

For-Profit Public Schools Show Hope After First Year

The Washington Post

As Edison Project Plans to Expand Number of Campuses, Critics Fear a Collision Course

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1996

A1

By Rene Sanchez
Washington Post Staff Writer

BOSTON—One year after its debut here as part of the Edison Project, one of the most provocative ventures in American education, the Boston Renaissance School is brimming with signs of promise.

Walk the halls and see why: In Bill Gilson's math class, fourth-graders are getting their first dose of fractions and vying to rack up extra points for creating what their teacher calls a "beautiful moment"—when he sees the entire class doing something well.

"Like when all of us are raising our hands," says 10-year-old Stephan Myers, "or like when we all shut up in the halls."

Outside Kathy Johnson's classroom, fifth-graders are spending part of their lunch period practicing how to walk single file, with arms folded across their chests—a code of conduct the school demands from students whenever they move around the building.

Upstairs, Yulinda Chow's students are studying words from their latest book. One of them stands beside a chalkboard and asks her classmates, one at a time, to pronounce a word. Like most teachers here, Chow lets students lead some lessons but makes sure no one is missed. "Raise your hand," she says, "if you haven't had a chance yet."

Boston Renaissance is one of 12 schools nationwide now part of Edison, a private firm trying to chart a radical—some say unrealistic—new course for public schools. With the project now in its second year of work here and in several other cities, some educators say it has begun to make the first positive case for one of the most controversial questions facing the nation's public schools: whether private, for-profit companies can be entrusted with the task of teaching children.

Schools around the country are letting private firms manage parts of their budget or help with class instruction. But Edison's scope is unrivaled. It is trying to remake schools entirely with its own ideals, by casting aside old habits of public education and using a management and teaching model that it built from scratch.

Edison has spent more than \$45 million de-

See EDISON, A14, Col. 1

EDISON, From A1

signing its own curriculum and creating a strategy for running every aspect of a school. It is spending the per-pupil money that it receives from public school systems largely as it sees fit, and it is hiring its own teachers and administrators, most of whom are not union members.

Its class days are 90 minutes longer than those at most public schools. Its academic year is almost a month longer. All of Edison's students—there are now more than 7,000 nationwide—get a computer to bring home, after their parents complete a few hours of computer training. Parents at Edison's schools around the country also can talk to each other on a computer bulletin board the company has dubbed "Front Porch."

There are television sets and VCRs in every Edison classroom, but the company saves money in other ways. At Boston Renaissance, for example, students are served lunch at their desks; running a full-fledged cafeteria would be more expensive.

Edison's teachers emphasize reading, writing and math. But art or music is offered daily. So is foreign language. Teachers often divide students into learning teams and develop lessons with learning games, not traditional lectures. Most classes stay together for several years, and teachers tailor learning goals for each student.

The company's approach is winning early praise from the parents and school systems that are gambling on it. "They really seem to be on track," said Kaidi Grant, whose two children attend Boston Renaissance. "Most parents are impressed by how hard they're working. They really have the resources and the enthusiasm to apply their vision."

Even as other companies working in public schools struggle to live up to lofty expectations, or battle with teachers unions, Edison is avoiding labor strife and gaining more support from investors. Unlike some of its rivals in the emerging private schooling industry, Edison has not tried to run an entire school system or take on many schools in one district all at once. But Edison has gone a step further than some other companies by hiring its own teachers. Another private company, the embattled Education Alternatives Inc., has tried to enact its education program using teachers already working for the public school system.

Just recently, the company raised another \$30.5 million from investors who are betting that it has the right formula and ultimately will make money from schools. That capital will finance the next batch of schools Edison is planning to run.

Still, Edison's leaders, who include a former president of Yale University, Benno C. Schmidt, say they know they have much more still to prove, just to survive.

"We have come a long way," said Schmidt, whose decision four years ago to leave one of academia's most prestigious jobs for such a risky venture puzzled many educators. "But it's going to take about three more years to get a solid, clear judgment about the long-term benefits of this program on the academic growth of children."

Only a few years ago, before it had run even one school, many investors and educators considered Edison dead—a victim of its own extravagant goals and the financial troubles of its founder, the brash media entrepreneur Christopher Whittle. He created Channel One, which beams educational programming and advertising into thousands of schools.

But the company abruptly scrapped its plan to open as many as 1,000 private schools, which could have cost more than \$2 billion, and embraced a far more modest strategy. Now, it is trying to take over public schools nationwide.

Edison ran four schools last year. It is managing eight more this year. At some of its schools, students are selected by lottery, without regard to family income or race. Preference at others is given to students who

live in the school's neighborhood, with the rest chosen randomly.

So far, Edison's student body is roughly the same around the country: mostly minority, mostly from poor or middle-class families, and often with mediocre academic records or chronic learning problems.

"Our experience so far is that most families whose children are having success in school tend to stay put," said John Chubb, Edison's director of instruction.

The school districts giving the company its first chance to teach children seem pleased with its work. Student attendance and parental involvement are high. Student turnover is low. Achievement test scores in reading and math at Edison's first four schools suggest that many students are making academic strides.

Every district that worked with Edison last year asked it to expand by adding a middle school this fall. In Wichita, parents are petitioning the school board to give Edison a third school. Here in Boston, hundreds of families are on Edison's waiting list. The company also is running schools in Colorado, Florida, Michigan and Texas.

Yet there is still widespread doubt that Edison can fulfill its central promise: to improve students academically by using the same amount of money a public school system spends per pupil at its other schools, and to earn a profit doing it. Many public school districts are still quite reluctant to work with the company.

Edison overall is not making money yet, though it posted small profits from its first four schools. Its leaders now say they do not expect to make the company profitable until it is managing at least 25 schools, a goal they do not expect to reach until 1998.

But some educators say it will be hard for Edison to succeed financially unless it tightens spending and curtails some classroom resources. At Boston Renaissance, some parents are already worried about the size of classes; a few even have offered to return the computer the company gave them to save money and help pay for more staff.

Many classes here have about 28 students at times during the day, an average that is higher than at many public schools. Skeptics of Edison predict class size will grow as it feels more pressure to make money. Others warn that the company is lavishing so many resources on its schools that comparing its work to other schools is unfair.

"I have some real fears about the concept," said Keith Welty, president of the Wichita chapter of the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union. "I

1
2

Educ - School Reform

don't see how they can keep putting all of this capital into schools and make a profit. They will start cutting corners. I doubt the schools you see now are what you'll see from them in a few years."

Then there are Edison's teachers. Most of them are young and have only a few years of experience. Their zeal, educators say, may be one reason for the company's apparent early success. "We wanted people young enough to be willing to throw away the rule book," said William Doherty, Boston Renaissance's community resource director.

Sustaining that enthusiasm could be tough over time, however. And paying teachers as their careers progress could be more costly. At Boston Renaissance, which is an independent "charter" public school, starting salary for teachers is about \$32,000 a year. That is slightly higher than the pay at Boston's other public schools.

Boston Renaissance, which has about 1,000 students, is spread

See EDISON, A15, Col. 1

EDISON, From A14

across a dozen floors in what was once a downtown office building. More than half of the students come from disadvantaged families and receive free or reduced-price meals for lunch.

The school stresses discipline. And although uniforms are optional, most students wear them. Chatting or running in halls is not tolerated. Teachers serve on "climate committees." Classrooms boast bright posters with examples of model citizenry, such as showing classmates courtesy. Before lunch in Brian Newsom's fourth-grade math class the other day, one student after another raised two fingers above their head—the signal he uses to call for silence. After the entire class settled down, he let them eat.

Students here spend nearly two hours reading each day. Teachers or aides divide them into small groups during that time, a practice at every Edison school. Teachers were trained all at once last year before the school opened and must follow a meticulously outlined curriculum. But they say they do not find it stifling.

"You have flexibility to be creative," said Newsom, 25. "What I like is the school encourages students to help each other learn, in a real hands-on way. Sometimes I don't think they realize they're learning. They think they're just playing a game."

Not much emphasis is placed on letter grading, either. Instead, students receive quarterly "learning assessments" that give parents detailed explanations of their child's strengths and weaknesses in subjects.

"It's much better than the other way," Grant said. "Sometimes you don't know what a 'B' or a 'C' really means. This way you know exactly what you have to work on."

"We didn't know what to expect last year," said Kim Williams, who has two children at Boston Renaissance. "But I think the curriculum exposes children to more. Reading is part of everything, plus there are the sciences and Spanish. It's challenging."

Parents and students also are gradually using the take-home computers more. Barbara Wager, the school's principal, said she gets about a dozen e-mail questions from parents every day. Often, she is able to resolve a problem in a matter of minutes that way. Students also complete some homework assignments on their computers.

Wager, who worked in Rochester's public schools for 30 years, said she is taking a chance on Edison because she's weary of the bureaucracy and low expectations that plague some public school systems. Teachers here say Edison has a bolder classroom plan. And Wager said it is not surprising that most of the teachers are young. Last year, she received hundreds of resumes for fewer than 50 teaching positions.

"We have longer days. A longer year. A tough student population. New ideas to learn and strictly follow," she said. "How many veterans want to leave a system for that?"

Like other educators in Edison, Wager also said she no longer believes traditional public schools can reform because doing so is so arduous, so expensive or so mired in politics. Edison, she said, forces faculty and students to think big.

"We're not just trying to get through a year," Wager said. "We're trying to build a new national model for great schools."

Edison concedes it has had some troubles: Start-up costs at some schools have been higher than anticipated. It took months to iron out busing routes and class schedules. Edison is serving more students with special academic needs than it expected. One of its first four principals already has been replaced.

But Schmidt scoffs at suggestions that the company's long-term health is not sound. "We've already learned a lot about how to improve, and I

think we're beginning to prove some things," he said. "It's always hardest in the early going. We're getting past that now. We certainly are overcoming doubts in the investment community."

Investment analysts say confidence in Edison has grown because it is expanding now with a more cautious strategy and is responding to pressure from investors to cut some costs, like the salaries of its top officials. Some analysts, however, say reaping great profits with its school model may be hard, no matter how well the company is run.

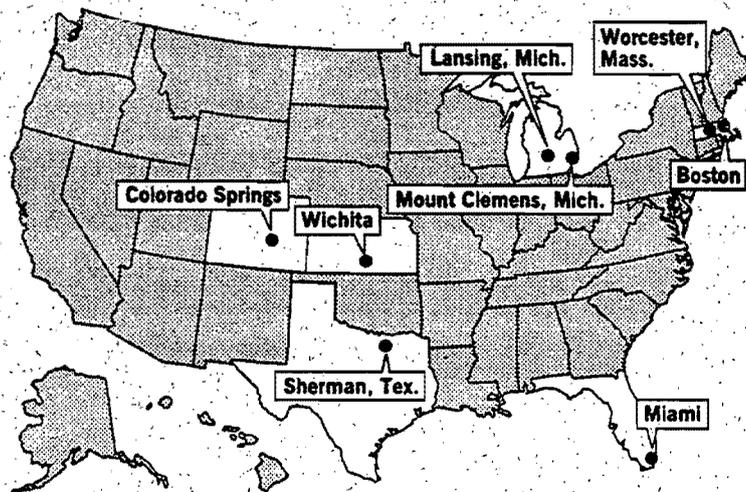
"I don't think this is going to be a huge profit-margin business," said Michael Moe, who tracks school privatization for Montgomery Securities, based in San Francisco. "But Edison has been smart. They're taking it one school at a time, and they are gaining credibility. But it's too early to make any ultimate conclusions about this."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the Edison Project's curriculum goals and educational model, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

ALTERNATIVE FOR AMERICA

The Edison Project, a private company trying to build a national network of for-profit public schools, is now in its second year and winning high marks from parents. Next year Edison plans to expand from 12 schools—in the locations labeled below—to about 20 schools nationwide.



Edison's school plan features:

- School days 90 minutes longer than at most public schools.
- School year about 25 days longer than the national average.
- A free take-home computer for each student.
- Principal has full budget and hiring authority.
- Heavy classroom emphasis on reading.

2/2