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School District Blasted for “Secret” Edison Deal

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Julian Guthrie

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SAN FRANCISCO -- In the latest attack on the for-profit Edison Project, child advocates say San Francisco schools chief Bill Rojas signed a "secret agreement" giving the company authority to expand its program to middle and high schools.

The advocates also charge the district with giving more money per pupil to the Noe Valley elementary school run by Edison than other district sites.

The Edison Charter Academy opened in August as a for-profit charter school run by the Edison Project.

"The Edison Project appears to be draining money from other public schools in the district," says Margaret Brodtkin, executive director of Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth.

She said per pupil expenditures at Edison "seem to be 20 percent higher" this year than last, growing from \$4,136 to \$4,923.

Brodtkin says she came up with the per pupil figures by looking at total projected expenditures at the school divided by the number of students enrolled. She did not, however, take into account expenses such as busing, food, maintenance, security and payroll services, which must be factored in.

"I admit, it's very difficult to evaluate something like this when we don't have all the numbers," Brodtkin said.

"We did the best we could with the numbers we had."

The district's chief financial officer, Bill Coleman, however, says Brodtkin "is dreaming."

He said the district allocates per pupil spending based on revenue limits. "We allocate the same amount to every school based on our revenue limit," Coleman said.

"Whatever the revenue limit is, that's what they get."

In coming weeks, Coleman and his staff will do their own analysis of how much Edison is spending per pupil.

"I realize that I can't just say it's the wrong number, that I have to show you on a piece of paper it's wrong. That takes time and is a tedious process," Coleman said.

This is only the latest flap in a heated controversy that began in April and was fueled by concerns over

"privatizing" public schools and injecting corporate culture into the classroom.

It is a controversy that Brodtkin and others insist will define who gets elected to the school board in November.

The Edison Project, an educational management company run by entrepreneur Chris Whittle - who brought child-oriented television into the classroom via Channel One - proposed taking over two public elementary schools in The City and running them as for-profit charter schools.

Because of vehement protest, however, the proposal to run the new Tenderloin Community School was dropped. The Board of Education approved the Edison charter for Thomas Edison Elementary on June 23. The Noe Valley school opened in August with its new name.

The so-called "secret agreement" between the district and the Edison Project was dated Aug. 14 and signed by Rojas and Whittle.

Among other things, the weighty legal document stipulates that if the Edison Charter Academy is implemented and run "to the satisfaction of the Board of Education," the company and the district will explore sites for a Junior Academy (grades six-eight), a Senior Academy (grades nine-10) and Collegiate Academy (grades 11-12).

"There was no talk of expansion during the discussion to approve the Edison Project," Brodtkin says. "The opposite was implied." Assistant Superintendent Laura Alvarenga denied there is anything secret about the agreement signed by Rojas and Whittle and that expansion of any charter school - Edison or otherwise - rested on board approval.

"I'm not sure where this is coming from," Alvarenga said. "This was no more done in secret than any other charter agreement that's been developed by the district."

Edison spokeswoman Kathy Hamel says expansion plans were discussed in public forums.

"Parents are usually the ones who ask if we have anything like this," Hamel said of the upper grade academies.

Edison, which operates charter schools across the country, has 13 middle school academies and five high schools, said Hamel.

A resolution to augment the Aug. 14 agreement was introduced this week by school board members Jill Wynns and Dan Kelly. It seeks to establish closer oversight and evaluation of the school and make sure no advertising is allowed on the campus, among a half dozen other things.