

Sept. 17, 2001 San Francisco

## How Voucher Campaign Machinery, Other Outsiders Orchestrated Edison 'Parents' ' Crusade

When controversy erupted last spring over a for-profit San Francisco charter school operated by New York-based Edison Schools Inc., Edison claimed an outpouring of support from parents at the school. But the purportedly spontaneous parent crusade was part of a sophisticated, high-tech operation orchestrated by the multimillion-dollar machinery that had just run California's unsuccessful November 2000 school voucher ballot initiative.

And according to one organizer's website, Edison had collected only five names on a list of supporters until the professional outside organizers took over.

The Edison effort was promoted by a "viral marketing" enterprise called Digital Campaigns Inc., partly owned by venture capitalist Timothy Draper, sponsor of the Proposition 38 school voucher initiative. Digital Campaigns used its "Ripple" tool to create a self-spreading e-mail blitz that, according to Digital Campaigns' website, "grew ... [the Edison] supporter list from just five people to several hundred in just four weeks."

Draper, who poured \$20 million of his own into the losing Proposition 38 campaign, is listed on the Digital Campaigns Inc. website as a "major investor" in the company.

"Because Ripple allows a campaign's message to spread virally over the Internet, action emails from 'Parents to Save Edison Charter' quickly landed in inboxes around the nation," the Digital Campaigns website boasts. "Within weeks, Edison parents were receiving messages of support from parents from as far away as Florida." Digital Campaign spokesman Greg Mitchell didn't respond to questions about who paid for the services his company provided to Edison.

Meanwhile, a team of outside organizers directed the Edison Charter Academy "parents' " effort and mobilized an aggressive publicity campaign. The outsiders included political public-relations veteran Gary Larson, former deputy press secretary for the Yes on 38 campaign. Among other activities, Larson set up an Internet and phone tree network for Edison, according to the publication School Reform News. Larson, who is not an Edison parent or a public-school parent, said he volunteered his services for no pay.

Also mobilizing the Edison effort were two representatives of the Pacific Research Institute (PRI), a politically conservative San Francisco think tank. Through the efforts of PRI research fellow Diallo Dphrepaulezz and PRI marketing and public affairs director Dawn Dingwell, "PRI provided policy content for the Parents to Save Edison Charter (a parent group) web site," notes PRI's own website.

"Other efforts included assisting parents in filing civil rights complaints against the [San Francisco Board of Education] under the state Uniform Complaint Procedures, ethics complaints, letters to the editor, coordinating parent-media contacts, and providing parents with media training," the PRI material continues. The PRI website also boasts of the positive media coverage that PRI orchestrated for Edison.

Dphrepaulezz, who has no children attending Edison or public schools, also said he donated his services for no pay. Dingwell was away from the office and unavailable for comment.

The involvement of Larson and Dphrepaulezz, neither of them a member of the Edison or San Francisco school communities, is particularly ironic given Edison Schools' characterization of its critics as "race-baiting outside agitators" in a Salon article.

Information was unavailable on the value of the donated consulting services.

San Francisco's Edison controversy ended in a compromise after the school board voted last spring to begin the process of revoking its Edison Schools contract, citing numerous problems with the company and the contract. A June agreement severed the San Francisco contract, and the California state Board of Education agreed to charter the school.

The agreement released the San Francisco district from its obligation to provide many free administrative services to Edison on top of passing on to the school its full funding per student. The former contract had meant Edison received significantly more district resources than other district schools. Edison also agreed to pay rent for the district-owned site it occupies, which had previously been provided rent-free.

Edison contracts have also been ended in Sherman and San Antonio, Texas; Goldsboro, N.C.; and Lansing, Mich. An Edison contract in Minneapolis will be canceled at the end of the current school year. Many districts nationwide report problems with Edison Schools, including high costs, low performance, poor accountability and other difficulties.

In San Francisco, Edison Charter Academy's test scores fall far below districtwide average test scores. ECA's most recent scores showed a significant drop from spring 2000 to spring 2001.

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Digital Campaigns' online press release,  
"San Francisco Parents Use DigiCamp Ripple™  
to Build Coalition to Save Charter School"

<http://www.digitalcampaigns.com/u33.html>

Pacific Research Institute website  
"San Francisco-Edison Milestones"  
[http://www.pacificresearch.org/issues/edu/edison\\_milestones.html](http://www.pacificresearch.org/issues/edu/edison_milestones.html)

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Edison Charter Academy and San Francisco Unified School  
District test  
scores:  
(links at end)

Edison Charter Academy compared with San Francisco Unified  
School  
District averages  
Spring 2001 STAR test scores  
National percentile ranking for average student score

2nd-grade reading  
Edison 22 SFUSD 53

2nd-grade math  
Edison 24 SFUSD 61

3rd-grade reading  
Edison 23 SFUSD 47

3rd-grade math  
Edison 35 SFUSD 62

4th-grade reading  
Edison 29 SFUSD 51

4th-grade math

Edison 36 SFUSD 58

5th-grade reading  
Edison 28 SFUSD 47

5th-grade math  
Edison 38 SFUSD 61

Percentage changes in STAR test results from spring 2000 to  
spring 2001  
Edison Charter Academy and San Francisco Unified School  
District  
Spring 2001 score (spring 2000 score) and percentage change  
National percentile ranking for average student score

2nd-grade reading  
SFUSD 53 (was 56); drop of 5%  
Edison 22 (was 33); drop of 33%

2nd-grade math  
SFUSD 61 (was 65); drop of 6%  
Edison 24 (was 57); drop of 58%

3rd-grade reading  
SFUSD 47 (was 46); gain of 2%  
Edison 23 (was 28); drop of 18%

3rd-grade math  
SFUSD 62 (was 62); no change  
Edison 35 (was 41); drop of 14%

4th-grade reading  
SFUSD 51 (was 51); no change  
Edison 29 (was 30); drop of 3%

4th-grade math  
SFUSD 58 (was 56); gain of 3.5%  
Edison 36 (was 32); gain of 12%

5th-grade reading  
SFUSD 47 (was 47); no change  
Edison 28 (was 35); drop of 20%

5th-grade math  
SFUSD 61 (was 59); gain of 3.4%  
Edison 38 (was 49); drop of 22%

Edison Charter Academy spring 2001 STAR test scores:

<http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2001/reports/38/68478000/6040935158/01.html>

Edison Charter Academy spring 2000 STAR test scores:

<http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2000f/reports/38/68478000/6040935158/01.html>

San Francisco Unified School District spring 2001 STAR test scores:

<http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2001/reports/38/68478000/01.html>

San Francisco Unified School District spring 2000 STAR test scores

<http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2000f/reports/38/68478000/01.html>