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Progress at School Run by Private Firm

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SAN FRANCISCO -- ONE YEAR after the for-profit Edison Project took over a woefully failing San Francisco elementary school, an independent review shows the beginning of a turnaround, with kids reading better, teachers receiving more training and parents flocking to school events. The results released Wednesday were cheered by those who welcome private management of public schools, but dismissed by the teachers union and others who vehemently oppose the experiment, the first of its kind in San Francisco.

Edison students who took reading tests in August and again in March showed significant progress. In August, 88 percent of students read below grade level, 10 percent at grade level and 2 percent above grade level. In late March, 57 percent were below grade level, 24 percent at grade level and 19 percent above grade level.

"What most places do in three or four years, we did in one year," said Barbara Karvelis, principal of the Edison Charter Academy, a K-5 school in Noe Valley. "It all starts with reading. That has been our primary focus. It's the single most important piece."

Karvelis credits the apparent turnaround to committed and well-trained teachers, a research-based reading program, inflexible discipline, longer school days and enriched music, art and language classes.

Critics, however, say it doesn't take a private company to create such changes.

"I'm not willing to give the Edison Project any credit, because the district is able to do every one of these things - and has done so in other circumstances," said teachers union President Kent Mitchell, who ardently opposes privatizing public schools.

"I am willing to give teachers credit because they've worked their tails off. I'm willing to give Barbara credit. She's brought focus to the school. There is more stability

and an agreement among faculty about the curriculum. But, a well-run school district can do these things without an Edison."

The midyear evaluation was presented to the Board of Education on Wednesday night. Four other charter schools - one elementary and three high - also gave progress reports. The charter schools are: Creative Arts, Gateway, Leadership and Life Learning Academy.

It was the Edison report, however, that was most eagerly awaited. Debate over the role of private industry in public education has simmered since the proposal was floated last spring to hand the elementary school over to a New York-based educational management firm.

"This is the single most important policy decision that is being made in public education," said Margaret Brodtkin, executive director of Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth, a vehement Edison critic.

In addition to the reading gains released Wednesday, the Edison report included these key findings:

- *Edison teachers spend 34 days in professional development, compared with eight days for other district teachers.

- *Edison kids attend school for eight hours, two hours longer than the typical school day.

- *The school year is 10 days longer.

- *28 of 30 teachers are fully credentialed.

- *95 percent of parents meet three times a year with their children's teachers.

"Yes, the district could've turned this school around in two or three years," Karvelis said. "But, we needed to do it fast. These kids for the past two to three years have been failing. They don't have another three years to wait for the district to improve the school."

Indeed, test scores at the school - coincidentally named Edison Elementary before it was taken over by the Edison Project in August - had been abysmal for more than a decade.

The school ranked 63rd out of 66 elementary schools in a 1997 district reading test. In math, the school ranked last. In 1987, on the same test, the school ranked 68th out of 69 elementary schools in reading and 66th in math.

Skeptics remain

School board member Dan Kelly, who voted against handing the elementary school over to the Edison Project, concedes that the results are promising, but is not willing to become a convert.

"I was critical of the district for not turning around the school," Kelly said. "I think the Edison approach is a viable model that is well-scripted from classroom to classroom. We can learn a lot from Edison, but we don't have to have the Edison Project running our schools."

School board member Jill Wynns, who also opposed the proposal from the beginning, was unimpressed by the upbeat report.

"It doesn't surprise me that kids are doing better and the school climate is better," Wynns said. "I'm glad for the kids. But I am fundamentally opposed to a private company profiting from a public school."

She also criticized Edison for enrolling fewer blacks and Latinos this year.

Karvelis acknowledges there has been speculation throughout the year that academic performance has improved because of a change in school demographics. However, she dismisses such speculation. The Edison report shows some changes in demographics: a 4 percent decrease among both blacks and Latinos and a 3 percent increase in white students.

Enrollment rose to 457 students this year, from 333 last year, Karvelis said. Ninety-eight percent of kindergarten through fourth-grade students returned this year.

As the students increased, the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch rose by 18 percent, Karvelis said.

"Such speculation is a rumor, not a fact," Karvelis said. "It's fiction and it's politically motivated."

Critics of the Edison Project - a company created by media entrepreneur Chris Whittle, who brought child geared TV news and commercials into the classroom via Channel One - fear corporate culture is seeping into classrooms.

Supporters say the Edison Project approach brings desperately needed funding and professionalism to public schools that are openly in crisis.

Edison Project runs 51 schools across the country, six in California, four in the Bay Area: two in East Palo Alto, one in Napa and Edison in San Francisco.

Increased curriculum

All Edison Project schools have enriched art, music and language instruction, classes that have been cut from cash-strapped public schools. The Edison Project also lends home computers to students from the third grade up.

Because of the high cost of operating schools in California, and the low per-pupil spending, the Edison Project will not take over a school here unless it receives supplemental funding.

Through the Donald and Doris Fisher Foundation, Gap founder Don Fisher has agreed to donate \$25 million to cover costs of opening Edison school sites in California.

A visit to the Edison Charter Academy on Wednesday showed a school with immaculate halls, walls adorned with student artwork and kids who greet visitors by name and in unison.

In a fifth-grade classroom, students were learning about surrealism, studying the works of Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte.

"Surrealism is kind of like abstract art, but it doesn't have all the wacky colors," said fifth-grader Lewis Johnson.

Asked by his teacher what characterizes surrealism, Johnson ticked off, "Levitation, dislocation, incongruence."

In a fourth-grade classroom, teacher Heath Caceres, who started at the school in 1998, said the Edison Project has brought desperately needed structure to the classroom.

"Last year, I literally had kids jumping off the desks," he said. "There had been no consistency here for years."

Pausing, he added, "There were also no textbooks."

Another convert to the Edison program is parent Alvaro Sanchez, whose daughter, Alba, is a third-grader at the school.

"My daughter went to Mira Loma before transferring to Edison this year," said Sanchez, referring to another San Francisco public school. "She's very intelligent and she wasn't challenged. Now, we drive in my car and she talks about the environment, about all these things and she's always asking me questions. She's a different person.

"I believe this school is the best thing that's happened to my daughter - and to me."

