



## MALICIOUS MATH GAMES? THE PROBLEM WITH PRODIGY



The allegations are troubling. There are more advertisements than there are math lessons. The marketing materials feature false claims that the product improves learning outcomes in math.

These are just two of the claims included in a [letter of complaint](#) filed by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) and more than 20 other organizations against Prodigy, a trendy interactive, online, gamified math program that targets children between the ages of 6 and 14. The letter was sent to the Federal Trade Commission, which investigates complaints of unfair or deceptive business practices. The Prodigy website claims that over [1.5 million teachers](#) already use its math game with their students.

Another CFCC allegation is that children are manipulated into pressuring their parents to purchase premium Prodigy subscriptions. The premium version permits members to collect electronic swag like costumes and wizards, all within full view of their classmates whose parents cannot afford the \$100 annual fee for fun extras.

[According to Prodigy Education](#), the platform has more than 100 million registered users worldwide. The version of the games that are designed for school use do not include advertisements. But children are encouraged to continue to play at home. And CCFC found that the free home version has four times as many advertisements as math questions. Children who use this version are bombarded with requests to upgrade to paid versions that can cost as much as \$100 annually.

CCFC says this raises equity concerns:

Children can see who has the cool stuff and who doesn't, thereby creating two classes of students—those whose families can afford a Premium membership and those whose families cannot. To make matters worse, students with a Premium membership advance through the game faster, creating the false impression that they are more accomplished at math.

The letter also notes that Johns Hopkins University research commissioned by Prodigy itself fails to support the company's claims that the game improves test scores and grades and teaches essential math skills.

“Prodigy may keep children quiet and happy while teachers or parents are busy, but it doesn't teach them math,” said Faith Boninger, an assistant research professor at CU Boulder and the co-director of NEPC's Commercialism in Education Research Unit.

Any potential math learning through the Prodigy app would require students to fully immerse themselves in the app—along with its advertisements. The study relied on by the company warned that students would have to answer almost a thousand questions while at home to get just a one-point gain in their standardized assessment score. This is not an efficient way to learn math, in terms of time spent or exposure to marketing.

The FTC letter urges the agency to investigate Prodigy, taking “appropriate action” to hold the company “accountable for its deception of educators and families” and to halt “deceptive claims or manipulative design to promote use of Prodigy and to sell premium memberships.”

## NEPC Resources on School Commercialism

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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