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**Commercials as Curriculum**

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**Alex Molnar and Jennifer Morales**

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Over the past several years, the start of the school year has begun to resemble a blockbuster movie release, with all the associated marketing tie-ins and other gimmicks. The nation's schools, caught between stagnant education spending and advertisers' growing interest in the youth market, are suffering an unprecedented onslaught of commercial overtures. From selling ad space on gym walls to allowing companies to use students for market research during class time, school administrators are scrambling to solve their financial difficulties by permitting companies to cash in on kids. Good public policy, however, suggests that schools should resist the temptation to turn their curriculum into a flea market open to anyone with enough money to rent a table. Advertising is fundamentally at odds with a school curriculum planned in a spirit of inquiry and critical reflection with the best interests of students in mind.

Commercial deals encourage teachers and administrators to make decisions based on non-educational considerations. For example, Greenbrier High School in Evans, Ga. made international news in March 1998 when Principal Gloria Hamilton suspended senior Mike Cameron for disrupting the school's "Coke in Education Day." Greenbrier High was competing to win the \$10,000 prize offered by the Coca-Cola Company to the high school that developed the best plan for marketing Coke-sponsored promotional business discount cards. On that day in March, Cameron, along with 1,200 or so of his classmates, was lined up in the school parking lot to spell out the word "Coke." Photographers in a crane captured the moment on film as Coca-Cola executives, who had flown in to participate in Coke-themed events throughout the day, looked on. Cameron was suspended for unveiling a Pepsi shirt during the photo opportunity. Editorial pages from the London Independent to the Chicago Tribune criticized Principal Hamilton for, as the South China Morning Post put it, trying "to turn schools into nothing more than supermarkets where children can also take lessons."

The lessons themselves, however, have turned into advertising vehicles. Pizza Hut, for example, found a clever way to bring its redesigned logo to students' attention this year. The company bought rights to paint the logo on the side of a Russian rocket that was delivering parts to the International Space Station. CEO Mike Rawlings said they were looking for a "mythic symbol" to represent the chain's recent growth. Pizza Hut is well-known in education circles for its reading incentive program, Book It!, which rewards students with pizza for meeting their reading goals. The theme for the coming year's Book It! reading list, promoted in the teacher packets provided to schools each fall, is "Space: From Mythology to Technology."

These are not isolated incidents. In its series of annual reports on schoolhouse commercialism, the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE) has found a 10-year overall increase of 395 percent in press citations discussing commercializing activity in schools. Analyzing the number of press citations gives only an approximate measure of the actual growth of school commercialism. However, the increased media attention to activities such as exclusive vendor agreements with soft drink bottlers, the promotion of junk food and hair care products through in-school sampling and the privatization of public schools in deals with for-profit management companies, suggests that the presence of marketers in schools is indeed growing.

The drive to put technology in schools appears to be opening new channels for commercial activity. The high cost of computers and other equipment makes it very difficult for school administrators to say no to any associated "strings," such as ad-bearing web portals or the tracking of students' web surfing habits. As new technologies with school-related applications develop, marketing activities exploiting those technologies should be expected.

The Internet, for example, has enabled companies to extend a school-based marketing effort to involve the whole family. Web services such as FamilyEducation.com offer free school home pages to pitch financial services and mortgages to visiting parents. Others, like SportsCapsule.com, take advantage of the geographically scattered nature of the modern family to sell virtual high school sporting events in the form of videotaped games and on-line game highlights.

Commercial activities in school raise fundamental questions about the nature and purposes of schooling, and pose difficult questions for policy makers who must decide about the appropriateness of trading access to students for free equipment, money or supplies. However, a recent General Accounting Office report noted that although commercialism in schools is now widespread, policy makers have yet to formulate a satisfactory response.

Commercial activities now shape the structure of the school day, influence the content of the school curriculum and may determine whether children will have access to a variety of technologies. Moreover, for the foreseeable future, it is likely that school commercialism will continue to increase both in the variety of its expressions and its intensity. In a culture in which commercials are a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week

curriculum, those of us who would make schools ad-free zones have our work cut out for us.

Alex Molnar is a professor at the University of Wisconsin--Madison School of Education and is director of CACE. Jennifer Morales is assistant director of CACE.