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Ad-Free Schools

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HAVE A PEPSI WITH that education - or a Coca-Cola, or a Reebok book cover. According to a new report from the General Accounting Office, advertising in schools nationwide is on the rise, pelting students with consumer come-ons in the very place where they ought to be free of pesky commercial marketers.

Company money can be a benefit when it finances sports uniforms or the yearbook in return for small ads.

But other marketing is disturbingly direct. It might be a soda vending machine in a school hallway that doubles as a billboard. One school pushed students and staff to buy vending machine soda, because the school got a small cut of the revenues. States like New Mexico allow advertising on school buses. Other schools have let market researchers enter classrooms to survey students.

The Campbell's Soup Co. has a "Labels for Education" program in which clipped labels of some products can be traded in for computers, art supplies, and other materials. The program's Web site advises: "To get your students involved, print out the list of Eligible Products page and give it to them to give to their parents."

It's a familiar problem. In 1995 the Consumers Union issued "Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School" - updating a 1990 analysis. In addition to ads, the report criticized corporate-sponsored school materials with "plugs for a company or its product, or worse, biased information."

Of course, the programs are voluntary. A Coca-Cola official says the company wants to be where thirsty people are, and that includes schools. But Coke "is happy to abide by any and all local rules." In other words, the company does no more than what schools allow.

This gets to the heart of the matter: Some schools can't say no to marketers. They're too hungry. Some administrators admit that they turned to advertising because they were tired of begging for public money. Some crave computers and other equipment and are willing to get them by putting up with ads.

Companies frequently offer, but the sound policy of Boston's public schools is not to allow commercial advertising. Vending machines are in cafeterias, but schools do not get a cut of revenues. Recently, dot-com companies have approached Boston offering deals such as a percent of revenues if students buy through a Web site. School officials have declined.

Ultimately, local and national governments must make sure schools have enough public funding so that administrators can freely choose whether and how to work with private companies. Ideally, schools should be ad-free. Minimally, they shouldn't be under marketing duress.