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Agenda date May 24, 2011

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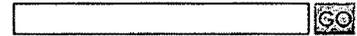
Name: Lenore Faulkner

Address: 11109 Kapok Grand Cir
Madiera Beach FL

City: _____ Zip: 32178

Topic: Education Excellence
for All Students

Email: _____



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THE EDISON SCHOOLS

Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education

BY KENNETH SALTMAN

Full Text:

As suggested by the subtitle, Kenneth Saltman's exposé of Edison Schools makes no attempt to disguise its opposition to the largest for-profit educational management organization (EMO) in the United States. Saltman, however, does not believe that the privatization of American public schools is the result of a "conspiracy of overfed cigar-puffing men in three piece suits." Aiming to be "radically hopeful rather than sniping and cynical," Saltman chronicles the founding of the company, assesses its performance, and ultimately seeks to transform the terms with which the successes and failures of the privatization movement are measured. While Saltman hopes that his book will help dissenting parents and students in the event that an Edison school is proposed in their community, his primary purpose is to elevate the debate over corporate schooling by highlighting "the role that public schooling plays in a vibrant democracy."

Inspired by the voucher and charter school movements of the 1990s, forty-seven EMOs were operating as of 2003. Edison and other EMOs persuaded school districts that they could provide effective and efficient administration. EMOs promised to out perform publicly run schools and turn a profit by centralizing bureaucracy, generating economies of scale, and hiring low-cost, nonunion labor. Edison also sought to increase its allure by pledging laptop computers for each student, dual-language instruction, increased parent involvement, and longer school days.

The Edison Schools argues that the company has failed to provide high-quality education. Many of the company's selling points, such as free laptops and bilingual instruction, were abandoned when they were found to be too expensive. To further support his criticism, Saltman cites research revealing the poor standardized test performance of many Edison schools. He suggests that generous media coverage allowed the company to continue to make contracts with school systems even as it struggled to educate children and earn profits.

Edison Schools aims its most heartfelt criticism at the question of whether students and the nation are best served by public or corporate education providers. Saltman believes that assessing Edison solely in terms of test scores overlooks an essential feature of for-profit schooling — the elimination of schools as preserves of democratic exploration and critical thinking. Saltman bases this critique largely on his analysis of the highly structured Success for All and Everyday Mathematics curricula prescribed by Edison. Not only does Saltman question the academic efficacy of these curricula, but he suggests that their canned question-and-answer sequences leave no room for criticism of the status quo. Saltman doubts if Edison would ever promote this sort of classroom environment, since the company is a mainstream corporate institution and "institutions do not commit suicide."

In later sections, Saltman provides case studies of Edison failures. After being billed as the company's flagship school, the Boston Renaissance charter school severed its relationship with Edison after its test scores sagged. The Edison Charter Academy in San Francisco fired the company after a series of community protests, as well as accusations that school officials were encouraging students in special education classes to transfer elsewhere. Even in Philadelphia, its largest contract (20 schools), Edison was unable to create significant economies of scale.

The concluding chapter of *The Edison Schools* delves into a broader discussion of ideological and

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economic conflicts over the purpose of public education. Informed by work of Bowles, Gintis, and Giroux, Saltman makes a case for the benefits of public education insulated from the dictates of neoliberal functionalism. While Saltman has consulted an array of scholarly sources, *The Edison Schools* is essentially a journalistic account. The book's informal approach is highlighted by its frequent reliance on long and somewhat undigested newspaper quotations. While his book occasionally adopts a muckraking tone, Saltman thoroughly explains the reasoning behind his opposition to Edison schools. This passionate book will be welcome reading for parents, teachers, and students who are skeptical of the promise of corporate schooling.

S.G.

Against Common Sense
BY KEVIN KUMASHIRO

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CONTACT

Honor Flight of West Central Florida

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Agenda date 5/24/16

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Support Oppose Undecided

Name: Rondale McDowell

Address: 5301 Columbus Way S

City: St. Petersburg Zip: FL

Topic:

Email: _____

GROUP SPEAKER LIST

Name: Paula Boatwright

Address: 14171 59th St. N.

City: CLRWT.

State: FL. Zip: 33760

Email: _____

Name: PATRICK SCRIBNER

Address: 1452 GOLF TO BAY

City: CLEARWATER

State: FL. Zip: 33756

Email: PTRCKSCRIBNR@YAHOO.COM

Name: CLIVE SANDS

Address: 603 1st AVE

City: CLEARWATER

State: FL Zip: 33764

Email: CLIVSANDS32@GMAIL.COM

Name: Teresa McDowell

Address: 5301 Columbus Way S.

City: St. Petersburg

State: FL. Zip: 33712