The Battle Over Commercialism

Despite resistance from some concerned parents and educators, commercialism continues its assault on the schoolhouse.

**Alex Molnar and David Garcia**

Silicon Valley entrepreneur Craig Harmer has given a novel twist to the traditional gift registry. In 2004, Harmer established a nonprofit corporation that connects classrooms and teachers with individuals or corporations who want to donate school supplies. Classroom Wishlist invites teachers to register and build a list of materials they need for their classrooms. Prospective donors select some or all of the items on a particular teacher’s “wishlist” and make a financial donation; Classroom Wishlist purchases and delivers the designated items. “Our goal is to build an infrastructure where the private sector can directly fund true needs in the classroom,” the organization says on its Web site (www.classroomwishlist.org).

Classroom Wishlist’s goal statement succinctly illustrates the underlying forces that help drive the continuing growth of commercialism in public schools. The reduction of public funds available to schools and the desire of corporations to be visible in schools have produced a climate in which inadequate public funding is accepted as normal and corporate dollars are eagerly sought.

For the last 15 years, the Commercialism in Education Research Unit of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University has studied trends in schoolhouse commercialism. The data, published annually, paint a picture of the marketplaces increasingly forceful incursion into U.S. public education. The 2005 study confirmed that schoolhouse commercialism is increasingly pervasive and diverse.

**More Common, More Diverse**

The following examples suggest the wide range of paths that commercialism has taken on its way into the schoolhouse.

No Child Left Behind’s emphasis on test-based accountability has created a context in which incentive programs, such as Pizza Hut’s BOOK IT!, may be particularly appealing to schools seeking to boost student test scores (Ison, 2005). In addition, NCLB’s consideration of attendance rates has fostered attendance-incentive programs in some schools (Maguire, 2004).

Contracts that grant soft drink and junk food marketers exclusive rights to sell their products in schools remain widespread (Snell, 2005). Programs designed to build shopper loyalty—such as General Mills’ Box Tops for Education program and PTA-sponsored product sales campaigns—dominate many schools’ fund-raising efforts.

Channel One News continues to furnish television equipment to schools in return for a contractual agreement that requires students to watch a daily 12-minute news program, including two minutes of commercials. Although often framed as a contributor to students’ civics education, Channel One also engages in marketing partnerships that blend educational aims with commercial promotion targeted to that age group.

Examples of corporate curriculums are easy to find. For 60 years, the Hart-
Commercialized Schools

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ford Financial Services Group (2004), which sells fire insurance, has provided schools with its fire safety curriculum. A program sponsored by McDonald’s Corporation sends the Ronald McDonald mascot into schools as the company’s “ambassador for an active, balanced lifestyle” (Mayer, 2005). Atkins Nutritionalals, Inc., which sells products that are based on the low-carbohydrate diet theories of the late Dr. Robert Atkins, has signed agreements with the National Association of State Boards of Education and the National Education Association to distribute Atkins-sponsored “nutrition education” materials (Toppo, 2004). The Chicago-based Field Trip Factory organizes corporate-sponsored field trips and sells them as a marketing tool to commercial retailers (Borja, 2004).

In science magazines, such as Science Reader and Science Scope, the candy company Pop Rocks, Inc. advertises a lesson plan featuring Pop Rocks candy: a science experiment in which students mix the carbon dioxide-impregnated candy with other ingredients in a test tube and then watch it foam and explode. “It promotes science,” claims the candy maker’s Vice President of Sales Mitch Boehm (Scully, 2005). On its Web site (www.poprockscandy.com/lab.html), the company advertises school discounts for the experiment’s “secret ingredients.”

Some corporate lesson plans seem designed to shape public debate and blunt criticism of industry practices. For example, the recreational all-terrain vehicle industry commissioned instructional materials purported “to promote all-terrain vehicle (ATV) safety and environmental-friendly riding” prepared by Lifetime Learning Systems (2004). The ATV industry’s interest in presenting a particular spin on safety is understandable in light of news reports that document disproportionate levels of injury among young ATV users, which have led some people to call for banning adult-sized ATVs for youngsters (Alexander, n.d.).

McDonald’s conversion of Ronald McDonald into a fitness mascot takes place in the context of a history of criticism of the company as a promoter of childhood obesity. PepsiCo, too, has embraced the cause of youth fitness. The company, a manufacturer of snack foods as well as soft drinks and other
beverages, has sent fitness education materials to elementary and middle schools (Mayer, 2005). Because excess consumption of snack foods, soft drinks, and fast food has been implicated in the alarming rise in childhood obesity, companies that promote and profit from the consumption of these products are likely using “fitness” as a public relations fig leaf. Genuine advocacy of fitness would inevitably lower commercializing activities has touched off a public debate in education (Molnar & García, 2005). Critics of schoolhouse commercialism include Alvin Poussaint, director of the Media Center of the Judge Baker Children’s Center at Harvard Medical School, who points out, “Kids are vulnerable. They don’t understand . . . they’re being marketed to.” (Parmet, 2005, p. A1). Glen Brodowski, associate professor of marketing at California State University San Marcos, counters,

> Of course these companies are marketing to children and trying to create more consumers, but I don’t necessarily think that’s insidious or evil. We’re all trying to get something back, and nobody does something for purely benevolent reasons—except Mother Teresa. (Parmet, 2005, p. A1)

In large part, recent criticism of schoolhouse commercialism arises from growing concern about its impact on children’s health. Critics of incentive programs like Pizza Hut’s BOOK IT!, for example, point out that rewarding children with food may be unhealthy. “It undermines everything we teach them about eating right,” Linda Nye, a registered dietitian, told the Wichita Eagle (Tobias, 2005, p. 1C). In Florida, Palm Beach County school board members expressed reservations about a promotion by Krispy Kreme doughnuts awarding students a free doughnut for every A on their report cards (Shah, 2004).

Active attempts to curtail schoolhouse commercialism have become more common. In Denver, Colorado, a school district commission charged with recommending ways to improve student health called for various measures, including restricting food and beverages sold on school campuses to products lower in fat and sugar (Mitchell, 2004). Local editorialists endorsed the recommendations. “Good parents don’t let children choose any diet they want, and neither should good schools,” one of them wrote in the Rocky Mountain News (“Targeting fat . . .,” 2004).

Such local and state bans on soda and junk foods in schools have spread across the United States (Associated Press, 2004). In 2004, for example, Seattle, Washington’s school board passed a blanket ban on sodas and foods with high fat and sugar levels (Bhatt, 2004). Bans or restrictions were also passed in the District of Columbia and in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Although some in Sioux Falls opposed the junk food ban, school board member Joy Smolinsky framed the move as ending the exploitation of children through unhealthy foods: “We won’t be making money on that, and we won’t be the supplier” (“Diet and nutrition . . .,” 2005).

The battle has grown heated, reflecting the high stakes involved. Texas Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs issued new regulations banning sodas and candy bars in schools and restrictions on cookies and chips. Her action won praise from the School Nutrition Association, but the rhetoric soon escalated. Talk show hosts castigated her as a “food Nazi” (Booth-Thomas, 2004). And she wasn’t the only one under attack: Maine State Representative Sean Faircloth, defending a proposed state tax on sodas to be used to help combat childhood obesity, found himself attacked as both a “Nazi” and a “Communist” (Simon, 2005).

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*Although it is not always obvious, corporate curriculums are inherently self-serving. Sponsored lesson plans do not give students objective viewpoints or teach them to think critically. Indeed, some corporate curriculums are little more than hucksterism. For example, Marvel Enterprises handed out a six-week lesson plan for grades 2–4 using a Fantastic Four comic book to promote student self-esteem—and, incidentally, the forthcoming Fantastic Four movie. The newspaper Daily Variety observed that the lesson plan would “introduce the Fantastic Four franchise to a core demo [demographic group] and foster brand awareness” (McClintock, 2005, p. 6).*

**Commercialism Prompts Debate**

The perceived benefits of corporate “partnerships” lead many education leaders to embrace commercializing activities in schools. Seeking more corporate sponsorship is a frequent talking point for school board candidates and high-profile district superintendents (Loh, 2005; Mohr, 2004). But the increased visibility of these companies’ sales and profits.

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Marketers Fight Back
Although some marketers are treading more cautiously in schools, others are looking for loopholes to get around restrictions. For example, Hernando County, Florida, banned soda in its schools in 2003, restricting its agreement with the Coca-Cola Company to selling water, sports drinks, fruit juices, and milk during school hours. But the company only pulled sodas from some vending machines; other machines were merely outfitted with timers so that they shut off during school hours and remained on before and after school (Quinlan, 2004).

Schools themselves, caught between the need to promote children's health and the desire for revenues, have looked for ways around the regulations. In August 2004, the Irving Independent School District in Texas considered taking over food vending machines to preserve its profits from sales of chips, cupcakes, and candy. Regulations forbid private vendors to sell those products during the most profitable period—lunchtime—but a loophole would have permitted the district itself to sell them (Rian, 2004a). The district later dropped the idea, saying that start-up costs were too high (Rian, 2004b).

The soft drink industry has underwritten two groups to pursue aggressive lobbying on its behalf—the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, which Coca-Cola founded in 2001, and the Center for Consumer Freedom, a lobbying group formed in 2003 to combat soda bans. (The latter organization's name is ironic, considering that exclusive agreements deprive consumers of the freedom to choose beverages made by firms other than the agreement's beneficiaries.) In Connecticut, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo succeeded in delaying a bill to ban soda and junk food vending machines in schools after marshalling an extensive lobbying campaign that enlisted union beverage-truck drivers, school coaches, and school boards (Hladky, 2004).

Implications for Educators
In view of the shifting landscape of schoolhouse commercialism, school leaders and other educators need to do the following three things.

Understand the relative costs and benefits of “partnerships” with corporate interests. Although anecdotal reports suggest that soft drink contracts may be lucrative for some schools, other reports suggest the deals are often less beneficial than they appear. In a recent Education Policy Studies Laboratory survey commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 67 percent of school administrators reported that their schools received no income from a variety of commercial activities that they might have expected to produce income, and another 26 percent of the schools indicated receiving between $1 and $10,000 (Mohar, Garcia, Boninger, Marrill, & Griffin, in press). Meanwhile, no one has adequately calculated the costs of such partnerships—whether measured in time diverted from classroom learning (such as the required one hour a week of viewing Channel One); in lost school lunch program revenues because of competing junk food vending machines; or in child health and nutrition.

Become more discriminating and informed about the effects of schoolhouse commercialism. For example, Albuquerque Public Schools has undertaken a research project in which 22 schools agreed to limit soda sales during the day and offer more healthful alternatives. The project, which started in early 2005, is attempting to track the impact of nutritional food and beverages on student behavior and academic performance, as well as on school revenues (Contreras, 2004).

Learn to say no. Too many education leaders prefer to maintain the status quo, continuing to claim that commercialism in school is inherently benign. They may well face public rebuke by community stakeholders who are increasingly skeptical about the benefits of commercialism and concerned about its long-term harm to their children.

Learning or Marketing?
Unfortunately, commercial interests show few serious signs of pulling back. Quite the opposite. Praising a video game company's partnership with Channel One, an industry publication noted,

Marketing into high schools is a tough and sensitive area that Primedia's Channel One figured out long ago. There
are in fact a number of untapped points of entry into the high school and middle school markets, including a number of sports pubs [publications] that schools allow through their well-guarded marketing filters. ('Data filter,' 2004) (Emphasis added)

The choice is increasingly stark, and school leaders will have to decide: Is our mission of providing the best education for all students compatible with practices that offer those students up as an "untapped point of entry" to marketers?

References


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