

The Going Price For Classroom Time

The Commercialization of Education: Private Funds for Public Schools

Every year public schools receive \$2.4 billion from “business relationships with corporations,” reports the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships. According to the Department of Education website, \$2 billion is spent on “high school programs.” It’s hard to fault a high school principal for doubling his budget by accepting corporate funding, but at what cost are these donations to the students? Are the schools enhancing or harming the educational experience by selling ad space, circulating corporate propaganda, and granting exclusivity agreements?



With cuts in the education budget for public schools across the country, local school boards must find creative ways to support programs in technology, sports, the arts, and other extracurricular activities, as well as enhancing basic education needs. Lately, additional funding has been found (at an increasing rate) in the private sector and public schools are accepting donations from corporations in exchange for everything from exclusive marketing rights to ad-filled curriculum materials. While their money is being used to buy new band uniforms, re-turf football fields, and build better sets for the school play, corporations are forcing their products and opinions upon our nation’s children at a place where students are supposed learn from critical, objective sources.

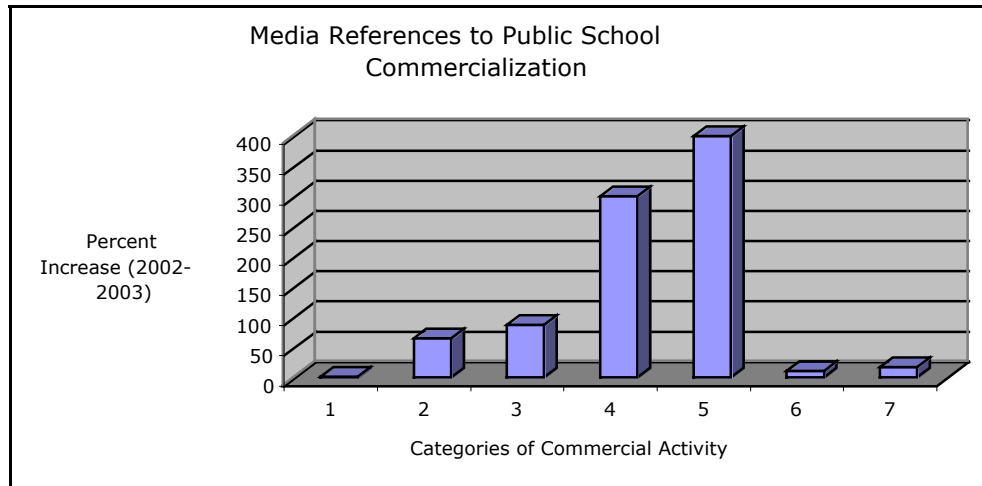
Accepting donations from private corporations is not bad, but the current modes of commercialization are largely unacceptable. Whether blatant or disguised as curriculum materials, these exploitative marketing schemes are detrimental to the education of our students. Rewarding schools and having corporations sponsor educational programs are much better alternatives. The corporations should not make educational materials; instead, schools should create their own curriculum and solicit corporate sponsors to meet budgetary needs. In short, the education and health of our students should never come second to meeting commercial needs.

● types of commercialization

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) at Arizona State University has been monitoring public schools and the private funds they receive. According to Educational Leadership magazine, this group “defines and tracks media references to eight categories of commercial activity in schools.” They are as follows:

1. Sponsorship of programs and activities
2. Exclusive agreements

3. Incentive programs
4. Appropriation of space
5. Sponsored educational materials
6. Electronic marketing
7. Fund raising
8. Privatization



Source: Molnar, Alex. "Cashing in on the Classroom,"
 Educational Leadership. v. 61, iss. 4. Dec. 2003 / Jan. 2004

Because this article will focus on the commercialization of public schools, the groups eighth category, privatization, will not be discussed as it pertains to the private management of schools. The other seven categories are of extreme importance because – as illustrated by the graph on the next page – participation in each has increased over the past couple of years. Each method of commercial activity hurts public schools in its own way, except for the first category (and, unfortunately, the one that has shown the least increase), corporate sponsorship of programs and activities. This article will examine the harmful effects of these categories, and then present ways for private companies to donate money to public schools so that both sides can benefit and – more importantly – the students can have a prosperous educational experience.

● selling ad space in public schools

Numbers 4 and 6 on our list of commercial categories represent some of the most obvious ways that corporations exchange financial donations for premium ad space in our nation's public schools. The Educational Leadership article cites a Chicago school that sold the name of its stadium for \$100,000 and an ad over the scoreboard for another \$80,000. And a Teacher Magazine article gives further examples of this, mentioning a New Jersey gymnasium bearing the name of a local supermarket. The article gives other examples, citing trends to sell ad space in yearbooks and even inside school buses. Alissa Quart, author of a book about the subject, notes that "35 percent of schools that stock brand-name sodas also feature advertising material in school hallways." An article in Pediatrics for Parents explains that companies can target specific demographics based on age (grade level) and household income with such ads.

Advertising space also comes in electronic form. Several of these articles cite Channel One, a ten minute daily news service featuring two minutes of advertising, which donates televisions and satellites to schools. Also, the company Zap Me! gives schools computers in exchange for placing on-screen advertisements in the web browsers.

Children are exposed to advertising on a daily basis, so what's so bad about selling ad space at public schools? Basically, it creates a conflict of interest. In America, children are required to attend school, with the understanding that "the experience should benefit them and promote social goals," according to the Educational Leadership article. When teachers and school officials sell advertising space, they are promoting a corporate agenda rather than creating an objective environment where students can critically examine the world around them. For example, how are students supposed to believe their nutrition lessons in health class when the campus is covered in ads for Pepsi and Pizza Hut?

● exclusivity deals

While many companies are satisfied with exclusive advertising rights to a school, some companies have extended this privilege in order to sell their product on campus and close out their competitors. Both advocates and opponents of this policy cite the deals struck by schools with soda giants Coca-Cola and Pepsi. The Nation quotes promoters of the practice that say "schools are raising as much as \$100,000 a year, money that pays for things like band uniforms, field trips, and computer rewiring." Again, in the age of under-funded public schools, it is hard to oppose such financial contributions.

Critics, however, state that even if one were to ignore the possible social and educational ramifications that could come from such conflicts of interest, one could not ignore the obvious health risks that such policies create. Alissa Quart notices that "schoolchildren put on pounds with chips, candy and soda" as they absorb the corporate onslaught. When America's children are growing increasingly obese, pushing sugar-filled sodas on them is no help. But because schools receive money from soda companies by meeting certain quotas of sales, that is precisely what school officials are doing.

And don't think an end is in sight. According to Educational Leadership, as recently as 2002, the California Teachers Association shot down a bill to end soft-drink sales because the schools needed the revenue. A similar event took place in Denver, where the newspaper stated, "With a down economy and extremely tight budgets everywhere, it's not the time to kiss off millions of private dollars." Will we not even put the health of our children ahead of public school commercialism?

● curriculum materials

The most clever (and fastest growing) way that companies work their way into our school systems is by producing curriculum materials for teachers to use in their classrooms. A great example of this, as described by *The New York Times*, comes from Procter & Gamble. For use in health class during a lesson on puberty for example, "The company provides an educational package with reading material, a video and product samples: an Old Spice stick for the boys, and a Secret stick plus Always pads for the girls." Also, the company imbedded its name into a school textbook about the Civil War, explaining that it provided soap to Union troops.

Articles in Pediatrics for Parents and Policy Review site several more examples from the past few years:

- A Hershey Foods video called "The Chocolate Dream Machine" that teaches vocabulary and geography while making product references and showing how chocolate is made.
- A science experiment provided by Campbell Soup Company that proves Prego is thicker than Ragu.
- A math lesson for kindergarteners involving Tootsie Roll counting.
- A survey by General Mills (disguised as a science experiment) asking students to compare the "dynamic volcanic eruptions" in their mouths after eating Fruit Gushers.

In these and similar cases, students are not only exposed to corporate advertising, they actively participate in it. What is most troubling about this trend is that are not buying billboards or book covers from the schools.

Instead, they are buying something which should not be for sale: classroom time. At an alarming rate, schools are selling public space and time to advertisers. This goes completely against the mission of a school to provide an objective learning experience. As the Educational Leadership article puts it, “The curriculum should represent the essence of a school’s purpose.”

Even more disturbing, the article continues, is the potential for private companies to insert their own points of view when creating such course materials. In a perversion of Proctor & Gamble’s tactic, Exxon-Mobil put a positive spin on the recounting of its Valdez oil spill in course materials. Apparently, corporations “conceive of school curriculum as a sort of flea market in which anyone with enough money to buy a booth can present his or her story.” Again, the point of public education is to develop critical thinkers that can examine the information around them and create their own conclusions. When the information presented in classrooms is biased or skewed by a corporate agenda, such development becomes impossible.

● **what we can do: philanthropic donations and guided sponsorships**

As long as education budgets continue to diminish and extracurricular activities are cut, public schools will require donations from the private sector. However, the most beneficial and least obtrusive form of corporate giving, program sponsorship, is growing the slowest. Educational Learning recognizes companies like General Electric and Shell Oil that sponsor academic competitions and special educational programs. More corporations should follow their lead. The most efficient way to save after-school programs in the arts, sports, and academia is for sponsors to directly support these activities. In this way, they are not pushing products on children or creating biased curriculum materials.

One benefit that companies provide by producing unique course materials is that they often break the monotony of classes with interesting activities and the use of interactive media. Keeping students interested in education is important, but the creation of lesson plans should remain in the hands of teachers, coaches, and other school officials. Schools can then solicit corporate sponsors to produce interesting presentations of these lesson plans in exchange for their name on required materials. If companies like Pepsi or Coca-Cola want to maintain their exclusivity on campus, they should be required to provide products that meet basic nutritional needs decided upon by school nutritionists.

Lastly, companies should not reward school activities with their products. (An example of this, as cited by Policy Review, is Pizza Hut rewarding children for reading a certain number of books with free pizza.) This activity is simply another way for companies to dictate public school curriculum. Instead, they should mimic the policy of Domino’s Pizza. (Domino’s rewards customers who buy their pizza by making donations to the patron’s favorite public school.) This type of reward system keeps the corporation’s interests in the private sector and promotes true philanthropic giving.

● **final recommendation**

Public schools must never forget their role in developing the critical thinkers of the future. In planning lessons and curriculum, educators must take the initiative in seeking outside sponsorship. They cannot accept corporate donations that are not in the best interests of the student and create a biased, unhealthy learning environment.

● **Student Bio** ●

Dan Williams is going into his senior year at USC, majoring in Writing for Screen and Television. Besides writing, Dan enjoys teaching and working with young people, and he hopes to study education after he completes his undergraduate work.

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