

# Invasion Of The Classroom

**How Corporations Buy Access To Children**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX MOLNAR**  
**DERRICK JENSEN**

**A**lex Molnar is one of the nation's leading experts on corporate involvement in public education. When we allow corporations to provide school equipment and lesson plans, he warns, we are also exposing children to advertisements and, ultimately, indoctrinating them in the corporate worldview. In effect, we are selling our children to corporations in exchange for a few educational tools of questionable value.

As the head of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, Molnar is a harsh critic of the corporate presence in the classroom. "At a time when poor children have been killed for their shoes," he writes, "they are forced to watch advertising messages for high-priced sneakers. . . . At a time when too many children abuse alcohol, they are taught history by a brewery. At a time when many children are literally made sick by the air they breathe, they are told that some of our nation's biggest polluters are their friends. And at a time when young people hunger for real connections and genuine friendships, they are fed illusions by people for whom they are little more than units of consumption."

A first-generation American born in Chicago, Molnar was one of the few kids from his neighborhood to go to college. His first two years at Wright Junior College cost him all of thirty dollars. It was this kind of opportunity that kindled his abiding faith and interest in public

education. Knowing what access to a high-quality public education has meant to him, he is leery of such education reforms as voucher systems and charter schools, which he believes undermine the promise of an equal education for every child.

Molnar has a Ph.D. in urban education and teaches at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. He is the author of *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (Westview/Harper Collins) and the editor of *The Construction of Children's Character* (National Society for the Study of Education). Educator and author Jonathan Kozol said of *Giving Kids the Business*, "I cannot think of any recent book that offers so much useful information to those who are fighting to defend our democratic heritage against the greed, the power, and the manipulation of the corporate imagination." Molnar's writing has also been published in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Republic*, and he's discussed education issues on *National Public Radio*, *60 Minutes*, and *The News Hour*. He is currently working on a follow-up to *Giving Kids the Business* describing how the marketplace has further infiltrated education.

I met Molnar on a warm fall day in his office at the university. Always animated, he became even more so as we began talking about the heart of his work: protecting children from the influence of corporations. Although the subject was serious, Molnar displayed a ready wit and a wry perspective.

**Jensen:** You've written much about "the self-serving corporate invasion of the classroom." Are most people aware of this invasion?

**Molnar:** I think many people know about corporate involvement in schools; they just don't think of it as an invasion. They think of it, rather, as a benevolent relationship intended to improve the quality of schools and enhance the ability of kids to get good jobs and participate in the economy and the global marketplace.

**Jensen:** I take it that's not a perspective you share.

**Molnar:** No, because corporations and schools have fundamentally different purposes. The purpose of a corporation is, in the narrowest sense, to provide profits for its owners. That's what corporations are created to do. Government institutions such as schools, on the other hand, must concern themselves with the common good — at least, to the degree that we live in a democracy.

If we're to confine the self-serving activities of corporations within tolerable limits, the government must keep corporations at arm's length. But over the past several decades, we've lost our ability even to make the distinction between private gain and public good. The two are widely considered synonymous. I think the popular catchphrase is "a win-win situation." In reality, however, it's mostly corporations that win; everybody else loses. That's certainly the case with schools.

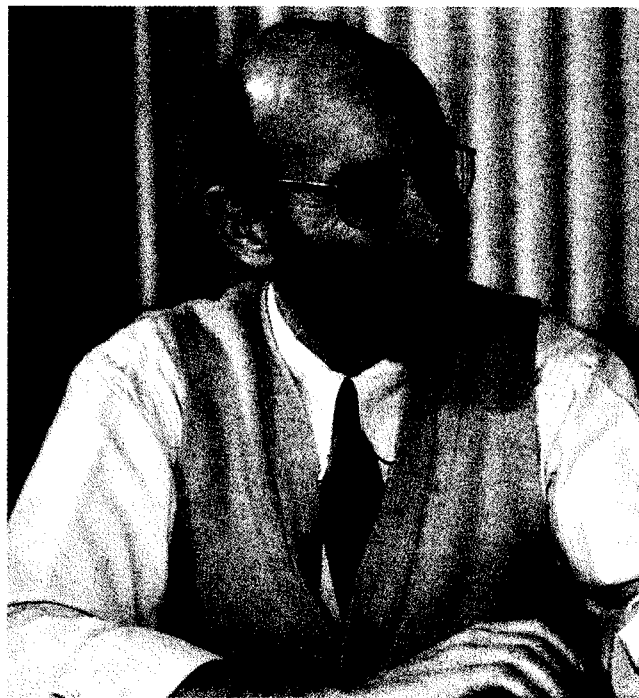
**Jensen:** What's the primary argument for promoting corporate involvement in schools?

**Molnar:** The argument is that schools are failing because they're dominated by large, unresponsive bureaucracies that suck up too much money and are run by self-interested employees — primarily teachers. Schools are not capable of reform because they don't have to face marketplace competition. They're neither lean nor efficient and will take as much money as you give them without producing any discernible improvement in return.

**Jensen:** Is that argument a whole-cloth fabrication, or is there a germ of truth to it?

**Molnar:** Of course there's a germ of truth, because effective propaganda never lies. It only omits. The argument has to have just enough truth for people to believe it. In this case, though, the propaganda creates some crazy disjunctions. For example, polls show that Americans are concerned about education, but when you ask them about the schools in their own communities, they generally like them and don't want them to change. Most people are prepared to believe that corporations can help those *other* schools, but they don't want corporations controlling or dominating their *own* schools.

As for the germ of truth in the argument: Sure, some schools are falling down. Many classes are too large. But the question is: how do we go about addressing these problems? I think it's fair to say that if a school has a leaky roof, it's not an ideological issue: you pay to fix the roof. If the toilets don't flush, you don't need the representative of a large corporation to advise you to fix the toilet — you need money.



Alex Molnar

What's not true is that American public schools are failing. Achievement scores are going up, and they're going up faster for poor and minority students than for the rest.

**Jensen:** So how do corporations supposedly help?

**Molnar:** First, they bring expertise in the form of mentors, technology, and curriculum guidance. "Let us teach your teachers what they need to know," they say. "Let us help your students learn to read. Let us consult with you about technology programs. Let us help you figure out an effective administrative style." But they also want something in return. They say, "We're going to need well-trained workers if we're to compete globally."

Now, at the same time that corporations are extending this helping hand, many of them are arguing vociferously for reduced corporate taxes, which makes it increasingly difficult for schools to raise the funds they need to provide the kinds of programs business says it wants.

In other words, corporations want it both ways: they want the expenses of education to be borne by someone else, and they want to exert influence over the way schools work and how different subjects are taught. If you look at the rhetoric surrounding job training and vocational education, you consistently see corporations attempting to socialize the cost of training their workers — that is, to get the public to pay for it. What is conveniently omitted from the debate is the possibility of taxing corporations for vocational training. In Germany, for example, either the corporation provides training at its own expense, or it reimburses the government for those specific school costs.

**Jensen:** What are some of the concrete effects of corporate involvement in schools?

**Molnar:** More and more blatantly self-serving corporate activities in schools have come to be viewed as appropriate. Specifically, schools are now being integrated into

corporate marketing campaigns. School marketing programs have become a big part of many corporations' plans to promote their products.

Examples of this are sometimes grotesque, such as when Tootsie Roll provided teachers with a history lesson plan about "the sweet taste of success." Unfortunately, that's not a rare example. There's also a science lesson in which kids are supposed to compare the thickness of Prego spaghetti sauce to the thickness of Ragu, and another that talks about the "nutritional" value of chocolate. There's a math lesson that uses potato chips, and a geology lesson that purports to teach kids about geothermal activity by having them put Gushers fruit snacks into their mouths.

**Jensen:** How do parents respond to this?

**Molnar:** I got a letter today from a grandfather in Michigan who sent a whole sheaf of examples of overt corporate marketing at his grandkids' school. He was frustrated because when he raised these concerns in his community, he was greeted largely with indifference.

Advertisers are doing whatever they can to get into schools. Their goal is to dominate all these kids' channels of information. Many companies use school-based advertising in integrated, multimedia tie-in campaigns. One large firm, Prime Media, owns many outlets that reach children both inside and outside school: the grade-school publication *My Weekly Reader*, *Seventeen* magazine, Lifetime Learning Systems, the in-school cable station Channel One. They can do the kind of saturation advertising we usually associate with summer-blockbuster movie releases, and they can do it right inside the schools.

Another recently launched program, Zap Me, provides a school with a computer lab containing fairly advanced computers loaded with Microsoft software. (You can't load anything else on these computers.) Each is equipped with a sophisticated Web browser and enough bandwidth to pull down full-motion images, so you can treat the computer monitor like a TV screen. The computers are linked to what they call a "netspace," for which corporations pay to provide content. Obviously, corporations that pay for content are going to control it, which means you might very well get Exxon's version of ocean biology or Weyerhaeuser's version of forestry. Kids can get through to the Internet on this browser, but they need their parents' permission to do so. Zap Me bills this restriction of access as a good thing, but I would hardly consider corporate control of children's access to information a welcome development.

Schools get the Zap Me labs for no upfront cost, but they have to guarantee that children will use them for so many hours a day. And guess what: the browser portal has advertising on it. This means kids' ability to do their schoolwork is contingent upon their viewing advertising. If a teacher makes an assignment requiring a child to use the Zap Me browser, the teacher is requiring the child to watch commercials. And if the child refuses to watch these commercials, her or his academic future could be affected.

Another condition of the program is that the school has to give Zap Me's partner Sylvan Learning — and other for-

profit outfits — access to the computer lab during nonschool hours. So Sylvan Learning is able to put on its for-profit programs inside a public facility for free.

The bottom line of a program like Zap Me is that we're reforming schools by selling our children to advertisers. And that, unfortunately, is the wave of the future.

**Jensen:** I used to teach at a university, and the first thing I would do every quarter was take down all the advertising from the walls of my classroom.

**Molnar:** But forcing students to look at advertising is acceptable in many communities. And, even worse, many of these advertisements promote products and services that are harmful to kids. The products most heavily promoted in school advertising campaigns are personal-care items, designer apparel, and — worst of all — junk food. A Louisiana State University researcher recently found that about 25 percent of the vegetables that children consume are potatoes in the form of French fries and chips. We have an enormous problem with childhood obesity in this country. These kids are being forced to watch ads for products that will literally harm them.

**Jensen:** What if teachers refuse to participate?

**Molnar:** Teachers can't refuse to participate in a program like Zap Me or Channel One, which gives schools TVs and VCRs in exchange for the right to broadcast its programming in classrooms. The school has to sign a contract guaranteeing that approximately 90 percent of the children will be watching 90 percent of the programming shown in the classroom.

Actually, when Channel One was first introduced, there was a case in Michigan in which a science teacher was disciplined for refusing to turn it on in his class. Many schools apparently get around this requirement by showing the program in homeroom, when supposedly "nobody's watching." That's the sort of double-think you get with these corporate programs, because you have educators who supposedly care about children, yet who at the same time have to roll over and play dead for these programs.

**Jensen:** The word *education* comes from *educere*, which means "to lead forth or draw out," and was originally a Greek midwife's term meaning "to be present at the birth of." By forcing kids to watch advertisements, what are we bringing forth?

**Molnar:** A 1993 study of Michigan high schools revealed that students who watched Channel One were more likely than other students to agree with the statements "Money is everything," "A nice car is more important than school," "Designer labels make a difference," and "Wealthy people are happier than the poor."

I think what we are bringing forth is children who believe that their life and worth are defined by what they possess. If you're sad or lonely, it can be cured with a trip to the shopping mall. If you're not attractive, have a beer. If you think you're not sexy — and, by God, you certainly *need* to be sexy — you can just buy a different shampoo.

We are inculcating in children a mystical belief in the power of *things*, as opposed to a genuine understanding of

how to develop connections to other human beings. And it's these de-emphasized connections that provide us with a satisfying life, give us some hope of love, grant us the opportunity to contribute and be cared about, and support us in ways that nothing else can. Instead of making connections, these students are encouraged to buy a car, or a hamburger, or a soft drink, or a beer — to buy almost anything, but just to buy, to consume at all costs and even go into debt to do it. In the last year, the American Association of University Women and the Consumers Federation of America have both released studies suggesting that consumer debt is impeding young people's ability to go to college. It's no surprise that so many young people are deep in debt, because corporations have encouraged them to believe that not only are they entitled to instant gratification, but they need not even have the money to pay for it: they can just charge it.

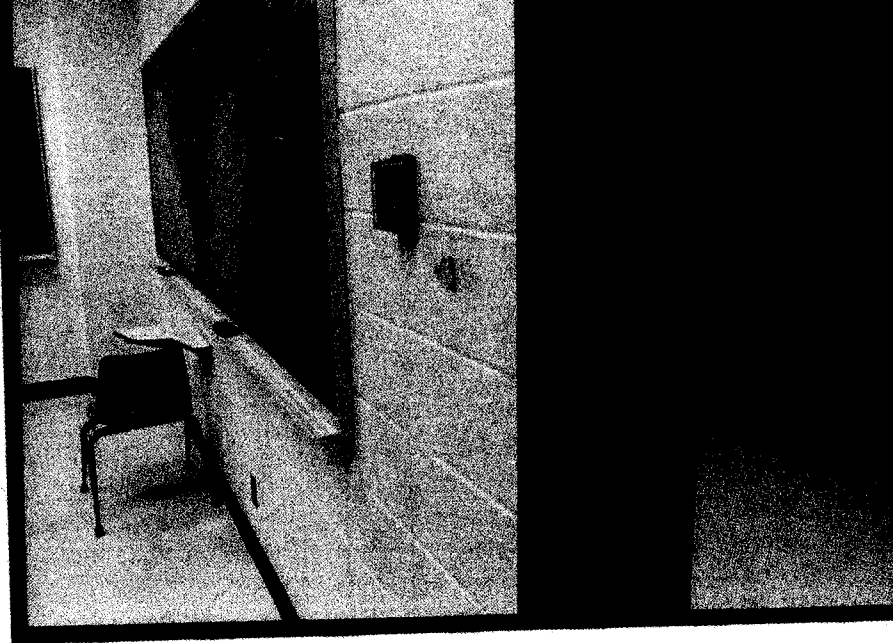
I can't help but feel that another potent byproduct of this process is cynicism. If the responsible adults in your school are willing to sell you to a soft-drink company to make a few bucks — bucks that come right out of your pocket when you buy the drinks, which may replace healthier alternatives like fruit juices or water — then why on earth would you go to these people for counseling or ethical guidance? You certainly wouldn't trust what they tell you about anything.

I'm not sure that a seventh-grader or a tenth-grader could articulate what I just said, but that doesn't mean kids don't feel it. You don't have to know what the word *cynical* means to adopt a cynical view of the world. I think that's why, among many young people, irony is the default emotional state. Ultimately, that irony is just a reflection of the underlying cynicism we adults have visited upon our children by our monumental hypocrisy.

**Jensen:** What do you think is the purpose of education as it exists today?

**Molnar:** Education has never served just one purpose for all people, but different purposes for different people at different times. For some, education is romantic: they think education is going to liberate them, provide for their intellectual development, and teach them who they are. For others, education is completely utilitarian: they have to take these courses and these credits to obtain that certification so they can get that job. Still others see education as just something to endure: they're in school because they have to be and have nowhere else to be. And to the extent that schooling reflects this country's democratic ideals, education is fundamentally about maintaining a civil society and allowing it to evolve in healthy ways.

Right now, we're at a point where the distinction between the market and democracy has been seriously eroded. Within this context, it's difficult for schools not to buy into



the assumption that education's purpose is simply to serve the market — for example, by providing it with trained employees, indoctrinated consumers, and various kinds of technicians. What we're seeing is the collapse of the individual, economic, and civic rationales for schools into one market-based rationale. Within this strange cultural environment, consumer choice has come to be viewed as identical to democratic freedom. Going shopping is the same as democratic participation. Being a well-trained corporate employee is the same as being an involved citizen. And schools are very much caught up in these developments, because schools don't control the immediate cultural environment, but respond to it.

**Jensen:** School vouchers seem to be all the rage these days. How do they work?

**Molnar:** In a voucher system, the state would provide the parents of each child with an equal amount of money to spend on education. Of course, parents who have more money to begin with would be free to supplement the state voucher, and so would be able to buy a better educational product.

**Jensen:** The public seems to like the idea, though.

**Molnar:** An awful lot of money has been spent to buy that public opinion.

**Jensen:** By whom?

**Molnar:** A whole array of ideological forces has gathered around vouchers, including hard-right neoconservatives, the Catholic Church, and even some spokespeople for impoverished communities of color, who say that public-school systems in large urban areas haven't properly served poor children and children of color.

But school vouchers are really an attempt to create a market in education. The theory behind it is that, just as in the private economy, market sectors will provide different educational services for people with more or less money to spend. Already, different people shop at Wal-Mart than at Bloomingdale's. The same will happen with schools, the theory goes.

This represents a direct flight from the government's



responsibility to promote equity in its institutions, policies, and practices, because equity is not a consideration in a market-oriented perspective. Think about cars. One person might buy a Chevy; another might buy a Mercedes; a third might be unable to afford a car at all. Clearly, that's inequitable, but most people would say it's not socially destructive. You can't apply that same logic to education, however, because it's so basic to the opportunities we receive in our society, and to our ability to participate fully in civic life.

Aside from the equity problem, vouchers would be fantastically expensive. Here in Wisconsin, about one in seven children attends a private school of some sort. To make a full-scale voucher program available to everyone, Wisconsin would either have to increase education spending by half a billion dollars — because it would now be paying for those one in seven currently in private school — or else take that half a billion out of the pockets of the children who attend public schools and put it in the pockets of those who attend private schools.

Another major problem with a voucher system is that, because most private schools in the U.S. are sectarian, it would mean the government using its police power and taxing authority to promote religion. I don't want that, and I'm not sure the people who send their children to religious schools want it either, because there would be a very real possibility that the state would start to regulate those schools. Where tax dollars go, regulation will likely follow. If I wanted my children to attend a religious school, I'd be concerned about that.

**Jensen:** If I had a child, could I use my voucher to send my child to, say, the Emma Goldman Anarchist Academy of Antiforestry?

**Molnar:** Sure. Everyone could open a school: the anarchists, the neo-Nazis, the racists, the Orthodox Jews, the Catholic mystics, the atheists. Anybody who wanted to. But at the end of the day, what would be left that we all had in common? Where would we fight with one another? Probably in the streets.

One of the beauties of public education is that it makes you have to engage people who aren't like you and figure out ways to manage your differences within the acceptable bounds of civil society. If you decide that all interest groups can withdraw to their respective niches, close the gates, and arm themselves to the teeth with their own views, then what have we got left to call civil society?

So vouchers are potentially devastating to the idea of schools as a place for civic engagement. And they represent the triumph of the market over democracy. Proponents make this clear by calling it "school choice." It replaces political involvement with shopping-mall

choice.

**Jensen:** I agree with what you're saying, but if I had a child who was forced to watch Channel One every day and bombarded with lesson plans put together by Weyerhaeuser and Coca-Cola, I might welcome a voucher so I could send my child to a commercial-free school.

**Molnar:** What you want is a cheap and easy solution, and in this life, nothing is cheap and easy. If you don't want your child watching Channel One, then talk to your school board and demand that your child not have to watch it. Make your arguments. Engage in debate. Mobilize your community. Talk to your neighbors. That's what we *do* in a democracy. And you know what? You might lose. But being in a democracy doesn't mean you win. It just means you have the right to struggle. And I think many of us have forgotten that.

**Jensen:** Do you believe that whatever problems might exist in public schools can be resolved by better funding?

**Molnar:** Some schools are funded just fine. In affluent communities, there are beautiful public schools with plenty of resources. Funding schools more *equitably*, as well as more adequately, would go a long way toward addressing many of the problems, but I wouldn't stop there. Once we've got the money, I think it's fair to ask how it will be spent.

Right now, however, the debate is dominated by reforms that don't offer specifics. What's the educational program of a voucher system? It's an administrative reform. Basically, its advocates are saying, "We don't know what to do, so we'll let anybody do anything they want."

**Jensen:** It seems that schools are flash points for many of the problems in our culture.

**Molnar:** Absolutely. Education is an arena where the most critical battles of our time are being fought. But I think if I had to choose a single question raised by our current system of schooling, it would be this: is democratic civil society still possible in a culture that is suffocating under the weight of its own consumption? The answer to that question would tell us a lot about what our schools — and our whole society — will look like in the future. ■