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MAYOR STREET is so desperate to cover the \$216 million hole in Philadelphia's school budget that he has struck a deal with Gov. Ridge.

According to that deal, if City Hall and Harrisburg cannot arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to the district's long-term financial problems and poor student performance by Oct. 29, the state will take control of the education of Philadelphia's 210,000 public school students.

No doubt that Ridge is banking on a state takeover. Why else would he be paying \$27 million to Edison Schools to routinize the district's finances, performance and labor structure? It's only the first step

in turning over management of the financially troubled district to the for-profit company.

Edison already operates more than 100 schools in 50 cities, including Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis. While the company claims to spend an average of just \$7,120 a pupil in these urban schools, test scores indicate that the students do just as well if not better than those in wealthier suburban districts that spend nearly twice that amount.

Sounds good to Ridge.

Having repeatedly failed to secure legislation for vouchers, the governor realizes that contracting out has a better chance for success since it does

not require basic changes in the governance structure or the statutory framework of public education. Also, the less Ridge has to spend on the education of disadvantaged students, the more money he has in the state coffers for his more valued rural constituents.

Truth is, Edison is selling a lot of hot air. After nearly a decade of operation, Christopher Whittle, the media entrepreneur who began the for-profit venture, cannot point to any profit. Last year alone, his company lost \$30 million while continuing to rely on outside contributions to keep its schools running in many cities.

Keeping Edison honest

Nor has Edison proved to be the elixir to better student performance, as it routinely short-changes costly special-education students and the social services that have become an integral part of urban schools.

Despite its questionable record, Edison appears to have the inside track on managing some or all of the district's 260 schools. So here are a few suggestions for Mayor Street and Gov. Ridge as they consider the slippery slope of privatization:

► Allow the district to accept the best — not necessarily the lowest — competitive bid for

contracting out its educational services, whether or not that bid is Edison's.

► In negotiations with the teachers union, be sure that the district seeks a waiver on the right to bargain on contracting-out those services before any specific effort materializes.

When it does, the district should have a plan to deal fairly with employees adversely affected.

► Measure Edison's success on more than test scores. If the for-profit company cannot also increase parental involvement, improve student discipline and reduce class size, then it is not meeting Philadelphia's needs, regardless of what it does in any other city. ★

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