

## Rebuttal of Edison's Criticisms by The Evaluation Center

Edison's response to the final report of our evaluation raised several criticisms, some which were repeated a number of times in its written response. We believe that Edison's response is unnecessarily critical and reveals the fact that Edison staff have not yet read the final report. Below we have prepared a brief rebuttal to the main criticisms the company has raised. Criticism made by Edison is paraphrased in bold text, and our response is included in the bulleted text below.

### **The sample of schools included in our study is not fair nor representative.**

- We studied the oldest Edison schools because they have the most years of data and should provide the best estimates of student progress.
- At the onset of the study, Edison was aware of the criteria for selecting schools for the study.
- Edison claims that we only reported on 10 of 113 schools. However, in Edison's third annual report, it included data and rated only 43 schools. The other schools have baseline data only or no data at all.
- Edison's own research finds that the 10 schools we studied are about the same as its other schools (we compared Edison's own ratings—in its third annual report—of the 10 schools in our study with its ratings of the other 33 schools for which it has data and found that there was no statistically significant difference between Edison's ratings of our sample of schools and the other 33 schools).
- In our study we clearly outlined the limitations in the study as well as the limitations in terms of generalizations that could be made from our findings (see Section 2.6 of the report).

### **Edison claims that our evaluation does not include 1999-2000 data.**

- Edison's claim that we did not include 2000 data is not true.
- In December 2000, we updated our case studies with new data—where available—to match the years of data presented in Edison's third annual report, which was released in October 2000. Not every case was updated with 2000 data. For example, new MCAS results were available for the two schools in our study from Massachusetts. However, since these data were not included in Edison's third annual report—perhaps because they were not available when Edison completed that report—we did not include them.

### **Edison claims we focused on absolute scores—or levels of achievement—rather than on gain scores.**

- With the design of our analyses for the norm-referenced test results, this is simply impossible. These analyses focus on individual student gains relative to national norm groups.
- With our criterion-referenced test results we presented the data from many perspectives, including charting out the comparisons in terms of absolute scores as well as gain scores. However, all trends

included in the case summary that we considered in the rating given to the school are based on gains relative to comparison groups only. A poor performing Edison school that gained more than a high performing comparison group that gained little would result in a positive trend in favor of the Edison school. In our report, we clearly spelled out the rules for how the comparisons were made and the cutoff points to determine whether the trends were positive, mixed, or negative. We did this to distance ourselves from making subjective judgments about the cases. We would like Edison to spell out in detail how it calculated the trends presented in its annual reports.

**Edison claims that our use of odds ratio analysis is unfair and does not adequately capture gains made by its students since we collapse 3, 4, or 5 scoring categories into either pass or fail categories.**

- ❑ The specific cutoff points are determined by states and are based on “meeting or exceeding state standards” or “not meeting state standards.” All schools must be held accountable to that standard.
- ❑ Depending on the state standard, collapsing the data from 3, 4, or 5 categories into two categories means we cannot capture change in *either* direction among collapsed categories.
- ❑ We presented the data in two ways. First we presented the data without collapsing into the pass or fail categories. However, in order to determine whether the changes over time were statistically significant, we utilized a statistic that required collapsing performance into two groups. If we had not done this, we would have been forced to base our ratings of trends on subjective criteria.

**Edison claims: “The [WMU] report accuses Edison of being uncooperative. . . . There are no grounds for the accusation.”**

- ❑ Data sets promised to the evaluators in July 1999 did not arrive until end of November 1999, and they were incomplete (see Table 2:1 on page 11 in our report).
- ❑ Requests were made for new data during 2000, including data for Dillingham Intermediate School in Sherman, Texas. We received only limited data from Edison for the Dillingham school (see Appendix D in our report). These data were apparently not shared with the district, so they could not confirm whether or not they were valid; therefore, we could not use them.
- ❑ We were required by the contract to allow both Edison and NEA to review and comment on our report. The report was expected to be released during the summer of 2000. Edison delayed the release of the report by not providing comments in a timely fashion. In fact, Edison even threatened Western Michigan University with a legal suit because it wished to have more time to comment on the report. The company’s recent criticism of our report indicates that Edison staff still have not read the report.

**Edison claims that we failed to explain a number of shifts in background characteristics of the schools included in our study, for example, the drop in special education services at one school.**

- ❑ The data are presented as factual, and the source of the data is cited. We offered no explanation for shifts in school background indicators. In order to explain shifts in these indicators, we would have needed access to the schools. In order to obtain access, we were expected to sign a confidentiality agreement that

would have allowed Edison to determine whether or not the results of the study would be released. We refused to sign such an agreement, since it would have meant that we could not undertake the study as an independent third party and also because many “right-to-know” audiences might not have had access to the findings if Edison did not find them favorable.

**Edison claims that we do not take into account that its students are more disadvantaged than the comparison groups we used.**

- ❑ In comparison to statewide or national averages, students at Edison schools can certainly be characterized as “disadvantaged,” as Edison claims. However, the characteristics of the students in its schools are generally similar or less disadvantaged than students in the districts in which they reside. In our in-depth case studies, we made comparisons with a number of relevant groups. However, when we summarized the cases and calculated trend ratings, we only compared the gains made by each Edison school with the most similar comparison group. For this reason, we used local districts as comparison groups for the criterion-referenced test data in all cases except for the Sherman, Texas, case where we were able to use the Campus Comparison Group, which is comprised of 40 schools across the state with similar characteristics.
- ❑ When comparing the student characteristics in the 10 schools in our study with the local districts, we found that, if anything, Edison students were slightly less disadvantaged:
  - ▶ In all 10 schools in our study, Edison had a lower proportion of students with *special educational needs* than the local district. In 2 of these schools, however, the difference was quite small.
  - ▶ In 4 of 10 schools, Edison had higher levels of students qualifying for *free or reduced lunches* than the local district (one school was close). In 4 of 10 schools, Edison had a lower proportion of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch than the district. In 2 schools the figures were very similar.
  - ▶ In 2 of 10 cases, the Edison school had a higher proportion of students with *limited English proficiency*, while in 3 of 10 cases, the district had a higher proportion of students with limited English proficiency. In the other 5 cases, there were similar figures or insufficient data to make the comparison.
- ❑ Based on these findings, Edison cannot make the claim that its students are more disadvantaged. However, it is fair to point out—as we have done in our report—that the contract schools for which Edison assumes control are typically already distinguished as low performing schools. After all, it is unlikely that a district will contract out the operation of its well functioning and high performing schools. Because our ratings are based on gains scores, rather than absolute scores, we think the comparisons are fair and relevant.

The findings presented in our report are positive in the sense that the Edison schools are making gains similar to other relevant schools. It is not easy to turn around low performing schools. Edison would be less likely to contest our findings had it not already presented glowing results to its stockholders and to prospective districts and charter school boards that suggest that its schools make gains larger than what might otherwise be expected.