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Edison Vote Favors Project

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Julian Guthrie

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Weighing in on the contentious issue of privatizing public schools, parents, teachers and faculty at Edison Elementary in The City voted in favor of becoming a charter site that will be managed by a for-profit company. The votes, released Wednesday, show almost 85 percent of the 57 parents who voted favor handing their children's school over to the Edison Project, with 48 voting yes and nine voting no. More than 300 children attend the school. Teachers were more divided, with 12 saying yes and eight voting no. Of 11 support staff and classroom aides, all but one voted in favor of the charter proposal.

While supporters of the charter idea hailed the ballot results as a harbinger of victory, critics vowed to fight even harder.

"I will not go quietly and sell our public education system," school board member Jill Wynns said.

Equally insistent, however, was schools chief Bill Rojas, who said the voice of the parents and faculty should be heeded.

"I don't buy the hype that we're selling our children," Rojas said. "Those ideological discussions about privatization belong some place, but this is a school that needs a boost."

Edison Elementary has been fraught with problems, including abysmally low test scores and four principals in less than two years.

The vote comes less than a week before the Board of Education is expected to cast its final vote on the issue of allowing the Edison Project to manage the Edison School.

It also caps two months of divisive debate among educators and parents over whether private companies should be given the right to run public schools in San Francisco.

Two of The City's elementary schools were originally targeted for takeover by the Edison Project, a company created by Chris Whittle, the same media entrepreneur who brought child-g geared TV programming into the classrooms via Channel One.

In addition to the Edison school, the new Tenderloin Community School was considered for an Edison Project charter. But after formidable opposition from parents and community leaders, the proposal was defeated.

One strong enticement for San Francisco to bring in the Edison Project: a donation of more than \$1.3 million for start-up costs, courtesy of Donald Fisher, owner of The Gap.

Another enticement to many parents is that the typical Edison Project school day lasts eight hours (even kindergartners attend full days), and the school year is about a month longer.

"It's very good for children to stay in school longer and that's one reason I supported the plan," said Vilna Ticas, who has two children at Edison Elementary. "I have more confidence in the Edison Project than in our own school district."

Another parent who voted in favor of the plan said she too had grown tired of the district's empty promises.

"Everyone was debating this issue and saying, 'Oh, no, where is the money coming from?' " chuckled Myrna Britton Banks, who has a second-grader at the school. "Why should we be worried about a company coming in and giving us money? The district makes money off of us everyday."

She was more concerned, she said, with what the Edison Project had to offer in terms of curriculum, teaching staff and computer availability.

One of the most alluring selling points of the Edison Project is that it lends home computers to students from third grade up.

"Parents have looked at what we have to offer and indicated they're interested in partnering with the Edison Project," said John Fisher - Donald Fisher's son - who owns a 4 percent stake of the Edison Project.

But, for as many people who support the concept of private-public partnerships, there are at least as many detractors.

"I believe in public education and I wouldn't consider sending my son to a private school," said Pam Coxon, who volunteered at Edison Elementary for two years. "I'm especially concerned about this corporation because they have a history of using students as a captive audience for advertising."

She also didn't think parents and teachers at the school had the opportunity to hear both sides of the issue.

Because school Principal Barbara Karvelis strongly supported the charter proposal, any dissenters were discouraged, Coxon said.

"I was asked by the principal not to talk to teachers and staff about my views," Coxon said. "She (Karvelis) even said I couldn't volunteer at the school if I kept talking to teachers about the Edison Project."

Karvelis did not return calls Wednesday.

Parent Mary Beth Pudup was also considering sending her son to Edison, but will look elsewhere if it becomes an Edison Project school.

"I'm opposed to Edison because I'm against privatization," Pudup said. "Also, it destroys a sense of community and dedication. The company thinks it will make money by drawing on all the good will people have for education. But this would really destroy the incentive to volunteer. Why volunteer for a company that's making money?"

There are others still who discount and distrust the ballot votes.

Although it was counted by the independent League of Women Voters of San Francisco, the ballots were sent out on postcards by the district, leading some to believe they could have been duplicated.

Child advocate Marybeth Wallace also questioned the validity of the vote. With more than 300 children enrolled at Edison Elementary, why would only 57 parents vote, she asked.

"That tells me that the yes votes were solicited," said Wallace, of Coleman Advocates for Youth and Children. "I certainly don't see the Edison Project as the winner. What I see is that there's a whole lot of education that needs to go on between now and next Tuesday."