WE CAN do one of two things about closing the educational achievement gap between the haves and the have-nots in this country: we can choose to ameliorate the conditions that lead directly to low achievement, or we can treat the symptoms of these conditions. Edison Schools, Inc., is a manifestation of the latter approach. Instead of focusing on the real sources of the achievement gap, it turns our attention to the most superficial forms of teaching and learning: feel-good measures that ease the symptoms and make the pain, and the calls for substantive reforms, go away.

Treating primarily the symptoms of this social disease represents a business opportunity for companies like Edison. The rationale seems unimpeachable: do well by doing good. That is, make a lot of money for you and your investors while doing something noble for the less fortunate among us.

But if we were to seriously engage in ameliorating the conditions that lead directly to low achievement, we would be taking away this business opportunity. There would be no business plan for companies like Edison, because the target market would not exist. The simple fact is that, without suffering, companies like Edison would not only go out of business, they would never have gone into business in the first place. With Edison, then, we must deal with the
moral question that arises when we consider the economics of suffering.

But doesn’t something have to be done? And the first response to such a question is another question: If not by Edison, then by whom? John Chubb would argue that at least Edison is doing something to help. And even if this help is not perfect, supporters of Edison’s efforts would argue that it’s better than nothing. But I wonder: Is it better than nothing? Imagine if we construed the question “If not by Edison, then by whom?” as a real question, rather than a rhetorical one. Then we’re left asking: What are we to do? And who is responsible for doing it?

I do not blame Edison Schools, Inc., or Chubb for seeking to make a profit from low-income minority children. It is my sincere belief that neither Chubb nor Edison CEO and founder Chris Whittle nor anyone else in the Edison corporation has consciously set out to profit at the expense of poor children. Indeed, I take them at their word: they want to help these children. But the critical questions are these: What does this kind of help look like? What are the consequences of this kind of help? And does this form of help serve to make other problems worse? As Kenneth Saltman observes so powerfully in his book *The Edison Schools*, it may be that Edison schools “work.” But the question of what they work at doing has largely gone unexamined.

As I argued in my original article, Edison, Inc., and other companies like it are symptoms of a broader social phenomenon that looks to for-profit corporations for answers to today’s most vexing educational challenges. I refer to this broader phenomenon as a disease for two reasons: 1) it is indicative of a pathological approach to educating low-income minority children, and 2) it is indicative of the discomfort (dis-ease) that surrounds the problem of educating these children. Though Chubb and I clearly disagree on a number of things, we just as clearly agree that these are desperate times for America’s neediest children. And as we all know, in desperate times, people are more likely to do desperate things. Edison, Inc., is one such desperate thing.

It is hardly surprising that Chubb, the chief education officer of Edison Schools, Inc., vigorously defends his employer. Indeed, he is one of the founders of the Edison enterprise. Saying that he has a lot at stake in such an apologetic response is another question: If not by Edison, then by whom? John Chubb would argue that at least Edison is doing something to help. And even if this help is not perfect, supporters of Edison’s efforts would argue that it’s better than nothing. But I wonder: Is it better than nothing? Imagine if we construed the question “If not by Edison, then by whom?” as a real question, rather than a rhetorical one. Then we’re left asking: What are we to do? And who is responsible for doing it?

In its vitriolic response to my piece, Chubb’s thinly veiled ad hominem attack (he refers to my observations as “scurrilous and irresponsible lies”) serves only to obfuscate the deeper issues that he seeks to gloss over with such bromides as “We are not racists.” Racism is as racism does. Systems that seek to propagate inequality under the guise of opportunity are no less racist and no less insidious than those that go about it more blatantly. They are simply better at hiding what they are. Chubb’s reference to basic demographic data (“61% of the Confluence instructional staff members are minorities”) is an odd attempt to argue that, because the majority of educators at the school are minorities, the school cannot be capable of engaging in racist practices. This specious line of reasoning, reminiscent of what Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to as “the noble savage,” is akin to saying that, because all cars are equipped with anti-lock brakes, no traffic accidents can occur. Surely Chubb would agree that minority teachers, like their white peers, are capable of holding racist beliefs. And even if it were possible that no single teacher in any Edison school held any racist beliefs whatsoever, it would not mitigate the impact of their participation in a racist enterprise.

This line of thinking reveals Chubb’s obvious refusal to address the mechanisms of institutionalized racism and oppression. Within our current sociopolitical milieu, we talk at length about raising minority achievement yet refuse to engage in policies and practices that will result in substantive improvements. Instead, we scratch the surface and create educational institutions designed specifically for low-income minority children. For-profit versions of these institutions are designed not to raise achievement per se but rather to give the appearance that achievement is being raised. “Achievement” becomes synonymous with higher scores on standardized tests.

Chubb completely ignores several questions that I raised in my original article: Why are there no Edison schools with a majority of white students? Why do Edison schools serve only low-income minority students? How many of Edison’s senior managers have children who attended or currently attend an Edison school?

Chubb attempts to undermine the credibility of my visit to Confluence Academy by saying that I was there only for one hour and that, if I had been there longer, I would have seen more and better examples of teaching and learning. Perhaps. But I suspect the uniformly dull and often frightened faces that I saw, most disturbingly those of the 6-year-olds I observed, would not have changed significantly even if I had been there for weeks or months.

Still, Chubb’s criticism is fair. How can one really know what goes on at a school based on such a short observation? I actually planned to spend much more time at Confluence, observing both the reading and math curricula that Chubb mentions in his response. In fact, I e-mailed the principal, Sharon Taylor, three times after my visit to arrange a follow-up (on 10/25/05, 11/28/05, and 12/5/05). I also left two voice-mail messages for her. Unfortunately, she never
returned my calls or my e-mails. Strategically, Chubb cites the record of my initial visit in the visitor’s log at Confluence as a way to undermine my findings. But, conveniently, he mentions no record of my attempts to make subsequent visits.

Therefore, confronted with this version of “accountability” and “transparency,” all we can do is take Chubb’s word for it. We have to trust him and choose to believe that what he is saying is true and complete. Fortunately, there are other sources of information we can consult to corroborate his claims.

In 2000, Edison Schools, Inc., commissioned an audit by the RAND Corporation to review the inner workings of Chubb’s company. The report, based on five years of close analysis and observation in 23 different Edison schools, was released in 2005. Not surprisingly, the Edison press release announcing the publication of the study spun the findings of the report very favorably, saying, “The 290-page study . . . offers the most comprehensive independent analysis to date of the achievement gains generated by school districts and charter schools that partner with Edison Schools.”

In the press release, Chubb is quoted:

RAND is one of the premier independent research organizations in the world. We commissioned RAND’s study of our schools for several reasons. . . . We were confident it would affirm the general proposition that most Edison schools bring significant achievement gains to our public-education partners. The study shows that, over time, this is exactly the case and reconfirms results previously reported in Edison’s annual reports on achievement.7

But in actually reading the report, I discovered a number of findings that contradicted this glowing summary.

DATA-DRIVEN ASSESSMENTS

With regard to Edison’s benchmark assessment system and data-driven decision making, the authors of the RAND study write:

Occasionally, even the quality of information provided by the benchmarks is in doubt. A few teachers have viewed the benchmarks as high-stakes tests in themselves rather than diagnostic tools (although interviews in our case study schools suggested that this is not common). Although Edison’s explicit accountability system attaches no consequences to benchmark results (unlike state test results, which constitute a major part of each school’s Edison star rating), it is not surprising that some teachers would wonder whether benchmark tests might have implicit consequences for their own evaluation. Teachers who view the benchmarks as high-stakes tests may prepare their students in ways that are effective in promoting performance on the benchmarks but ineffective in promoting general academic skills. If this happens, the diagnostic value of the benchmarks is degraded. Recognizing the potential problem, Edison assessment staff are well aware that misuse of the benchmarks will undermine their utility for diagnosis (for teachers, for schools, and for the central office), and they consistently send the message that the benchmarks should not be viewed as high-stakes tests. (p. 69)

NARROWING THE CURRICULUM

In regard to narrowing the curriculum in order to concentrate on test preparation, the RAND authors write:

In fact, we observed an intense focus on achievement in many of the Edison case study schools. This clearly had a payoff, as the case study schools had generally positive achievement trajectories in both reading and math. In some instances, however, a focus on test scores created a tension with Edison’s broader goal of promoting “world-class” education. In a few of the schools we visited, some teachers admitted that the broader Edison curriculum is sometimes pushed aside by narrowly focused test preparation activities. Non-tested subjects such as art, music, foreign language, and (in many states) science and social studies are in some instances downplayed in favor of additional practice in basic skills in reading and math. And the ambitious, problem- and concept-focused mathematics curriculum used by Edison is sometimes displaced by worksheets used for test preparation in basic math skills. . . . It must be acknowledged that to the extent that Edison’s accountability systems reward test results, they will reinforce both the productive and unproductive incentives associated with NCLB. (pp. 71-72)

TEACHING TO ‘THE BUBBLE KIDS’

Finally, with regard to teaching to “the bubble kids” — that is, adjusting instruction to raise the test scores of children near the proficiency level as indicated by the benchmark tests — the RAND authors write:

The standards movement in K-12 schooling has encouraged schools to move away from achievement measures defined by reference to a larger population (e.g., percentile rankings) and toward achievement measures defined by external standards of proficiency in a particular content or skill area. NCLB cemented this trend by requiring all states to establish school accountability systems based on the proportion of students achieving proficiency. Many public schools around the country have rationally re-
sponded to the policy by seeking to identify and direct interventions toward those students who are closest to the cut-point for proficiency — the bubble kids. . . . Edison has responded similarly: Its monthly benchmark assessments give its schools unusually good information for identifying bubble kids, and Edison actively encourages schools to identify such students and develop interventions to prepare them for state exams. The Edison schools we visited had some variation in attention to bubble kids. Some Edison principals and teachers embrace the concept as a logical and appropriate way to have data drive instructional decision-making. Others, however, are disturbed by the possible implication that students on both ends of the achievement spectrum — high achievers and low achievers — might be neglected in favor of those in the middle. (p. 72)

Clearly, there is a vast discrepancy between what Edison and Chubb say about the RAND study and what the RAND study actually says.

As consumers in a postmodern era, we’re all familiar with the discrepancy between what advertisers claim about their products and the reality of their products. We know, for example, that Coke does not “add life,” that Energizer batteries keep going and going but eventually die, and that Timex watches can take some — but not all — lickings and keep on ticking. We have become numb to the claims of corporations about the virtue of their products. Such hype is acceptable to us when we are talking about French fries or spark plugs. But it strikes me as unacceptable when we are talking about children, especially low-income minority children. Counter to what Chubb claims, this is not self-righteous indignation on my part. It is anger, pure and simple. It is an expression of outrage. It is a call for justice and accountability.

Readers should remember that Chris Whittle, the founder and CEO of Edison Schools, Inc., started his career as a magazine publisher and then went on to push television advertising in schools through his Channel One enterprise. These are curious credentials for someone charged with transforming public education for low-income minority children. However, these same credentials are appropriate for someone who wants to convince us that he is committed to transforming public education for low-income minority children.

Chubb makes a number of claims about the quality of Edison schools. Surely these claims, by any reasonable expectation, would have some grounding in reality. But there is a body of evidence that suggests that his claims are exaggerated at best, “scurrilous and irresponsible lies” at worst.

For example, according to a story that ran in the Baltimore Sun on 13 July 2006, three Baltimore elementary schools that were taken over by the state and handed over to Edison six years ago saw a significant drop in test scores this year. Scores at Furnace L. Templeton and Gilmor elements dropped at least 10 percentage points in most grades, and scores for fifth- and sixth-graders at Montebello Elementary also fell sharply.

In the Sun story, Chubb is quoted as saying, “School improvement is a long process. We started working in the schools six years ago when there were no worse schools in Baltimore. We have improved the schools.” But, according to Sun reporter Liz Bowie, “Test results under Edison have been inconsistent, and virtually everyone is troubled by this year’s drop.”

“Certainly the results are not anything we are happy about,” said James Foran, a state education official who manages the contract with Edison.

And what about Confluence Academy, the school that I visited and which Chubb so vigorously defends? In 2005, 93% of the students tested at Confluence were not proficient in reading or writing, according to the state test. In 2006, none of the four subgroups made adequate yearly progress in either reading or math. The schoolwide data show that 85% of the students tested at Confluence were not proficient in reading or writing, and 82% were not proficient in math.

Chubb has the audacity to call me a liar. I wonder what these data would make him.

Chubb’s response to my article also raises the question of the role that parents, educators, and citizen activists can play in the dialogue concerning public education in this country. Indeed, as his response keeps intoning in the background, who is Campbell to offer criticism of this school? His implicit message is as follows: best leave the governance of institutions of education to those who know better, to the for-profit corporations such as Edison that know better than democratically elected school board members and parents.

But we need not leave the management of our public institutions to them. We can choose to distrust Chubb and his company and ask for evidence to support their claims. We can be skeptical of the ideological lens through which Chubb and his Edison colleagues view the mission and purpose of education, especially the education of low-income minority children with which Edison is charged.

1. For a powerful discussion of what these policies and practices might look like, see Richard Rothstein, Class and Schools (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2004).
2. The RAND study can be found at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG351.pdf.