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Amy P. Fouse

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Edison Schools in Bibb County, Georgia

By Amy P. Fouse

In March of 1999, the Bibb County Board of Education made a controversial decision to hire private, for profit Edison Schools to run two of its low-performing elementary schools. Parents of nine Bibb County elementary schools were given the option to adopt this corporation and contract them to run their schools (Cass, 1999). Of the nine elementary schools, Riley Elementary and King Elementary chose the program. Investigation of The Edison Project was initiated by Superintendent Dr. Gene Buinger in 1998. Less than one year later, and after many heated debates, a five-year contract was signed to pay Edison "roughly $1 million each year" to operate the schools (Lord, 2002). However, only three years from its inception, the contract was terminated and the Bibb County Board of Education made a severe break with the company that had promised so much to them in the area of student achievement and test scores.

The general consensus was that The Edison Project would be beneficial to Bibb County Public Schools because the company promised higher achieving students and also higher test scores. It was a promise that was not realized. The Edison Project, later renamed Edison Schools, Inc., set the stage for a prosperous school environment. According to Ellen Lord (2001), some of the benefits that Edison schools reap stem from their being, "equipped with the best reading, mathematics and other curriculum." Edison also asserted that school faculty and administrators nationwide have the opportunity to share advice and information online. When faced with the optimistic opportunity to take a failing school and transform it into a passing school, board members such as Ms. Betty Phillips jumped at the chance. Two years later, she remarked, "We have been disappointed in the results in Edison. It's one of the really bad votes I've made on the board, and I regret it" (Lord, 2002).

Parents who were concerned about a private organization running the two elementary schools in the county initially voiced opposition. Other concerns of the taxpayers were the cost of the program and the length of the contract. Betty Phillips, board vice-president, reflected on the board's decision: "At the time we went with Edison, they appeared to be what we were looking for to sort of jump start some of our low-performing schools. It is not accomplishing what he had hoped for – the scores are not better, the numbers are decreasing instead of increasing." Parents referred to the Edison school curriculum as "empty promises" (Lord, 2001). Poor leadership was also cited for the Edison schools' failures. At the beginning of the third year of the Edison contract, King-Edison Elementary school was starting the year with its third principal in three years.

Initially, expectations were high. Once the decision was made in March, 1999, to turn over Riley Elementary and King Elementary to The Edison Project, the county rallied behind those schools and hoped for the best. Parents such as Sheryl Watkins, who were once skeptical about the success of the
program became involved and described herself as “thrilled” about the school, its atmosphere, and her son’s progress (Loeffler, 2000). However, early test scores did not impress the public or the board members. Parents after the first year began removing their children from the school because of complaints of, “poor discipline, lack of materials, the late arrival of promised computers and lackluster leadership” (Lord, 2001).

During the summer of 2002, when the Bibb County Board of Education was debating whether they should honor the Edison contract, Edison Schools, Inc. was receiving negative press nationwide. Mark Welsh described 2002 as a “make-or-break school year” for the organization (2002). A shaky investment on Wall Street, Edison Schools, Inc., claimed to be making necessary changes to become more profitable. Christopher Whittle, the chief executive officer of Edison Schools, Inc. admitted that there had been some financial difficulty but things were looking hopeful with the procurement of a contract with the Philadelphia school system. Whittle’s insistence on the quality of the organization and their impending success led him to project that, “By 2020, Edison would run one in ten public schools in the United States.” However, financial problems led to an investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission because of misreported revenues that misled investors. As of June, 2002, ten class action lawsuits had been filed against the company because of this alleged misleading of investors (Woodward 2002).

The controversies nationwide helped to end the contract between Edison Schools, Inc. and the Bibb County Board of Education. On August 15, 2002, the board unanimously voted to terminate the five-year agreement with Edison Schools, Inc. Nancy Bailey, regional vice-president for Edison operations, said, “Some of the reactions, I think, are from the struggles of the last couple of years.” In reference to teacher training and student assessment, she commented, “[Edison Schools, Inc.] have seen dramatic differences in King this year.” Terry Tripp, a newcomer to the board, reviewed the goals and objectives of Edison Schools and said, “It looks so good on paper” (Lord, 2002). Looks, however, can be deceiving.

Parents welcomed the opening of the school year at Riley Elementary and King Elementary with the same gusto and support as they had three years prior with the inception of the Edison Schools program. However, 2002 was different in that they felt as if they had their control back over their schools and had just been given a fresh slate and a clean start. What is next for these two schools? According to Superintendent Sharon Patterson, the school system anticipates the implementation of a new reading curriculum, “Success for All,” that will hopefully turn around these schools with low test scores (Patterson, personal communication). The overall attitude of the parents and the board members seems to be, “Hey, it can’t be worse than Edison!” I guess time will tell.

References


Amy Phelps Fouse teaches English at Central High School in Macon, Georgia. She received her B.S.Ed. from Valdosta State in 1997, her M.Ed. from Mercer University in 2000, and will complete her Ed.S. at Columbus State in 2003. She and her husband Jonathan are proud parents of a baby girl born in January.

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