

Oct. 4, 2001 San Francisco

### **Claims of Gains ‘Potentially Misleading,’ Edison Schools Admits**

Edison Schools Inc. has long touted before-and-after improvements in test scores once it takes over a public school, and has vigorously disputed charges that revamped student demographics make such comparisons deceptive. But in a sudden about-face, the controversial, for-profit firm acknowledges in its new School Performance Report that its student demographics often change significantly after privatization, making “comparisons of test scores before and after Edison ... potentially misleading.”

Edison’s new report, released Oct. 2, confirms what Edison critics have charged all along - that comparing before-and-after test scores is invalid and statistically unsound because of transformed student demographics. In effect, the report disowns Edison’s own past publicity touting before-and-after comparisons.

Edison and its supporters strongly emphasized such comparisons during a dispute last spring with the San Francisco Unified School District. The San Francisco school board had moved to revoke the company’s charter for a San Francisco elementary school, citing numerous problems with the company and the contract.

New York-based Edison, which operates 136 schools nationwide, won coverage from international media assailing the San Francisco school board. Editorials in the Wall Street Journal and the London-based Economist not only cited Edison’s gains from before privatization but also used inaccurate figures, apparently from Edison sources, greatly exaggerating the increase. USA Today, the New York Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, the San Jose Mercury News and Salon emphasized before-and-after achievement in articles and favorable editorials.

Edison supporters, meanwhile, slapped down critics’ charges that the San Francisco school’s student population had been revamped after privatization, in common with most Edison schools. Most, if not all, Edison schools enroll students entirely by parental request, enhanced by aggressive marketing and outreach. That creates what some call the “magnet-school effect,” self-selecting for education-focused families. Edison also is widely accused of discouraging or “counseling out” the

most challenging students. Statistics showing transformed ethnic and economic demographics at its San Francisco school confirm the changes.

Yet Edison backers repeatedly disputed links between changed demographics and higher test scores. San Francisco Chronicle columnist Debra J. Saunders scoffed at Board of Education President Jill Wynns for pointing out, as paraphrased by Saunders, “that Edison scores have risen because Edison had recruited more middle-class students.” Edison supporters - including Joan Walsh in Salon, former San Jose Mercury News columnist Joanne Jacobs, Sacramento Bee columnist Peter Schrag, and Diallo Dphrepaulezz of the politically conservative Pacific Research Institute, who produced a pro-Edison research paper and generated op-eds around the nation - discounted assertions that the school was serving a transformed population.

Now Edison’s new report confirms those assertions. “Schools often change their enrollments dramatically after Edison is introduced,” the report explains. “...Edison schools are generally schools of choice, and enrollments change as families opt into or out of this new program. If enrollments change, comparisons of test scores before and after Edison become potentially misleading comparisons of different students.”

Last year’s Edison School Performance Report did not use comparisons with scores from before privatization, but the company’s own publicity and its supporters have used such comparisons widely and aggressively.

The Edison report’s own figures also confirm significant demographic changes at San Francisco’s Edison Charter Academy (ECA) in just one year. The 2000 Edison report listed 6.8 percent special education students - already low for a San Francisco school. The number plunged to 2 percent in 2001. The 2000 Edison report noted that economically disadvantaged students made up 79 percent of ECA students; in 2001 the number plunged to 55 percent. The 2000 Edison report showed that English language learners made up 32 percent of ECA students; in 2001 the number was a surprising zero, according to Edison’s own report.

Even with the revamped student population and the extensively touted gains from before privatization, ECA’s test scores fall far below San Francisco Unified districtwide averages. ECA ranks No. 62 of 75 district

elementary schools based on its score on California's Academic Performance Index, according to the website School Wise Press.

Edison's dispute with the San Francisco district was resolved in a June agreement severing the company's ties with the school district and allowing the California state Board of Education to charter the school.

Edison Schools is a nationwide school management firm stock publicly traded on the NASDAQ, though the 9-year-old company has never made a profit. Edison has attracted ideological support from backers of privatization and school vouchers, and such powerful conservative bastions as the Wall Street Journal editorial board and the Hoover Institution.

Along with San Francisco, many districts nationwide have had problems with the company, and its contracts have also been severed in Sherman and San Antonio, Texas; Goldsboro, N.C.; and Lansing, Mich. Edison's one Minneapolis school will also close at the end of this school year, ending the company's presence there.

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Edison's 2001 School Performance Report:

<http://www.edisonschools.com/design/d23.html>

San Francisco Unified School District school ranking based on their score on California's Academic Performance Index:

[http://www.schoolwisepress.com/compare/38/38\\_e\\_api.html](http://www.schoolwisepress.com/compare/38/38_e_api.html)

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>

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