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Parents, Are You Aware of the Commercial Activity in Your School? **You Should Be**

Dispirited fans of professional sports sometimes look nostalgically back at high school as a place of innocence in their favorite games, a place free from the money-hungry ethos that has become synonymous with the nation's pastimes.

They may not be able to do so much longer. Schools are joining full-swing in a trend once limited to professional sports stadiums and convention centers: selling naming rights. In Brooklawn, New Jersey, a school board raised funds to defray the cost of a new gymnasium last year by naming the facility for the only supermarket in town, ShopRite, for \$100,000. Then the school board proceeded to name its vice president to the new post of director of corporate development, charging him with the task of selling naming rights for everything from baseball field foul lines to the school's proposed new library.

Brooklawn's wasn't a novel strategy; schools across the country are auctioning off not just sports scoreboards, but gym floors, building roofs, indeed, virtually any potential display space to any willing company seeking a place to convey a message to audiences of students and their parents. Schools are now part of the corporate branding of virtually every public space.

Using schools to boost brand loyalty

Commercialism in the classroom isn't new. Over the last two decades, however, corporations have dramatically increased their involvement in education. Today, almost every large corporation sponsors some type of in-school promotional project, from advertising on school buses, on scoreboards, and in lunchrooms, to the

creation of curriculum materials for science, government, history, math, and current events classes. Corporations seeking to sew up the brand loyalty of impressionable young people have found willing accomplices in American public schools. In return for corporate cash—often in relatively paltry amounts—schools are allowing marketers sweeping rights to promote commercial messages inside schoolhouse walls.

Commercial messages in school serve a variety of interests and cover a variety of topics, but among the most prevalent are messages that relate to nutrition and that promote unhealthy dietary habits, including the consumption of candy, fast foods, snack foods, and sugar-loaded soft drinks. Some schoolhouse commercialism activities seek to build good will for industries or individual companies; others promote industry views relating to controversial subjects, such as environmental science. Many, however, seek to influence buying patterns, particularly for products that children and teenagers buy, such as clothing, athletic shoes, candy, fast food, and soft drinks.

The reason for corporate interest in school-age children is clear: collectively, the spending power of 6- to 19-year-old consumers adds up to \$485 billion per year. Meanwhile, financially strapped and resource-poor schools find it difficult to resist corporate-sponsored educational materials and ads—especially when they come with free computers or other needed resources.

The trend toward commercialization of the classroom and niche marketing to students can be expected to grow in coming years as children enter school in greater numbers, as children's

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purchasing power and consumer influence grow, and as other consumer markets become saturated. As James U. McNeal, a professor of marketing at Texas A&M University, wrote in a 1998 *American Demographics* article, "Children are the brightest star of the consumer constellation....A company can virtually guarantee itself customers tomorrow if it invests in them as children today."

Undermining the health of students

As commercialism increases in schools, obesity is rising among American children. Obesity is both a problem in itself and an indicator generally of the health of children. It has been the subject of recent inquiry by researchers and concern among policy makers. In October 2002, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that obesity in children has tripled in the last two decades. According to 1999–2000 data, 15 percent—or 9 million—of children and teenagers ages 6 to 19 were overweight. Also in October 2002, the White House sponsored a Healthy Schools Summit, at which speakers lamented rising malnourishment as well as obesity among children while health classes are eliminated and vending machines—and less-than-healthy cafeteria menus—continue to influence students' nutritional choices.

A 2001 study by David S. Ludwig, Karen E. Peterson, and Stephen L. Gortmaker examined the relationship between the consumption of soft drinks and the incidence of obesity in school-age children. The study confirmed an association between rising soft-drink consumption and obesity. Obesity-related health problems generally seen in adults are increasingly showing up in overweight children. A June 2000 study by Grace Wyshak found physically active girls who consume cola drinks are five times more likely to have suffered bone fractures than girls who do not drink soft drinks. Other reports indicate increased numbers of children afflicted with type 2 diabetes (commonly known as adult-onset diabetes), sleep apnea, gall bladder disease, and asthma worsened by obesity. In September 2002, the British medical journal *The Lancet* editorialized: "The soaring increase in obesity and type 2 diabetes among children is a public-health crisis, plausibly linked to the 'toxic environment' created in large part by the food industry."



Fast-food companies, to increase profits, encourage customers to order combination meals (entrée, side dish, and drink), larger portion sizes, or both, for a modest additional charge. "Supersized" or "combo meals" mean that a single meal may provide more calories than most children require for an entire day. Experts suggest that obese and overweight children are at high risk for becoming obese and overweight adults. A 2002 study by RAND suggests that obesity may constitute a more serious health problem, in terms of chronic health issues and health care expenditures, than either smoking or drinking alcohol.

Keeping commercial activity in check

School districts, teachers, and parents have begun to look critically at corporate-sponsored educational materials and other commercial activities in schools. Parent groups large and small have passed resolutions and policy directives on the subject, including National PTA, the Wisconsin PTA, and the Seattle Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools. Local school boards have begun reining in commercial activities. In Seattle, advertising was severely restricted, and in Los Angeles the school board has banned the sale of soft drinks beginning in 2004, citing an epidemic of adolescent obesity in its decision. A number of professional organizations have developed voluntary guidelines to help determine which, if any, corporate-sponsored educational materials have merit. These

organizations include the National Education Association, the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business, and the various organizations that have adopted the Milwaukee Principles for Corporate Involvement in the Schools. (More information about organizations and their use of these guidelines can be found at the Commercialism in Education Research Unit website, www.schoolcommercialism.org.) The American Academy of Pediatrics also has published material critical of commercialism in schools that promotes unhealthy nutrition and eating habits (See "Required TV Program in Schools Encourages Poor Lifestyle Choices" available online at www.aap.org/advocacy/reid1100.htm).

As recently as 15 years ago, a tacit, national community standard existed between the private and public sector around the purpose of public education and the role of schools as laboratories of citizenship, free of commercial pressures. The growing commercialization of the classroom is only part of a larger change in thinking about, funding, and reforming public education in America.

The man behind the Brooklawn, New Jersey, school's decision to sell naming rights for its gym to the ShopRite supermarket was not unmindful of its impact. Superintendent John Kellmayer acknowledged in a *Washington Post* article that selling a school's naming rights represented "the privatization of public responsibility." He added: "We'll be the first school district to be branded with a corporate logo. You hope children can become sophisticated enough to deal with it."

Such "sophistication" may have its price, however. We might just as well say that we hope our children become cynical enough to dismiss such adult behavior with a wink and a nod. At a time when adults talk at length about the need to teach virtue and character in the schools, incidents such as these teach children volumes about what adults actually mean by "virtue" and "character."

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What Are the Main Types of Classroom Commercialism?

At the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, the Commercialism in Education Research Unit has been monitoring classroom commercialism by tracking references to the practice in public media for more than a decade. Researchers at the Commercialism in Education Research Unit have found increases in references to each category from 1990 to 2002. Moreover, each category includes practices that potentially undermine children's health:

- Sponsorship of programs and activities. Corporations paying for or subsidizing school events and/or one-time activities in return for the right to associate their name with the events and activities. These programs are frequently sponsored by, and promote the products of, makers of fast foods, snack foods, and sweets.
- Exclusive agreements. Agreements between schools and corporations that give corporations the exclusive right to sell and promote their goods and/or services in the school district—for example, exclusive rights for Pepsi-Cola or Coca-Cola. In return, the district or school receives a percentage of the profits derived from the arrangement.
- Incentive programs. Corporate programs that provide money, goods, or services to a school or school district when its students, parents, or staff engage in a specified activity, such as collecting particular product labels or cash register receipts from particular stores. Among the best-known such programs is the fast-food company Pizza Hut's Book-It program, which rewards children with free pizzas for completing quotas of reading.
- Appropriation of space. The allocation of school space such as scoreboards, rooftops, bulletin boards, walls, and textbooks on which corporations may place corporate logos and/or advertising messages for a wide range of products, including soft drinks and snack foods.
- Sponsored educational materials. Materials supplied by corporations and/or trade associations that claim to have an instructional content. The Tootsie Roll geography quiz mentioned below is but one example.
- Electronic marketing. The provision of electronic programming, equipment, or both in return for the right to advertise to students or their families and community members in the school when they contact the school or district.
- Privatization. Management of schools or school programs by private for-profit corporations or other non-public entities. Contracting school cafeterias to fast-food franchises is perhaps the most obvious example of such privatization schemes.
- Fund-raising. Commercial programs marketed to schools to raise funds for school programs and activities, including door-to-door sales, affinity marketing programs, and similar ventures. Many fund-raising programs rely on the sale of food, including frozen pizzas, candy, and the like.

Perhaps the most well-known school-based marketing effort is Channel One, the ad-bearing TV news program for middle and high school students laced with ads for candy, fast foods, and soft drinks. Examples of other lesser-known activities that promote behavior antithetical to good health and nutrition include a geography unit for 3rd-graders, in which students locate major cities according to where Tootsie Rolls are made and sold; and the "Chocolate Dream Machine," a nutrition guide and video that promote Hershey's chocolate to middle and high school students.