

June 3, 2001 San Francisco

Racial Tension Racks Edison School, Ex-Parents Reveal

The controversial, for-profit Edison Charter Academy in San Francisco appears to be torn by racial tensions, based on comments by former parents to school district investigators checking out reported problems with the school.

African-American parents repeated a bitter theme. Latino children “were more favored,” reported one parent who transferred her child to another school. Another cited “lack of communication and discrimination among non-Spanish-speaking students,” while a third complained, “They pretend only African-American children were out of control when actually all the children behaved similarly. They let the Latin children run amuck.” The report identified parents only by code numbers.

A teacher who worked at Edison in 1998-'99 supported the African-American parents' concerns. Figuratively speaking, Edison was “two schools,” she told district investigators, “one for Latino students and another for African-American students. African-American students were treated differently from the Latino students by the teachers and administration. They were a lot more lax with the Latino students.” As a result, she added, “There was a lot of anger among the students.”

Yet Edison has also been criticized for failing to provide required bilingual education to limited English speakers, prompting complaints from at least one Latina parent.

Edison's student population is overwhelmingly Latino and African-American. The school's Latino population has grown since the school was privatized from 44.9 percent in 1997-'98, the last year before privatization, to 52.6 percent in 2000-'01. Meanwhile, Edison's African-American population has dropped from 40.6 percent in 1997-'98 to 30.0 percent in 2000-'01.

Edison Charter Academy has been in the international media spotlight since the San Francisco Board of Education began in January to discuss revoking its five-year charter, which expires at the end of 2003.

The school board cited numerous problems, from alleged coercion and corruption in the original negotiations with Edison to a suspected pattern of “counseling out” challenging special-education students, particularly African-American children. The board said Edison, operated by New York-based Edison Schools, had also failed to comply with contract requirements to provide financial information. In March, the school board gave Edison 90 days to correct reported problems, with a deadline in late June.

Of 22 former Edison parents interviewed for the May 24 report, 14 said they left because of general dissatisfaction. Seven cited racial discrimination. (Some respondents gave more than one reason.) Six said that Edison staff had suggested a “school closer to home” or that “Edison didn't have the services” to meet their children's needs. Rumors have long persisted that Edison weeds out challenging students with such suggestions.

On the other hand, one parent, who cited both racial discrimination and dissatisfaction, complained that Edison staff had told her she could not transfer her children to another school

and that Edison was not part of the San Francisco Unified School District, although it is.

Another mother from the Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood, a few miles from Edison, said the principal told her and other African-American parents that their children should attend a school closer to their homes. Her husband added that their son had been “physically abused by other students, mentally abused, and told by the teachers to ‘press his “ignore” button’ when other students assaulted him.”

“There’s a sad and troubling pattern to these complaints,” observed Margaret Brodtkin, executive director of the San Francisco organization Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth. “The children suffer when a school is so badly divided.”

Brodtkin also said she was concerned about the findings of a Coleman staff member’s talks with current Edison school parents, an attempt to reach out to parents who oppose the school board move against the charter.

The Spanish-speaking Coleman staff member said many parents gave the same reason for supporting Edison’s for-profit management: They fear that disruptive children who have left the school would return if the charter were revoked.

The parents’ comments bolstered the charges of Edison critics who accuse the school of weeding out challenging students who attended before it was privatized. Before privatization, children were assigned to Edison automatically, including a large number from Bayview/Hunters Point. After privatization, the enrollment process was transformed by the California Education Code, which prohibits automatic assignments to charter schools. With all enrollment required to be by specific parental request, Edison mounted an aggressive recruitment and outreach campaign to bring in new families.

Edison has made sweeping claims of test-score gains since privatization, including releasing inaccurate figures to international media.

The school district report notes that Edison’s gains have been in line with gains at other district schools at its achievement level. Edison critics also note that the student population has been so significantly revamped that claims of gains are largely meaningless.

“Edison scores should be compared to districtwide scores, since Edison claims to run better schools,” pointed out San Francisco parent Dana Woldow. “Separating students by socioeconomic profile could be viewed as what some people like to call ‘the bigotry of soft expectations.’ “

A comparison of Edison students’ scores to districtwide averages for San Francisco Unified students shows Edison scores below districtwide in every category (reading and math from second through fifth grade) - significantly below in most categories. (See figures below.)

The school district report also raised concerns about Edison’s failure to comply with the contract’s financial disclosure requirements and with bilingual education requirements.

Edison has provided the district with inadequate financial information, reported district Chief Financial Officer Cathi Vogel. The school’s charter requires regular audited financial statements prepared by an independent outside agent, Vogel wrote. “The material provided by

Edison ... is a series of spreadsheets, with no identification as to who prepared, who reviewed or who certified," she noted. "The information is not prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles. ... (T)he information is incomplete as to sources of revenue. ... (N)o balance sheet information was presented."

Edison does not provide the mandated bilingual education for its English language learners, the report found. One parent who raised complaints about that omission said a former principal had told her she could remove her child from the school if she was unhappy. That parent was later given a paid job with Edison's after-school program, which is run by the Edison company, and has stopped complaining publicly.

District investigators have also learned that Edison does not comply with the contract requirement that a Community Council govern the school. Edison's contract stipulates that the Community Council approve and monitor the annual budget, operate the school in accordance with charter school laws and the school's charter agreement, and solicit and receive grants and donations.

A nominal Community Council has existed, but former member Libby Denebeim told district investigators that she understood the council to be an advisory committee and was unaware of its governance function. Denebeim said the council had no chair and was informally run, and that it had never voted on any issue during the six to eight months she participated.

Coleman Advocates' Brodtkin requested minutes of Community Council meetings and received purported sets of minutes that appeared to be improbably identical photocopies with minor alterations - including minutes from one meeting that hadn't taken place yet.

"It looked like one sheet had been cut and pasted many times to make it look like every meeting had its own agenda, and never were there any action items," added parent Woldow after perusing the so-called "minutes" online. "It was a joke."

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Edison test scores compared with districtwide averages
Spring 2000
National percentile ranking for average student score

2nd-grade reading

Districtwide	56
Edison	33

2nd-grade math

Districtwide	65
Edison	57

3rd-grade reading

Districtwide	46
Edison	28

3rd-grade math

Districtwide	62
Edison	41

4th-grade reading

Districtwide	51
Edison	30

4th-grade math

Districtwide	57
Edison	32

5th-grade reading

Districtwide	47
Edison	35

5th-grade math

Districtwide	59
Edison	49

SFUSD test score data:

<http://orb.sfusd.k12.ca.us/schdata/schdata.htm>

Edison Community Council meeting minutes:

http://orb.sfusd.edu/PDFS/edison_rpt_comp.pdf