

Opinion

There Are Kids at Edison Who Need a Break

Alan Bonsteel, M.D.

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San Francisco Unified School District is in chaos. Its finances have been taken over by the state's Fiscal Crisis Management Team. It doesn't have enough textbooks to go around. Its school buildings are dilapidated and vermin-infested. It has deliberately excluded ever more low-performing children from testing every year, making its test scores utterly worthless. Its dropout rates are phony. The education it offers is so poor that its own teachers are enrolling their children in private schools at a much higher rate than the general public.

One would think that the new school board would be eager to attack the innumerable problems of the district. Instead, several members have made clear that their top priority is to padlock one of the few schools that are actually working: the Edison charter school in Noe Valley.

Before becoming a charter school, the Edison school? which coincidentally carries the same name as the professional school management group now running it? was one of the worst public schools in the district. Even a reconstitution, in which all of its employees were transferred elsewhere and a completely new team took over, was a total failure.

When the Edison Project took over, they instituted a proven, no-nonsense curriculum. Long before Gray Davis thought of the idea, both the school year and the school day at Edison were lengthened. In stark contrast to the textbook-challenged traditional public schools in the district, every Edison student not only got up-to-date textbooks, but a laptop computer to take home. Discipline was established. Test scores rose. Teacher salaries were raised. Parents clamored to get their children in, and enrollment soared.

The children who benefited are overwhelmingly minority and low-income. If their beloved school is closed, they'll be sent back to the truly awful inner-city public schools from which they only recently escaped.

Why would anyone want to harm these kids? Why, especially, would anyone want to close a school that is so clearly excelling when so many others in the district are failing? Those attacking the school haven't produced even a single dissatisfied parent? nor will they, since attendance at all charter schools is voluntary.

Those who want to close the school claim that they don't like profit-making schools. In fact, however, the school has yet to become profitable. And even if it eventually does show a return for its investors (just as investors in public school bonds expect a return on their investment) that profit will be dwarfed by the \$1.8 million that the Don Fisher family donated to the school in one of the public/private partnerships that the public school establishment has long claimed it wants.

And the notion that nobody is profiting at the San Francisco Unified School District is naive. The school headquarters at 555 Franklin is packed with administrators pulling down high six-figure salaries at a time when the district can't even provide pencils and paper to the kids.

The *real* reason for this bizarre vendetta is that the teachers at Edison are not protected by the tenure rules that make teaching in our public schools a government job guaranteed for life? something that is anathema to the teachers union.

If the special interests succeed in voting to close the school in the San Francisco school board, the battle will have only just begun. Under the 1998 state charter school reforms, the State Board of Education may supervise charter schools directly, as it has already voted to do with new charter schools in Oakland (under the auspices of Mayor Jerry Brown) and in Ridgecrest. And under the newly-passed Proposition 39, school districts are required to offer charter schools buildings equivalent to the traditional public schools in the district, so trying to evict the kids won't work either.

If the San Francisco School Board tries to shut down this highly successful inner-city school, it will become a laughing stock. But far more importantly, it will have done untold harm to some very disadvantaged and defenseless children who desperately need a break.

Alan Bonsteel, M.D., is a San Francisco resident who is co-author of A Choice for Our Children: Curing the Crisis in America's Schools (Institute for Contemporary Studies, Oakland, 1997)