
Interview: Veronica Joyner

Stop 'Edison' Takeover Of Philadelphia Schools

by Marianna Wertz

A broad-based coalition in Philadelphia is organizing feverishly to stop the planned Dec. 1 state takeover and privatization of the city's entire school district, the largest such project ever proposed in the nation. Former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge (R), now chief of U.S. Homeland Security, set the takeover in motion in August, when he gave Edison Schools, Inc., the nation's largest private manager of public schools, \$2.7 million to conduct a two-month review of the Philadelphia School District's educational and fiscal management, and to prepare a plan for state takeover and privatization. When Ridge left for Washington, after the Sept. 11 attacks, newly installed Gov. Mark Schweiker (R) continued the plan, making it official on Nov. 1.

The plan calls for 60 of the district's 264 schools, serving approximately 50,000 students, to be managed by education companies (i.e., Edison Schools), working in partnership with "leading community organizations," including churches and political groups—along the lines of the "faith-based initiative" which the Bush Administration is pushing nationally for privatizing social services. Edison's president for Charter Schools is former U.S. Rep. the Rev. Floyd Flake (D-N.Y.), a friend of Ridge's and a leading advocate of "faith-based initiatives."

The New York-based Edison Project has never turned a profit in its ten-year history, and is more than \$2 million in debt. Under the proposal, Edison would receive about \$40 million to run the system. Edison was founded by communications tycoon Christopher Whittle, who was forced to divest himself of parts of his communications empire in 1994, amid allegations of fraud and mismanagement. Edison's chief executive officer and executive vice president is John Chubb, author of *A Lesson In School Reform From Great Britain*. Donald Sunderland, chief information officer and executive vice president, was formerly managing director of Union Bank of Switzerland, in charge of Global Technology for Derivative Projects. (A dossier on Edison appears in *Documentation*.)

Helping to lead the fight against the privatization is Veronica Joyner, a teacher of 25 years and president and founder of Parents United for Better Schools, which is a non-profit parent advocacy corporation, with about 20,000 members citywide. She is also president and founder of The Mathematics, Civics, and Sciences Charter School of Philadelphia, Inc., with 900 students and 125 employees. She spoke with *EIR* on Nov. 9.

EIR: Is the takeover set in stone?

Joyner: No, it isn't, because our Mayor [John Street (D)] has gone on record as saying that he is opposed to the takeover. We're opposed to the takeover. The Home and School Council of the Philadelphia Public School District, which has representation in every Philadelphia public school, are totally against the takeover.

EIR: Are you mounting a protest?

Joyner: We've already had one. There were about 1,300 kids out on Wednesday [Nov. 7] protesting. We've had a press conference in front of the Board of Education which drew hundreds of parents on a day's notice. We had a press conference at City Hall yesterday [Nov. 8] that was comprised of the state representatives, the Black Caucus of the State Legislature, the School District of Philadelphia, and the City Council.

EIR: Has the school district officially been turned over to the Edison Project?

Joyner: No it has not. Edison was simply given a \$2.7 million fee to investigate the school district and identify some of the problems. Of course, they found problems and recommended themselves as a management group, which, in my opinion, is a conflict of interest.

We have filed, and Parents United for Better Schools is part of that, what's called a fair-funding suit. The formula used to calculate monies the state contributes for education is significantly lower in Philadelphia than it is in the suburban areas. So that means, that where they get about \$1,300 per student, Philadelphia gets about \$500.

Now they're saying, "Okay, we'll equalize the funding, so that children can have the same resources, and then we can have the same expectations." They're saying, "Let's throw it all to a group for less money. At least it's off of us, we don't have to deal with it." So to me, it's like having an orphan, and nobody really wants the child, so they just pass the child around to anybody that will take the child.

Here you have the city of Philadelphia, which just raised millions of dollars for two new stadiums to be built in the city. Our mayor just raised \$3 million, a million each from three different areas, for hotels. He raised a million from the city, a million from the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, and another million came from private donors.

EIR: And nothing for the schools.

Joyner: Nothing for the schools. What has happened, and we must look at it: The schools have become all one ethnic group. So, when you have a large population of minority students, nobody wants to invest money in that. It's easier for

us to invest money in prisons, than to try to invest money into children's education.

EIR: That's where the children go when they fail in school.

Joyner: Yes. Right into the prisons, or drugs, or crime.

EIR: When do you think this is all going to be settled?

Joyner: Several groups are exploring legal action. You have the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the unions announcing in support of the fight, and numerous community organizations stating that they will fight this with civil disobedience. They will do whatever they can.

Pedro Ramos [an attorney who heads the city's school board] said that they will not come in here easy. In other words, they're going to have a fight if Edison comes into the city.

In other schools, Edison has been able to sort of slither in. But here, people are a little bit more organized and little more knowledgeable about Edison's record.

Documentation

Will Edison Improve Student Achievement?

Veronica Joyner, President and Founder of Parents United for Better Schools, provided the following documentation regarding the failure of Edison Schools, Inc. in cities nationwide.

August 2001: Minneapolis public schools announce that they will close Edison's elementary school next year after complaints about low test scores, student behavior problems, and leadership issues (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Aug. 15, 2001).

July 2001: Wichita, Kansas School Board members say Edison hasn't lived up to its promises. District leaders threaten to terminate Edison's contract at two schools because of poor student performance, plummeting enrollment, and high teacher turnover (*Wichita Eagle*, July 15, 2001).

June 2001: Lansing, Michigan charter board chooses to cancel its contract with Edison. Under Edison's management, the school had a "revolving-door administration" that resulted in having two principals and three interim principals in the past five years. Students at the Edison-run school performed significantly below district averages on state assessment tests (*Lansing State-Journal*, Aug. 16, 2001).

April 2001: Pontiac, Michigan. Edison students perform

at or near the bottom on state assessments. Edison violated state laws by hiring teachers with no background checks. Improper filings by Edison could cost the district \$400,000 in Title I funds (*Detroit Free Press*, April 20, 2001).

April 2001: Miami-Dade County (Florida) Public Schools (MDCPS) evaluators find Edison students "never once exhibited an academic advantage over the students in the regular MDCPS program." The four-year study, designed in cooperation with Edison, "failed to produce any evidence that the Edison model represents a superior educational program" (Gomez and Shay, "Evaluation Of The Edison Project School Final Report," MDCPS Office of Evaluation and Research).

February 2001: Education researchers at Western Michigan University find that students in Edison schools did no better than students at comparable public schools (Miron and Applegate, "An Evaluation of Student Achievement in Edison Schools," December 2000).

Can We Afford Edison?

August 2001: Clark County, Nevada taxpayers have to pay Edison more than \$8 million in overhead in addition to \$35-38 million to operate seven schools. But Edison has to raise \$10 million in charitable contributions to pay for the higher costs they need to run Las Vegas schools (*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Aug. 8, 2001).

July 2001: Wichita, Kansas taxpayers pay three-quarters of a million dollars more to Edison than they spend for students in regular district schools, according to school board member Jim Ward (*Wichita Eagle*, July 15, 2001).

June 2001: York, Pennsylvania taxpayers face an 11.5% rate increase, to send \$4.25 million to Edison's charter school this coming year, almost \$1 million more than it cost the district to operate the same school in 1999-2000 (*York Daily Record*, June 21, 2001).

May 2001: Edison's program costs Perry County, Indiana \$800 more per pupil than it spends on students in its other schools (*Indianapolis Star*, May 22, 2001).

April 2001: Wayne County, North Carolina Board of Education terminates its Edison contract two years early, because of excessive costs. School officials say they paid Edison \$300,000 more per year than other district schools received (*Goldsboro News-Argus*, April 11, 2001).

March 2001: Edison's Dallas, Texas schools could cost up to \$20 million more this year than expected (*Dallas Morning News*, March 20, 2001).

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