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Private Profit will not bring School Improvement to Roosevelt

The new Roosevelt School Board, with approval from its New York State oversight committee, is considering a plan to let the Edison Project, a private profit making corporation, run one of its four elementary schools. Approving this proposal would be a serious mistake for Roosevelt. At a minimum, it wastes valuable time as it diverts the district away from addressing the serious issues confronting its schools. At worse, it threatens to leave reform minded parents and teachers disheartened and academically threatened students at even greater risk.

While the initial Edison Project proposal may sound good on paper, private profit making corporations have a track record of poor performance operating public schools and public school systems. According to a recent study published by the Twentieth Century Fund, "Hard Lessons: Public Schools and Privatization," there is no hard evidence that privatization efforts during the last thirty years have brought any educational improvement to troubled school systems. The Edison Project currently operates for-profit schools in Texas, Kansas, Michigan, and Massachusetts. These schools were not evaluated in the study because no results on student achievement was available.

According to a preliminary report presented to Roosevelt parents by School Superintendent Will Singleton, the Edison Project expects to be paid \$11,600 per student, the average amount the district currently spends on each child. In return, the company promises to improve student performance, install additional computers in the elementary school, provide laptop computers for teachers, and to extend the school day and school year. The company claims that these changes would require no additional public spending or taxes. It also promises to invest \$2 million of its own money.

Parents who heard the proposal were skeptical about turning a public school over to the Edison Project and with good reason. Highly publicized efforts by another private corporation, Education Alternatives, failed to improve student performance in Miami, Florida, Baltimore, Maryland, and

Hartford, Connecticut. In all three cities, local school boards decided to suspend the company's contract in the middle of the experiment. In addition, there were continuing conflicts between school boards and Education Alternatives over disputed bills. On Long Island, the Wantagh School District experimented with using a private company, Mariott, to manage its school buildings. According to Superintendent George Besculides, the plan was an "albatross" and a five year management and maintenance contract was dropped after only two years.

The Edison Project claims that it is not Education Alternatives and that its school based programs should be evaluated on their own merits. Even by this standard, Roosevelt should be wary. Chris Whittle, the spokesperson for the Edison Project was originally involved in providing public schools with free television equipment if they agreed to require students to watch specific cable programs and advertisements. His company, Whittle Communications, made millions of dollars by bombarding public school classrooms with adds for Burger King and Snickers. While the Edison Project promotes itself as an educational company, most of its stock is actually owned by Time Warner and a British tabloid publisher.

I suspect that their current offer to Roosevelt is really part of a broader corporate strategy to take over larger more profitable school systems. The Edison Project will slap a fresh coat of paint over a troubled Roosevelt school, use it as a model to attract new "buyers," and then abandon Roosevelt before underlying problems begin to reemerge. The Edison Project, which pays huge consulting salaries to John Chubb and Chester Finn, jr., leading advocates of private school voucher plans, may also be manuevering to cash in on the voucher jackpot if they are ever approved on a broad scale.

Roosevelt parents have a right to wonder whether the Edison Project, even if it turns out to be a quick fix marketing gimmick, can benefit their children in the short run. I don't think it will. Its flat fee price based on the average cost for educating a student is misleading. Central overhead expenses and the cost of educating special education students mean that the average amount spent on most students is probably half of the figure they are requesting. The Edison Project is really demanding a disproportionate share of Roosevelt's educational dollars.

In addition, time spent on the Edison Project will be time not spent on rebuilding the Roosevelt school district so that it benefits all children.

Roosevelt parents, teachers, and school officials need to be lobbying for increased state and Nassau County investment in their children and a new more equitable system for school funding. Nassau school districts are among the most racially and economically segregated in the United States and the amount spent on education in some communities is double the amount spent by their less affluent neighbors. I am also concerned what will happen to children in this school after all the whoopla, if the Edison Project fails to improve education or if the company decides to abandon an economically marginal enterprise for a more profitable contract.

The children of Roosevelt are too important for their educational futures to be tied up in this risky business enterprise. When something looks too good to be true, that's because it usually is too good to be true.