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Sold Out: Corporate Marketing in America's Schools

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Last year Andrea Boyes, then a sophomore at West Salem High School in Oregon, had a good idea. To raise money for her high school cheerleading squad, Andrea devised a plan to resell bottled water, netting 55 cents on every \$1 sale. Demonstrating entrepreneurial spunk, creativity and compassion rolled into one, she designed her own label and hoped her project would harvest enough profit to pay for uniforms, allowing low-income teens to join the squad.

But West Salem High School would not let her sell the water on school grounds. The reason: Pepsi Cola's exclusive contract with the school forced Andrea to conduct the fund-raising sales off campus.

Increasingly, companies are calling the shots in America's schools.

Facing a growing gap between the cost of educating children and the cash available to do so, schools are getting desperate.

Some swap advertising space - on school buses, at the gym or stadium and in the lunchroom - in return for corporate cash. Others accept "free" materials or services. But these often serve corporate interests more than they promote educational objectives.

A case in point: The firm Field Trip Factory peddles students to retailers under the guise of providing schools with free "field trips." The field trips generally include opportunities for participating businesses to pitch their wares.

Schools have also opened their doors to a flood of commercial messages that promote harmful health and nutrition habits. Ads for candy, fast food and soft drinks punctuate Channel One, the TV news program for middle and high school students. Marketers of Tootsie Rolls and Hershey's chocolate have used "geography" and "nutrition" lessons to promote their products to students.

These practices are harmful. As commercialism in public schools has increased, so has obesity among American children - tripling in the last two decades, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Last year, as schools cut health classes while school vending machines continued to sell fattening junk, speakers at a White House-sponsored conference on "Healthy Schools" lamented rising levels of childhood malnourishment and obesity.

Fortunately, there is evidence of a backlash against the corporate infiltration of our schools. Critics are threatening lawsuits, charging that sponsorship programs interfere with school operations, instruction or children's health. Legislators and school officials in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Texas and elsewhere have banned or limited the ability of schools to enter into arrangements, such as exclusive agreements with soft drink bottlers.

Parents are speaking out against the relentless marketing to their children in school. As one South Carolina parent put it: "Do we want (students') health to be what is used to make up for the budget shortfall?"

Some corporations appear to be backing off. In July, Kraft announced it would cease all school marketing. Many others, though, unwilling to lose such a potentially lucrative marketing channel, are keeping at it.

Our schools and our students should not be auctioned off to the highest commercial bidders. We have greater moral obligations to our children.