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Pro and Con Edison

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Performance data on the Edison Project schools are limited because the longest-running Edison sites were established in 1995.

The company provides its most detailed data on Dodge-Edison Elementary School in Wichita, Kan., a school some observers call Edison's greatest success.

Edison officials report that students who entered as third-graders in the fall of 1995 and reached fifth grade by the fall of 1997 had boosted test scores "more than 25 percentiles on average against national norms."

But skeptics, including Alex Molnar, director of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, suggests their performance resembles a regular cross-section of schools and is "nothing special."

In his book Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools, Molnar writes that the Edison educational programs do not contain "any startling departures from good educational practice. There is no breakthrough.

"Most of their so-called innovations they supposedly spent $30 million to develop, they actually got off the shelf from places like Johns Hopkins, programs available to any public school," Molnar said.

The Edison Project has been criticized in other areas, most notably for its handling of special-education students - those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder, for example - and its rocky relationship with teachers unions.

Education professor Carol Furtwengler, of Wichita State University in Kansas, evaluated an Edison Project school in the Midwest - on the condition that she not name

the school - and said the question of how special-education students were placed in classrooms was critical.

While the Midwestern Edison Project received average per-pupil funding along with extra dollars for low-income and special-education students, Edison included all students - even those with severe disabilities - in regular classrooms, according to Furtwengler.

"Should for-profit schools be allowed to limit their enrollment of special-education students to those who don't need expensive services and can be mainstreamed into regular classrooms?" she asked.

The Edison Project states in its San Francisco charter proposal that it will "work cooperatively with the district to meet all students' needs (and) the district will retain the responsibility and oversight of all special-ed students."

Furtwengler's study also raised questions about teacher salaries. At the Midwestern school, teachers were paid for the extra days required by the Edison Project, but they did not receive pay for the extra hours worked each day.

"If you're trying to take a profit out of what is already an under funded enterprise - where 85 percent of the costs are in personnel - what you're essentially doing is looking at where you can cut and whose salary you can cut," said Mary Bergan, president of the 45,000 member California Federation of Teachers.

Bergan added: "To Edison's credit, they believe in their product and they've put work into developing a program that guarantees achievement. But I'd rather have seen Don Fisher, with all of the attention he brings to something, offer the money to programs with proven track records."

The problem with that approach, Fisher and others believe, is that most California public schools do have a

"proven track record" - a record of failure.

Results of the first statewide exam given to students in four years showed California pupils faring worse than their peers nationwide. The scores, released this summer by the state Department of Education, showed that in every subject except 11th-grade social studies, the longer kids stayed in the public school system, the worse they fared. Students in all grades managed to exceed the national averages in only 12 of 43 grade-and-subject combinations.

In 1996, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, given to a sampling of students every two years, California scores were embarrassingly low. Just 11 percent of the state's students were deemed proficient in math. In 1994, on the same

exam, 18 percent of California fourth graders read proficiently. Only in Mississippi and Louisiana did students fare worse in both subjects.