacks, Ballmer paced the stage and told the students his career story. In 1980, Bill Gates, who is now chairman, persuaded him to quit business school and join Microsoft when it was a little-known company in the Northwest.

"I was 24 years old when I came here and, frankly, didn't know what the heck I was getting into," Ballmer said. "I always assumed I would work for a big, established company."

Friday's event was webcast to minority students gathered at Microsoft locations around the country.

"Nobody had computers when I was a kid," he said. "Heck, 10 years ago, most people didn't even have cell phones -- as crazy as that seems now."

Some of the kids snickered at that.

Later, a Microsoft employee showed the students some of the company's newest products, including Windows Vista and Windows Live Search.

"This is the Zune player," said the employee, who then wirelessly sent a Miles Davis song from the white Zune to the black one.

Microsoft's Zune is fighting an uphill battle to steal market share from Apple's iPod, the world's dominant music player. The company has a long way to go.

Geiger looked at the white Zune and whispered to her friend, "No, actually that's an iPod."