

Nov. 28, 2001 San Francisco
Parents Advocating School Accountability

Advice to Mayor Street: Proceed with Caution When Dealing with Edison Schools

An open letter to Philadelphia Mayor John Street and the people of Philadelphia

>From Parents Advocating School Accountability (PASA), San Francisco

Dear Mayor Street,

Here in San Francisco, our school district has had bitter experience with for-profit Edison Schools Inc. PASA has followed Edison Schools' dealings and achievement nationwide ever since we observed the turmoil, conflict and high legal costs Edison Schools inflicted on our own district. A compromise eventually severed Edison's contract with our district and allowed the company to secure a charter from the state for its one San Francisco school.

We think we have a good idea of what Philadelphia can expect if you turn over several dozen schools to this company as proposed. So we've compiled a list of things you'll need to watch out for if Philadelphia contracts with Edison Schools. We hope this helps you avoid the kind of pitfalls that our district and others around the country have encountered.

1. Negotiating behind closed doors:

In San Francisco, our school board members never saw the contract our former superintendent negotiated with Edison Schools before they were asked to approve it in 1998. Unfortunately for our district and its children, a majority of former board members voted to OK the contract anyway.

2. Cutting deals for higher funding than other schools get; persuading districts to cover Edison expenses that other schools must pay themselves:

District after district has been blindsided by higher costs. The Dallas school board was shocked to learn that Dallas' Edison schools - already expected to cost more than other schools - would cost another \$5 million to \$20 million more than projected. In Las Vegas, Edison's seven schools are

expected to cost \$1 million a year more than district schools. In Perry Township, Ind., Edison is currently negotiating to launch schools that are openly projected to cost \$838 more per student than comparable schools.

3. Hiring predominantly inexperienced teachers:

The fact that inner-city students are disproportionately taught by novice teachers creates widespread dismay over the obvious inequity. Yet Edison's business plan calls for deliberately employing lower-paid beginners. Edison's two schools in low-income East Palo Alto, Calif., provide an extreme example: At Edison-Brentwood Academy, 76 percent of the teachers were uncredentialed in the 1999-2000 school year; at Edison-McNair Academy, 79 percent were uncredentialed.

4. High teacher turnover:

San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy, with a teaching staff of 25, lost 39 teachers in two years. This kind of turnover is echoed elsewhere. Edison's Milwaukee Academy of Science burned through three principals in its first three months of operation in fall 2000.

5. Dumping the most challenging children on other schools:

Other San Francisco schools found challenging students from Edison Charter Academy landing on their doorsteps. York, Pa., officials complained that Edison's Lincoln-Edison Charter School accepted only the least challenging special-education students, receiving the full special-education funding for them and dumping the costlier-to-educate students on other schools. Look for Philadelphia's other schools to receive an influx of expensive-to-educate students from any schools Edison takes over.

6. Disdaining accountability:

Edison's San Francisco agreement called for a Community Council to oversee Edison Charter Academy's operations. But the Community Council rarely met and never took a vote, and its own members didn't know they were supposed to make major decisions about how the school was run. One activist requested copies of Community Council minutes and received several purported sets obviously photocopied from each other,

including minutes for a meeting that hadn't yet taken place. And required financial disclosure was little better. Former San Francisco Unified School District Chief Financial Officer Cathi Vogel complained, "The information identified as 'Financial Audits' does not satisfy the requirement for audited financial statements. . (It is) not prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles. . (It is) illegible and appears to be a second-generation fax copy. . (It is) incomplete as to sources of revenue."

7. Raiding public schools for principals and administrators:

We don't need to tell you about this, because we hear that Edison already hired away a top Philadelphia administrator and has sent recruitment letters to all the district's principals.

8. Using petitions from "happy parents" as a negotiating tool to wring further concessions from district:

In San Francisco, a team of professional outside organizers inflated lukewarm parent response to Edison Charter Academy into the appearance of an outpouring of support. One of the professional organizers publicly said that Edison was able to attract only five parents' signatures on a petition until the pros stepped in. So it didn't surprise us when "parents" petitioned the reluctant Baltimore school district to expand one of Edison's schools there.

9. Excluding many students from testing:

Statistics support rumors that San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy has maneuvered to exclude many students from test scores. In spring 2000, the school enrolled 124 African-American students in the tested grades, 2-5, but scores were reported for only 93 in reading (75 percent) and 97 in math (78.2 percent). Of 140 Latino students in the tested grades, scores were reported for only 97 (69 percent) in reading and 101 (72 percent) in math. (Information is from the California Department of Education's Academic Performance Index website.)

10. Using statistics that don't add up:

You've seen Edison's claim that 84 percent of its schools made "positive gains" last year. Yet in actual numbers, Edison lists 62 schools as making "positive gains" - at a time when it

ran 113 schools. That's 54 percent, not 84 percent. In addition, a large number of those 62 schools listed as "positive" are severely troubled, including seven for which districts have severed contracts with Edison. It's highly debatable whether those 62 schools could be called successful. And in Philadelphia, Edison used one statistical method to evaluate its own schools and a different one to evaluate Philadelphia public schools, whose problems it is now widely accused of exaggerating.

11. Pushing for huge schools; cramming in additional students:

Big schools cost less per student. That may be why Edison runs schools as large as troubled Edison-Perdue Academy in Pontiac, Mich., which was reportedly expanding from an 850-student K-5 to an 1,100-student K-8. This is especially worth noting at a time when smaller schools are widely viewed as more beneficial to children. In San Francisco, Edison Schools closed the existing library at Edison Charter Academy to squeeze in more students, expanding from 350 to 550 students.

12. Touting "gains" for individual schools but refusing to compare with other district schools:

For San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy, the company boasted of "gains" that the nationwide press obligingly described as "sky-high" and "soaring." Actually, Edison Charter Academy's gains were eclipsed by increases at a number of other low-performing San Francisco schools with similar populations, and test scores in Edison Charter Academy's best year fell far below districtwide averages. In the most recent test scores, Edison Charter Academy ranks dead last in the district. Yet Edison Schools still touts the school as showing "positive gains."

13. Disseminating misinformation to the media:

See the above item about "sky-high" and "soaring" test scores. Edison also handed out false purported test scores for Edison Charter Academy that were printed in the Wall Street Journal and the Economist. The company fed the press the oft-repeated line that its San Francisco school was "a successful school in a failing district" - again, when the school in its best year fell far below districtwide averages and now is dead-last in the district. The frequently quoted claim that 84 percent of Edison's schools showed "positive gains" is another notable example. And when San Francisco

moved to revoke Edison's charter, CEO Chris Whittle was quoted on Page 1 of the New York Times as saying that no other district had ever done such a thing. Actually, at the time Whittle spoke, several other districts had severed or were in the process of severing Edison contracts.

14. Using sophisticated marketing and spin maneuvers to obscure schools' actual achievement; putting Edison's image above true assessments of students' progress:

See the above items about claims of "soaring" test scores and "a successful school in a failing district." The Dallas school district also objected to this Edison tactic: When test results indicated that several Dallas Edison schools would make the state's low-performing list, Edison sent out a press release focusing on students' gains. The superintendent complained that "Edison needed to work in cooperation with the school district" instead of promoting itself, according to the Dallas Morning News.

15. Accusing critics of racism:

Edison challengers encounter this inflammatory tactic repeatedly, from untrue charges that they send their own children to "mostly white" schools to accusations of "genocide against Latinos," as expressed by a speaker at a San Francisco school board meeting. Edison supporters, in a letter to a newspaper, accused one critic of "racial overtones" and charged that the critic "works to deny . choice to . African-American and Latino parents."

16. Waging a furious fight against a district that wants to end a contract:

In San Francisco, Edison mounted a costly, bloody, all-out legal battle - as well as a high-stakes public-relations and political lobbying war in which our district was wildly outmatched. During negotiations with San Francisco's superintendent over severing the Edison contract, Edison CEO Whittle reportedly declared that his investors would refuse to spend a penny on continuing to bus students to Edison from the largely African-American Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood, but were willing to spend whatever it took to sue the school district.

17. Hiding their real motive:

Kent Mitchell, president of United Educators of San Francisco, said it best: "We are afraid that Edison's major goal is to break the entire public school system."