
Charlotte (NC) Schools Weight Opening Door to Corporate Naming Rights

October 26, 2000

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Corporations forced their names into the minds and onto the lips of sports fans by paying to give their name to stadiums and arenas everywhere.

Now Charlotte-Mecklenburg school officials are considering selling naming rights to classrooms and cafeterias.

Could the future feature the Gateway computer lab or the Nike gymnasium?

The school board is considering a policy to allow some campus areas, to be named after a corporate entity that makes "significant contributions" to the school or district.

Several board members are expected to vote on the proposal Tuesday.

Although the proposed policy could apply to any school, Superintendent Eric Smith said it was crafted with a particular one in mind - the technical high school now under construction in west Charlotte.

The school's focus will be preparing students for careers in computer science, manufacturing, transportation, construction, environmental and health sciences.

That means students will need training time on expensive equipment that tight school budgets can't always handle, Smith said. So the district plans to ask businesses for help. Offering to name a lab, school wing or other campus area after these businesses may encourage these corporate donations, he said.

"Within that high school, we're going to have various laboratories that will need to be outfitted," he said.

This would "assure us that the type of equipment students are being trained on are still relevant in the workplace."

Board members haven't talked about how a company's name would be displayed, but "I would expect it to be appropriate to the area in question," said board member Jim Puckett.

"A library would obviously have a different approach than a cafeteria or a football stadium."

Such partnerships have triggered a debate in school districts in Texas, New Hampshire, California and elsewhere over how involved companies should be with schools.

Officials with the state Department of Public Instruction didn't know of any examples of schools naming campus areas after businesses, although there are plenty of instances in the Carolinas and elsewhere of schools teaming up with businesses for everything from school supplies to computers to pizza lunches.

Denise Carter, head of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg PTA Council, said the public schools couldn't function without outside business support.

But others worry that corporate influences can go too far.

The California-based Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, which argues that schoolchildren become easy targets for advertising when their school districts use scoreboards sponsored by soda companies, or cafeterias contract to sell a company's product.

If the school board approved the policy to name campus areas after corporations, it would weigh each case carefully, board chairman Arthur Griffin said.

"That's not to say we're going to be guaranteeing a name, because some corporations do not have good community will," Griffin said. "If the gambling industry wanted to donate a wing, certainly that wouldn't pass the board of education."