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Proposed chain of private schools stirs debate

By Tim Carvell
Staff Writer

EDUCATION

First, Christopher Whittle prompted a debate among educators by suggesting that students should watch TV in school. Now, he's building his own schools, and local educators are arguing again.

Whittle, best known for his controversial in-school Channel One television broadcasts, announced recently that he had created the Edison Project, a for-profit chain of 1,000 private schools.

The schools, under the guidance of Yale University president Benno Schmidt Jr., will charge the same amount the government spends per student each year, approximately $5,500; Whittle said he hopes to make a 15% profit on the venture.

Project representatives said they have not yet chosen the sites for the initial 200 schools, which are scheduled to open in 1996.

Whittle's plan has not won many proponents among local public school administrators, many of whom see the proposed schools as another setback for state-funded education.

Citing recent tax cuts and the property tax freeze, Jay Young, supervisor of public relations for the Livonia School District, said he felt the Edison Project plan only intensifies the problems facing the public school system.

"Currently, Michigan schools are suffering from various measures passed by the state Legislature and the governor . . . We need to re-look at the way we finance education around the state. I don't feel the way to solve educational problems is through entrepreneurial projects," Young said.

Some administrators took a more favorable view of the Edison Project. Michael Flanagan, superintendent of Farmington schools, saw the schools as a testing ground for new teaching techniques.

"I have to admit, my first reaction was skeptical, but I think it could be a research laboratory for us in public education. We don't have anything to lose, and we have something to gain," Flanagan said.

Richard Egli, administrative assistant for community relations in the Plymouth-Canton school district, said he doubted the new schools could compete with the public school system.

"We charge $4,878 per student, and we would stack our system up against anyone else's. I think we offer unparalleled educational opportunities. If he can do better, more power to him," Egli said.

Still, Whittle's decision to sell commercial time on Channel One to advertisers made some public school administrators leery of the Edison Project.

Like many administrators, Dr. Robert Docking, superintendent of Bloomfield Hills schools, said he felt Whittle was "a good salesman without a lot of substance."

The quality of the schools was the primary concern for two private school administrators, whose high school tuitions are slightly above $11,000 per year.

Whittle's previous attempts at education reform made Dr. Daniel Behring, director of schools for the Cranbrook Educational Community, doubtful that the education provided by the Edison Project would benefit the student.

"I would put my bet on education that pays attention to all dimensions of a child's life instead of the technological, cerebral focus which Whittle seems to favor . . . It certainly isn't the kind of education I believe in," Behring said.

Gerald Hansen, headmaster of Birmingham Detroit Country Day School, said he did not foresee an Edison Project school posing a threat to DCDS. "Will they be able to offer full sports and full activities? There are a lot of dimensions to a school, and the dimensions they will be able to implement remain to be seen," Hansen said.

Still, Hansen said he supported the idea of having as many educational options as possible.

"I think school choice is wonderful," Hansen said. "The more competition there is, the more the consumer will benefit, because it will raise educational standards."

Administrators at parochial schools, where tuition is usually between $2,000 and $3,000 per year, said they did not think Whittle would have trouble running a well-rounded school while making a profit.

The Rev. Al Gensa, associate principal for academics at Detroit Catholic Central, said he thinks the plan "sounds like a good idea." "The price seems pretty high. He's charging $2,200 more than us," Gensa said. "If people can pay for it, it should be a good school."

Gensa's remarks were echoed by Will Gervais, associate principal at Farmington's Mercy High School. "That's a fairly substantial tuition, but if he's got a good product, priced and marketed correctly, it will probably be a success," Gervais said.

Ex-road official may have to pay jail room, board

James Edward Lanni may not be happy with his accommodations, but he may have to pay for them anyway.

If state Attorney General Frank Kelley has his way, Lanni could have to foot the bill for his incarceration at the G. Robert Cotton Regional Correctional Facility.

Lanni, a former Oakland County road commissioner, is currently serving a prison term for a 1991 conviction on two counts of sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl. He entered prison in November 1991; his earliest expected release date is April 1994, by which time Lanni's care will have cost the state over $36,000.

Kelley announced last week that he has asked the Oakland County Circuit Court to order that payments be made to the state from Lanni's assets, which include $74,000 of stock in Royal Oak's Jimerson's bar and over $500,000 ownership interest in the property on which the bar is located.

"A convicted felon should not get free room and board for several years, then get out of prison and enjoy the money saved and the interest it has earned during the incarceration," Kelley said in a press release.

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