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Commercialism in Schools

By Kirstin Larson

Commercial activities in schools have increased dramatically in the last decade, and many people predict they will continue to grow in frequency and variety. As schools with strained budgets struggle to meet demands for improvement and acquire expensive technologies and learning materials for students, many businesses are attempting to obtain access to these students for their own purposes.

Typically, businesses offer support to schools in the form of cash, equipment, and educational materials in exchange for the right to advertise or sell products to kids while they are in school.

Considerable debate focuses on school districts entering into exclusive contracts with soft-drink bottlers and agreeing to air Channel One in the classroom. Critics contend that exclusive contracts with beverage companies result in schools profiting from student consumption of unhealthy soft drinks, undermining what students are taught in their health and nutrition classes.

Proponents cite the much-needed cash infusion and scholarship money that many of these deals provide. Commercialism has always been in schools, they argue, and now savvy schools are charging companies for the privilege.

The intense public controversy sparked by these deals has warranted a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office, and led to a number of recent attempts at regulation. Proponents view these interactions as natural, symbiotic relationships that benefit both businesses and children, while critics view them as something more akin to mad cow disease--they're spreading rapidly, undermining the ability of schools to control the curriculum, and eating away at the minds of children.

Educators and business people on both sides of the debate agree that schools need to have policies addressing commercial activities.

This issue of Research Roundup gives voice to the concerns raised by critics and supporters of commercialism in schools.

The U.S. General Accounting Office reports on the nature and frequency of commercial activities in

public schools, and the laws and policies that regulate them.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development highlights controversies sparked by commercialism in schools.

The Consumers Union looks at what commercial sponsors are teaching kids in school.

Alex Molnar considers how the commercialization of public education may affect the larger civic culture.

Nancy Willard examines electronic marketing in schools and offers guidelines for schools that do business with technology providers

U.S. General Accounting Office. **Commercial Activities in Schools**, GAO/HEHS-00-156. Washington, D.C.: Author, 2000. *Available from:* U.S. General Accounting Office, Box 37050, Washington, D.C. 20013. 202 512-6000. First copy free, additional copies \$2 each. Downloadable from website: <http://www.gao.gov/>.

Over the last decade commercial activities in public schools have increased in visibility and taken unprecedented forms, while subject to very little comprehensive or uniform regulation at the state and district levels, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reports. Businesses are eager to tap into the growing youth market, while schools are turning to businesses for resources such as cash and technology-related equipment and services. The variety and frequency of school-based commercial activities exceeds the scope of most state laws and district policies.

This GAO report is a response to growing concerns over how students' behavior may be affected by the advertising, product sales, and other commercial activities taking place in schools. At the time of the report, Congressional hearings had been held and legislation drafted (H.R. 2915, S.1908) to address the commercial exploitation of children and the need to protect students' privacy rights.

The report draws from a review of state laws and regulations, site visits to 19 public elementary and secondary schools in seven districts in three states, interviews with national education and business organization officials, and reports on commercial activities.

The report identifies four distinct types of school-based commercialism: (1) Product sales, including arrangements with companies to sell their products in and to schools, as well as rebate and fundraising programs; (2) direct advertising, including ads in school publications and free product samples; (3)

indirect advertising using such methods as corporate-sponsored incentive programs, educational materials that display brand names, product samples, and corporate gifts; and (4) market research using questionnaires, taste tests, and online surveys.

In the schools researchers visited, exclusive soft-drink contracts and short-term fundraising were the most common and lucrative methods. Nationwide, exclusive soft-drink contracts were the fastest growing commercial activity in schools.

Despite their growing visibility, revenue from school-based commercial activities represented only a tiny percentage of the budgets in the districts researchers visited. In addition, the report notes, many of the advertisements "yield no tangible commercial benefit to the schools, although they do yield benefit to the advertiser."

Only five states have statutes and regulations that specifically and comprehensively address school-related commercial activities, while 14 states take a more piecemeal approach by restricting or even explicitly permitting specific activities. The level at which decisions are made concerning commercial activities in schools also varies by state, though the decision-making is usually left to local school officials.

The report notes that specific activities often get designated controversial or noncontroversial according to the values and preferences (including brand preferences) of school officials and parents "rather than the nature of the activity itself." A wide range of policies and levels of commercial activities therefore exist among and even within districts.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Supporting Students or Selling Access?

ASCD Infobrief on Commercialism in Schools. Alexandria, Virginia. Infobrief Issue 15, November 1998: Author, November 1998. *Available from:* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1-800-933-2723 or online at <http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/infobrief/9811.html>

Proponents laud the financial windfall and critics deplore the exploitation of a young and captive audience, as commercial arrangements between businesses and schools undergo what many view as a dramatic shift in frequency, nature, and degree of boldness on the part of in-school marketers. ASCD's Infobrief highlights arguments on both sides of the debate.

Educators and business people alike are divided over the very nature of commercial arrangements between schools and businesses. Proponents often use the term "school-business partnership" to emphasize the mutually beneficial, cooperative nature of these arrangements. While businesses may benefit from their sales and marketing in schools, underfunded schools gain much-needed resources for their students, who will still be able to learn while exposed to a minimal amount of inschool advertising, supporters argue. To illustrate the symbiotic relationship between schools and businesses, a Colorado school official points to posters that display a corporate logo while encouraging students to stay in school.

Critics, however, think the term "school-business partnerships" disguises the exploitative nature of many of these arrangements. They point out that corporations often sponsor schools to gain access to students during school hours, cultivate them as present and future consumers, shape students' influence on their parents' purchasing behavior, and gain credibility with students through the business association with trusted teachers. Critics argue that such arrangements are commercial transactions that exploit students and betray the public trust.

Channel One is a twelve-minute classroom news program that includes two minutes of commercials. Along with the free television programming, equipment is made available to schools as long as they air the show almost daily. Supporters of Channel One defend the educational value of the show and point out its popularity among students and teachers.

Critics object to what they identify as the program's explicit advertising, dubious educational content, waste of costly instructional time, disproportionate presence in high-poverty areas, and noticeable effects on students, who mistake commercials for public-service announcements.

Districts considering commercial agreements with business should enlist school and community participation in the decision, thoroughly assess the educational value of the agreement, and never require a school to take part in such an agreement.

Consumers Union Education Services. **Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School.** Yonkers, NY.: Consumers Union, 1995. *Available from:* Consumers Union of U.S., Inc., 101 Turman Avenue, Yonkers, New York 10703. 914 378-2000. Downloadable from website: <http://www.consumer.org/other/captivekids/index.htm>

At a growing number of schools, students are encouraged not only to read and do their homework, but to buy. Schools across the country are allowing corporate sponsors to influence the curriculum and the lifelong purchasing habits of students, according to the Consumers Union.

Along with more traditional curricular fare, many students are now learning why they should buy (or get their parents and neighbors to buy) certain brand-name products. They are also studying educational materials that present corporate and industry opinions on social, environmental, and health issues as facts.

The report warns that when educators expose students to in-school advertising and promotional materials, they implicitly endorse corporate sponsors, undermine students' ability to distinguish between factual accounts and promotional vehicles, and violate public trust. The Consumers Union also warns against allowing commercial interests to set the classroom agenda.

In their review of 77 sponsored educational kits and packets, researchers found that the majority--including those endorsed by educational associations or produced by independent developers--were "commercial or highly commercial" despite the absence of advertising, and nearly 80 percent offered

biased, incomplete, or self-serving information. "A few," moreover, "contained significant inaccuracies." The educational value of sponsored materials is often left to the discretion of teachers ill-equipped to assess their accuracy or to defuse the effects of their advertising plugs, the report states.

To preserve the integrity of schools, the Consumers Union recommends that:

- the corporate sector publicly support appropriate school funding
- the education community recognize that bringing commercial influences into schools is unethical regardless of any financial payoff
- parents teach their children to be media-literate and critically aware consumers
- government ensure proper school funding, make corporations pay a fair share of school funding, and eliminate tax breaks for corporate contributions that bring commercialism into schools

Molnar, Alex. **Corporate Involvement in Schools: Time for a More Critical Look.** State Education Standard volume 2, No. 1. Alexandria, Virginia: National Association of State Boards of Education, Spring 2001. *Available from:* National Association of State Boards of Education, 277 South Washington Street #100, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. 703 684-4000. Downloadable from website: <http://www.schoolcommercialism.org/>

Unsolicited materials developed by well-funded outside interests are flooding schools, which must fall back on their own resources to evaluate the materials due to the decentralized nature of curriculum approval. The abundance of unscreened materials may weaken academic programs and undermine democratic control of the curriculum (typically through elected school boards), warns a report by the National Education Association's Committee on Propaganda in the Schools--in 1929.

Molnar argues that these concerns over commercial influences in schools are even more urgent today, given the phenomenal rise in school-based commercial activities over the last decade. Since 1990, for example, press citations of sponsored educational materials increased by 1,875 percent, citations of exclusive contracts between schools and corporations increased 1,384 percent, and citations of privatization increased 3,206 percent. Of the eight categories Molnar researched, fundraising had the largest number of citations.

According to Molnar, corporate involvement in schools has interfered with the ability of schools to provide a sound education, promote the best interests of children, and foster "democratic civic values." Children in schools, he argues, are increasingly being approached as consumers rather than as learners and citizens. He cites, for example, ads and products that encourage kids to consume junk food and sodas, market research that exploits students and invades their privacy, and lack of public accountability on the part of education-management organizations.

Attempts have been made to regulate commercial activities at state and federal levels, but many have failed. "Unfortunately," Molnar writes, "to this point in America, policymakers have devoted much less time to thinking through the constraints that may be necessary on corporate involvement in the schools

than to considering ways to expand school-business partnerships." He says this will need to change if the character of public education and the democratic culture it expresses are to remain intact.

Willard, Nancy. **Capturing the Eyeballs and "E-Wallets" of Kids in School: Dot.com Invades Dot.edu.** Eugene, Oregon: Center for Advanced Technology in Education, 2000. 541 346-3460. Downloadable from website: <http://netizen.uoregon.edu/index.html>

In exchange for technology resources, a growing number of schools are allowing businesses to collect personal information from students through online profiling and to expose students to the targeted marketing enabled by banner ads, according to Willard, director of the Center for Advanced Technology in Education at the University of Oregon. She terms this latest incarnation of corporate sponsorship the "dot.com business model."

According to Willard, schools are participating in these exchanges without adequate assessment of their educational value, impact on students, or ethical implications. Unethical classroom activities may require students to disclose personal information to be used for marketing purposes, allow students' online behavior to be tracked without their knowledge, or permit this personal information to be distributed to other online businesses without the knowledge or consent of either students or their parents.

Willard warns that students who are encouraged to share personal information that will be used to manipulate their own behavior and the behavior of other students for commercial purposes "may fail to develop an understanding of the boundaries of personal privacy."

While no laws or regulations address these specific concerns over electronic marketing in schools, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act does seek to protect the general online privacy of children under 13. Willard notes, "If teachers are selecting sites for student research, the sites should first be analyzed for the quality, appropriateness, and suitability of the educational materials present on the site."

She recommends a set of principles for a school policy on commercialism on the Internet and identifies questions teachers should ask when considering the use of a particular website with students. These questions include:

- What information will be collected directly or indirectly from students as they use the site?
 - What is the purpose of the collection of information?
 - What security provisions have been established to ensure the confidentiality of students' personal information?
 - Does the site have any banner ads? If so, what is the relationship of the collection of data to the presence of banner advertising?
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