

March 9, 2001 San Francisco

### **Costly Edison Schools Flunk Out in San Antonio**

Edison Schools arrived in San Antonio, Texas, four years ago full of sweet talk and big promises. The New York-based for-profit chain would take over Elm Creek Elementary School, spiff it up and improve its achievement, corporate honchos convinced Southwest School District officials, at the same cost as other schools.

“District and Edison officials are assuring residents Elm Creek will not cost taxpayers any more money to run than do other elementaries,” the San Antonio Express-News reported in March 1997.

It was a hollow promise. Southwest School District found itself pouring far more money into its Edison Schools - eventually four of them - than into other schools, for lackluster results. Now Southwest School District trustees are moving to end their contract with Edison, saying the district can't afford it. When the five-year contract ends in July 2002, officials say, the programs will have cost the district \$3.58 million to serve a current total of 1,363 students.

Edison is currently bidding to take over schools in New York City and Chicago, while battling to keep its toehold in San Francisco, where six of seven Board of Education commissioners voted in February to initiate revoking the charter for Edison's one school there. Now questions about whether the company lives up to its promises are being asked across the nation.

Results fail to bear out Edison's claims that it improves student achievement. A Western Michigan University Study released Feb. 21 showing that Edison has been no more successful at boosting student achievement than the districts that hired it. Those findings are reflected in San Francisco, where Edison students made modest gains but were outperformed by their demographic counterparts in non-privatized schools.

In spring 2000 testing, economically disadvantaged San Francisco students districtwide outperformed economically disadvantaged Edison students in all of the eight reported categories - reading and math for second, third, fourth and fifth grades. Districtwide figures swamped Edison's by 20 percentage points in two categories.

In San Antonio's Southwest School District too, Edison students made some gains, “but those who stayed at a traditional campus raised their scores even more,” the Express-News reported in May 1999.

But it was the cost that completely disillusioned Southwest officials. “It was getting more expensive every year,” school board President Mike Frazier told the Express-News in January. “Our understanding was that it would cost us no more [than a regular school].”

Instead, “If we had kept going with it, it would have put us out of business,” he added.

Officials in the small Texas town of Sherman also did not renew their Edison contract - the company's first in the nation - which expired last year. Yet again, modest gains at the Edison school were outstripped by stronger improvements at non-privatized schools, while Sherman school officials said that “hidden costs” of Edison's contract to run 1 1/3 schools drained an extra \$1 million per year.

Edison critics in San Francisco note that the school there receives more district resources than other schools, as well as benefits provided by Edison donors and investors. The school has also overhauled its student population, shedding disadvantaged, African-American and special-education students, and even gradually reducing its ratio of boys.

“Edison has revamped its student population, used more than its share of district resources and reaped the supposed benefits of privatization,” pointed out Margaret Brodtkin, executive director of San Francisco's Coleman Advocates for Children. “Yet it's still being

outperformed by similar schools and similar students districtwide.”

In San Francisco, Edison is waging an all-out legal and public relations war against the district’s move to revoke its charter. In San Antonio, the company appears ready to leave quietly, though it denies that its schools cost the district more than other schools.

But Southwest Schools Superintendent Pete Anthony is clear about the cost. “It was not an affordable program for the district,” he told the Express-News. “I think the district did the prudent thing.”

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