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Edison Schools' Hallmark: Slick Promises, Lackluster Results

Tagline: Caroline Grannan is a San Francisco public school parent and classroom volunteer.

By Caroline Grannan

Edison Schools sailed into San Francisco three years ago full of sweet talk and big promises. The for-profit corporation takes over low-performing public schools, vowing to run them for basic funding at no extra cost to districts, improve student performance and make money for investors.

Consumer watchdogs have a credo: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. And that's the case with Edison. The company's promises don't hold up.

-- Edison costs school districts plenty. Two of its earliest contracts, in San Antonio and Sherman, Texas, are not being renewed because of high costs to the districts. Sherman officials estimated "hidden costs" of the Edison contract at \$1 million a year for 1.3 schools - with lackluster achievement.

-- Edison made no significant improvements in student performance in Sherman and San Antonio - and it hasn't in San Francisco, where it took over one low-performing school.

-- Eight-year-old Edison still isn't making money, though it vows to make a profit someday. That may concern only investors, but it demonstrates Edison's difficulty doing what it promises.

Edison brought with it corruption and conflict. It cut its San Francisco deal amid costly rewards and payoffs for school board support - plus coercion, deception and threats to get teachers' signatures on the charter petition.

In San Francisco, Edison has revamped its student body, with California law prohibiting automatic assignments to charter schools. A pool of extremely disadvantaged students was previously automatically assigned to the school. Now all enrollment is by request, encouraged by aggressive outreach to middle-class families. Edison's percentages of low-income, special-education and African-American students have plummeted. Its challenging students are dumped on other schools.

Edison receives more district resources than other schools, which isn't fair and hurts other children. Investors' and donors' support provides a longer school day and year, more teacher training, and free take-home computers.

Yet even with those benefits and its revamped student population, Edison posts feeble achievement gains.

Low-income students districtwide outperform low-income Edison students at every level - reading and math in second through fifth grades - by up to 20 percentage points. Edison's modest gains are matched or bested by eight other low-performing schools with similar demographics. And in the reported subjects, math and reading, Edison tested only 73.49% of its students. Testing fewer students lets it drop likely low scorers from its averages. (Figures refer to spring 2000.)

Similar reports tum up nationwide - but they're hard to find. The press often behaves as if Edison walks on water. CEO Chris Whittle, who once ran Esquire Magazine, is a persuasive guy with great media contacts. Not everyone is sold: A BusinessWeek writer described Whittle as a "huckster" who "victimizes his marks," and a Bloomberg News Service columnist likened him to "Music Man" Harold Hill.

But San Francisco's school board is under heavy media fire for investigating whether Edison is fulfilling the terms of its charter - something the board committed to do all along but neglected until a new majority won seats in November's election.

Yes, Edison buses parents to meetings to testify. Presumably, these are parents of higher-performing students who like the free computers and longer school hours. But is it fair to drain resources from other schools to benefit their kids, while dumping challenging students? And shouldn't those parents question the lackluster results achieved even with all those benefits?

Edison vows an expensive, bloody court battle in San Francisco. The same fight will ensue if the charter isn't renewed at its 2003 expiration. Six of the seven board members believe it's their duty to review the charter now, since the board hasn't done so previously as promised. The battle threatens to cost plenty - but the option is to let Edison declare itself totally unaccountable to our school district forever.

The school board must fulfill its commitment to review Edison's charter. Edison must drop the costly legal challenges that will hurt our schoolchildren. And we all should question promises that sound too good to be true.
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