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Welcome to (Company Name Here) High™

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"It's easy, like selling candy to children." In the last month, that bromide has taken on a whole new meaning as public school officials have acted to make selling junk food to students a whole lot harder. On July 1, Kraft Foods announced that it would withdraw its advertisements for processed foods from the in-school television station Channel One. A week before, New York City's Education Department banned soda and candy from the vending machines of its public schools. The department's action came on the heels of similar measures by school districts in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The developments are an important step in tackling the epidemic of obesity among our youth. But perhaps just as vitally, they also tap into the issue of commercialism. Not only do schoolchildren put on pounds with chips, candy and soda, they also soak in the brand names that come along with such products. Unfortunately, the issue of commercialism doesn't end with removing candy from vending machines. It only begins with it.

Selling junk food in schools is just one step along the trademarked slippery slope of school sponsorship. Parents and teachers should be just as concerned about schools relying on field trips to chain stores as they are about vending machines. In one "educational" program sponsored by Field Trip Factory, a national for-profit organization based in Chicago, children are sent to visit sports stores, supermarkets and pet shops during school hours. Clients pay the Field Trip Factory to set up the visits; the students are asked, as voluntary homework, to cut coupons out of circulars.

Then there is the use of sponsored lesson materials, like the workbook sponsored by a cereal-maker that a teacher in New Hampshire recently told me about. It's also difficult to find the educational advantage to having ads for sportswear and movies plastered on school hallways, or in having students use "giveaway" book covers that advertise soda companies and pricey cosmetics. Lastly, shouldn't parents and teachers question why children in 12,000 schools still watch ad-laden Channel One every day or

why students have activities on playing fields or in gyms named after Shop-Rite and Rust-Oleum?

Schools use sponsorships as an important source of revenue. But that money comes at too high a price. Students, from kindergarten to high school, often are burdened by an over-identification with brands of fast food and clothes and peer pressure to buy unaffordable products. Ubiquitous advertisements in schools only increase these pressures.

One teenager from Texas who attends a school sponsored by a soda company recently told me that she was not allowed to drink other sodas in school and then was coerced into covering her textbooks with paper bearing the logo and the image of that brand of soda. Another told of being forced to watch Channel One at his school in Tennessee instead of, say, studying.

School sponsorship has long existed, but it wasn't always so deep and wide. Many revenue-hungry schools struck these deals with companies in the 1990's. Today, according to the National Soft Drink Association, 10 percent of schools are paid for allowing just one brand of soda on campus. And according to the advocacy organization Commercial Alert, 83.5 percent of junior highs sell soda and 72 percent of high schools sell chocolate bars, while 35 percent of schools that stock brand-name sodas also feature advertising material in school hallways.

This year, the youth obesity crisis has served as impetus for change. Defining the commercialization of schools as a public health issue has been a welcome sidelong strategy for combating the creep of school commercialism. It's an issue that mobilizes not only advocacy groups but also parents and, in the case of New York City, school system officials.

My hope is that the success of the youth obesity fight will intensify the scrutiny companies face regarding their marketing techniques in general. School districts in Seattle and Nashville have already limited corporate advertising on school signs and banned Channel One, respectively.

Parents and teachers need to work toward further measures aimed at taking commercialism out of schools, including banning advertisements on book covers and on hallway posters. Schools also need to abandon the practice of awarding their naming rights to companies: if you think selling candy bars and sodas at school is a problem, you can agree that children identifying their schools with a supermarket chain or a paint company isn't so healthy, either. Perhaps then it will not only be tougher for children to buy candy, but also easier for them to run around gymnasiums that once again are, rather quaintly, named after human beings.