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## Inaccuracies and Corrections

A correction in today's New York Times on an article about an Edison school in Flint, Mich., raises troubling questions about consistency and influence in correcting press inaccuracies.

The correction notes that when the article reported on test scores at the Flint school that fell after Edison took over, it neglected to mention a change in student demographics that might have affected achievement.

Of course corrections should be printed on inaccurate and incomplete information. But this particular correction raises the obvious point that news reports in many news media have called attention to test-score increases at Edison schools without noting student demographic changes that probably affected them. In fact, quite a few press commentators have even scoffed at and discredited Edison challengers who pointed out the demographic changes – even though Edison Schools itself acknowledges that demographics tend to shift significantly after it takes over a school.

Plenty of inaccuracies and misinformation in news stories and press commentaries benefitting Edison Schools' image have gone uncorrected. Here's a partial, informal sampling. (I and fellow Edison-watchers keep a close eye on nationwide press coverage, but I apologize if we've missed anything and corrections actually have appeared on any of these items.)

-- A Wall Street Journal editorial on Jan. 17, 2001 gave inaccurate test-score figures for San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy. The Economist also used the false figures, but the Economist ran a correction.

-- An April Wall Street Journal op-ed by Pete DuPont attributed Edison's untrue (see below) claim that 84% of its schools have made "positive gains" to the RAND Corp., completely inaccurately – the claim is Edison's own.

-- When San Francisco began discussing severing its contract with Edison, the New York Times quoted Edison CEO Chris Whittle in a Page 1 story as saying, "None of the 44 other cities where we manage schools has ever done anything like this." Actually, at the time Whittle spoke, several other districts had revoked, were in the process of revoking or were (as San Francisco was) discussing revoking Edison contracts. The quote was entirely inaccurate but ran unchecked, unchallenged and uncorrected.

-- News stories, including the same Page 1 New York Times article, citing test-score gains at San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy failed to note (along with demographic changes) that Edison Charter exempted significant numbers of students from testing, information readily available from

the state Department of Education website. Again, if the demographic changes in Flint that may have lowered test scores warranted a correction, so did the exemption of students in San Francisco that may have raised test scores. Yet the Times corrected one (to Edison's benefit) and not the other.

-- Edison's claim that 84% of its schools have made "positive gains" has been quoted far and wide, including in the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Christian Science Monitor and the Boston Globe. Any reporter who simply asked, "what's that in hard numbers?" would realize the figure is unsound and unusable, because Edison claims that 62 schools made "positive gains" at a time when it ran 113 schools – which works out to 54.8%, not 84%. Edison inexplicably uses a base of 74 schools in that claim. I have not seen any corrections of that wholly inaccurate figure, except in a Philadelphia Daily News op-ed that I wrote.

-- Regarding that same claim, many of the 62 schools Edison cites by name as making "positive gains" are badly troubled – and Edison had already been kicked out of some even at the time it was citing them as successes (in its 2001 School Performance Report, dated October 2001). At this writing, 10 of those 62 schools have had Edison contracts severed. Many others have suffered drops in test scores and other significant problems. Scrutiny of the 84% claim discredits it on multiple levels – yet it has been cited in the press many times without correction.

-- Edison has been quoted in various media, including the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Christian Science Monitor, as saying that it has lost only three of 65 contracts. That's accurate only by the most slippery possible definition. Edison has actually exited Sherman, Tex., Lansing, Mich., and Goldsboro, N.C., and is in the process of departing Trenton, N.J. Edison will be ousted (in done deals) from two other districts at the end of this school year. In San Francisco, Edison no longer has a contract with the school district but is chartered by the state, making another severed contract. Other districts have removed Edison from some but not all schools. That's at least seven districts, not counting districts where it has lost some but not all schools.

-- Many newspaper editorials and op-eds on Edison's dispute with the San Francisco Unified School District described San Francisco's Edison Charter Academy as "a successful school in a failing district," or some variation thereof – locally and nationwide. Actually, in Edison Charter's highest-scoring year, it ranked No. 62 of 75 SFUSD elementary schools on the state's Academic Performance Index, and it fell to dead last in most recent results. (Edison's test scores fell after the state Department of Education tightened a loophole that had allowed schools to exempt up to 35% of students from testing in any one subject.) The "successful school in failing district" description is clearly factually inaccurate, even in Edison Charter's best year (it hardly describes No. 62 out of 75), but I've never heard of its being corrected anywhere.

-- Both news accounts and op-eds about the San Francisco brouhaha routinely described the school district's motivation as "purely ideological." This includes a New York Times news story by Kate Zernike that used that phrase in passing, unattributed, as unquestioned background. Actually, the San Francisco school district gave a number of credible reasons for moving to revoke Edison's charter, including high costs and low achievement. Many opinion writers and even news reporters simply ignored them and used the Edison line instead.

Today's New York Times correction demonstrates that Edison schools has influence with the Times that Edison critics -- and the plain truth -- apparently lack. Again, this raises troubling issues not just about coverage of Edison but about press credibility, independence and fairness overall.

– Caroline Grannan

For background on these issues, go to [www.pasasf.org](http://www.pasasf.org)