

Distributed on behalf of PHILADELPHIANS UNITED TO SUPPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS
c/o Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth,
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Community Angered Over Edison Schools' Proposal, Calling it Child Labor

PHILADELPHIA -- Parent, community and student groups reacted angrily to Edison Schools' proposal to use students as workers in order to reduce labor costs in schools, calling the suggestion a violation of child labor laws.

"Once again Edison shows it's not fit to have public responsibility. Now they think that having children work for nothing is how they'll solve their educational budget problems," said Shelly Yanoff, executive director of Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth.

While media attention has focused on Edison's extravagant use of funds at a staff conference, advocates say Whittle's remarks show the company is morally unfit and philosophically mismatched for its educational mission. Whittle had directly connected the use of student workers to cost cutting measures for schools, commenting that 600 pupils working one hour a day was the equivalent of 75 full-time adult staff. He had suggested that such an action could be in place by 2004.

Janet McCoy, a 6th grader at the Edison-run Gillespie Middle School, said she was angry about the suggestion.

"It's wrong for them to use students as free labor when we come to school to learn," McCoy said.

McCoy pointed out that money is needed for books and qualified teachers, saying she still lacks history textbooks in her classes.

Parents and community members said the suggestion was the equivalent of child labor, noting that the majority of Edison's students are elementary-aged.

"Perhaps Mr. Whittle should check the history curriculum--child labor was outlawed in the U.S. in 1938 with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act," said Kati Sipp, director of Philadelphia Area Jobs with Justice.

Others pointed out the racist implications of Whittle's proposal, stating that over 90% of the students in Edison's Philadelphia schools are children of color.

"Is Chris Whittle suggesting that our children make up his his modern-day school plantation?" said Helen Gym of Asian Americans United.

Melania Page Gaither of the Alliance Organizing Project said such an action would reduce students to a "level of indentured servitude."

"At this point, the only responsible and appropriate action the District should take is to break with Edison completely and immediately so that schools and the families of Edison's 13,000 children have a chance to move on, " Gym said.