

Opinion

EDISON PARENTS' REVENGE

By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.

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Last year, a pitched battle to save San Francisco's Edison charter school drew worldwide attention. Had San Francisco's school board been trying to shut down a low-performing school, there wouldn't have been a word in the press outside of the city's borders. What earned the battle coverage in *The New York Times* and Britain's *The Economist* is that the public school monopoly was trying to extinguish a competitor whose very success threatened the monopoly's stranglehold on our children and our tax dollars.

Prior to 1998, the old Edison public school in the Mission district was the worst performing school in the deeply troubled San Francisco Unified School District. In eight years, it went through nine principals and two total reconstitution, in which all of its employees were transferred elsewhere and a new team took over. Nothing worked: test scores languished, kids got beaten up in the halls, and the toilets overflowed.

In 1998, the coincidentally-named Edison Schools Inc. took over the school and transformed it into the Edison Charter Academy, a publicly-funded school freely chosen by the families it serves. The school year and the school day were lengthened, and a proven, no-nonsense curriculum was instituted. In contrast to the textbook-challenged traditional public schools in the district, every Edison student got not only up-to-date textbooks, but also a laptop computer. Teacher salaries were raised. Test scores rose. Parents clamored to get their children in, and enrollment soared.

The public school monopoly reacted early last year to this success by trying to shut down the school. Since Edison's families were overwhelmingly minority and low-income, the school board thought it could get away with pushing them around.

They were wrong. Time and again, the Edison families marched to school board meetings and demonstrated for the school that had done so much for their children. Despite every effort by Edison's enemies to peel off a few dissenters, the Edison families stood together in total unity in defending their beloved school.

In the end, the Edison families won, but at a cost. The distraction of having to save the school from the district's power grab took away from concentrating on academics, as it turned the lives of parents, teachers and the kids upside down. After years of increases, test scores in the spring of last year slightly dropped. Opponents of school reform? the very people who had caused the disruptions and the drops in test scores? pointed to the declining scores as proof that freedom of choice doesn't work.

For the last year, Edison's charter has been through the State Board of Education, a more independent, less political oversight agency. That has given the school a much-needed reprieve of ease and quiet in which to regroup, and they have used that time to hit the comeback trail. Edison's 2002 statewide STAR test scores have now been posted, and the results are breathtaking:

- After testing 100% of its eligible students, the school posted its highest *ever* in reading, math, language, and spelling.
- In almost every grade level and subject matter, the school has at least twice and in some cases *four times* the number of students performing at or above grade level than when the school was a traditional public school.
- Perhaps most importantly, the cohort of students who have been with Edison since its inception, as opposed to students who arrived more recently from failed San Francisco public schools, has shown dramatic and unbroken progress in improving test scores.

Beyond the tests score gains, however, Edison has established the kind of community of learning about which ordinary schools can only dream. Teachers love the school, and more than 90% are returning this year. The parents are embracing the school, and the enrollment continues to soar — more than 60 new families are joining the school this fall, despite San Francisco Unified's attempt to hide the existence of this school from other needy families.

What the Edison experiment proves is that freedom of choice and open competition work. And, perhaps the more important lesson is that parents and children united *can* fight a faceless and impersonal bureaucracy? and win.

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