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**Edison Project: Still the Way? Mt. Clemens to Decide on
Renewal of Contract**

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Tracy Van Moorlehem

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Cassandra Esselink stood in the entry of the Martin L. King Academy on a recent school night with an armload of letters and a heavy heart.

As parents filed past her for curriculum night, she informed them that the school board was about to decide whether the Mt. Clemens elementary school should continue to be run by a private company.

"Here's some information about the contract renewal," she said again and again. "Please read it. If you agree with what we're trying to do, sign the petition on the table."

Five years ago, Mt. Clemens Community schools signed a contract with the Edison Project -- a private, for-profit company -- to run King Academy. The company now runs four other district programs. But the contract is up for renewal this school year, and the community is divided about whether to sign a new contract.

When Esselink enrolled her son at King Academy in 1997, she didn't worry about the length of the contract. The Edison Project was a popular program with a long waiting list.

"I guess we all felt there was no way they'd let Edison go," she said.

But some detractors say the Edison program costs too much and the debate in Mt. Clemens is the latest in an ongoing national struggle with school choice.

Throughout the '90s, the introduction of public charter schools, privatization and open borders between districts introduced market principles into education. Parents

generally have more choices among public schools, but also more risk; sometimes the school that goes out of business is the one they liked.

Mt. Clemens was one of the first four districts in the nation to sign up with Edison. At first, the company offered just one elementary school, but it expanded to include a primary school for grades K-2, an elementary for grades 3-5, a junior academy for grades 6-8, a senior academy for grades 9 and 10 and a collegiate academy for grades 11 and 12.

All told, about two out of five students in the district attend an Edison school. The district pays the company about 88 percent of its per-pupil state aid -- approximately \$5,800 -- for each student it educates. The district keeps the other 12 percent for administrative costs.

Those in favor of a continued partnership say it gives parents a choice between traditional schools and Edison's, which have a longer school day and year and offer computers that all children take home.

"I can't believe how smart my children are now," said Cindy Fitzgerald, the mother of two King students, Sean, 8, and Rebecca, 10. She said her fifth-grade daughter is doing geometry, and her second-grade son recently had a homework assignment to write a letter as if a cat were addressing its owners.

"He looked up at me and said, 'That's personification, you know,' " Fitzgerald said. "Children are smarter than we think they are. Some people don't give them enough credit -- but Edison does."

Detractors say the cost of choice is too high. They believe money paid to Edison is sapping a district that has struggled for two years to wipe out a \$2.4-million deficit caused, in part, by declining enrollment.

Today the district is running a small surplus.

Teachers and parents at the traditional middle and high schools say the district is too small to support two different programs.

Superintendent T.C. Wallace said the disagreement about Edison is difficult to resolve because much of it is based on perception.

"It's almost like trying to chase down a rumor," he said. "You never get to the source."

He said the board is trying a survey and a public forum to determine what people think, and get beyond the perceptions by taking a fresh look at how the district functions.

Edison and the district have until Dec. 31 to negotiate a new contract or mutually agree to an extension. Meanwhile, Edison is advising parents to be patient.

"There's no reason for concern at this point," said Edison executive vice president Deborah McGriff. "I understand their desire to have a quick decision, but I also understand the board's process for renewing this contract."

But Esselink and other Edison parents read danger in the reassurance they're not hearing. They're ordering lawn signs, circulating petitions, printing flyers and planning to attend Wednesday's school board meeting in a show of support.

Above all, Esselink and other parents want the board to know that ending the Edison partnership could be harm the district financially. Many parents say that if Edison leaves, they'll take their children -- and \$6,599.78 in per-pupil funding -- out of the district.

"I'm going where Edison goes, just like the Pied Piper and the mice," said parent Rita Brockington, who took her daughter Katherine, 11, out of a Lutheran school to attend King Academy.

Earl Rickman, one of two remaining members of the school board that signed the 1994 contract, said the board is proceeding cautiously.

"This is a very serious issue that could have a serious impact on the district and our ability to provide for our students," he said. "What if we don't have Edison? What will the district look like? What size will it be? These are all questions we have to ask."

Parents and residents can voice opinions two ways this week. On Wednesday the school board is meeting at 6:30 p.m. at Seminole Elementary, 1500 Mulberry. And Wallace has called a community forum from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday at the auditorium in the secondary complex, 155 Cass Ave.