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What Should We Teach?

Buy Me! Buy Me!

Fourth Annual Report on Commercialism in Schools

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During the past decade, an increasing number of media reports have documented resistance to—and acceptance of—commercial activity in schools.

On June 18, 2001, the morning of their high school graduation in Haddonfield, New Jersey, Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe pulled on a pair of brightly colored T-shirts, climbed into a limousine, and sped off for New York City to pitch themselves on national television.

Chris and Luke appeared on the *Today* show on NBC to announce that they had become the first college students in the United States to be commercially sponsored. "We were looking at our dream schools and discovered prices were so high we couldn't afford it on our own," said Luke. "We'd have to find another way" (Keedle, 2001).

For nearly a year, the two ambitious high school seniors marketed themselves on their Web site (www.chrisandluke.com), unabashedly promising to do just about anything to serve as "spokesguys" for a corporation willing to come up with the money to send them to college. Luke announced he might be persuaded to get a tattoo with a corporate logo. He and Chris posed in front of bowls of breakfast cereal with a sign: "Sponsor us. We will eat your cereal even if we're not hungry!" And, in a move that epitomizes the continuing encroachment of commercialization in education, the two published a picture on the Internet of themselves with golf clubs beneath a caption: "Tiger has sponsors for playing golf. We need sponsors to go to college!" (Barrett & McCabe, 2001a).

Potential sponsors flocked to the duo. In the end, Chris and Luke signed an exclusive contract with First USA, a subsidiary of Bank One Corporation, the largest issuer of Visa credit cards in the world. First USA pledged to pay one year's tuition for each of the students with the possibility of extending the deal. The company also agreed to pay expenses for promotional activities. Chris enrolled at Pepperdine University, where tuition, room, and board for out-of-state students in $31,370. Luke chose the University of Southern California, where out-of-state tuition is $31,714 (Keedle, 2001).

Although careful to advocate financial responsibility in its promotion of Chris and Luke, First USA remains one of the world leaders in issuing credit cards to college students, who often perceive plastic as easy money. Nellie Mae's recent analysis of student credit showed, for example, that one in three college students has four or more credit cards and that average credit card debt among students has soared nearly 50 percent from $1,879 to $2,748 since 1998 (Nellie Mae, 2001).

Chris and Luke's marriage to First USA was treated in the media and within marketing circles as a heartwarming example of the ingenuity and the entrepreneurial hustle that make the United States great. The morning after graduation, Chris and Luke did 30 consecutive interviews in five hours with television shows across the nation. They were featured in *USA Today* and *Teen Newsweek*. According to their publicists, the pair reached 50 million listeners, viewers, and readers during their first two days as "America's First Corporate-Sponsored College Students" (Barrett & McCabe, 2001b).

But for all the hoopla, Chris and Luke also became spokesguys for a darker side of the entrepreneurial spirit—the growing commercialism of schools and the conscious targeting of students to capture them as cradle-to-grave consumers. "We've gotten to the point where students don't mind being used," says Andrew Hagelshaw, executive director of the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education. "They don't see anything wrong with using themselves to advertise for their sponsors" (Zernike, 2001).

To gauge the public visibility, prevalence, and impact of different types of commercial activity in schools, the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education has tracked and analyzed a steady rise in media citations of this subject from 1990 to 2001. Our recent review of reports on school commercialism—in the popular press and in education, business, and advertising literature—found, for the first time, declines in the overall number of annual citations but an increase in attention to certain key issues.

Program and Activity Sponsorships

If universities follow the lead of a group of central Arizona high schools, the Big Ten someday could be known as the Boston Chicken Conference; Stanford could send its scholar-athletes to defend the Pac-Bell Championship instead of a PAC 10 crown.

"I can't see a downside to it," said Mike Kinnison, an executive of Wells Fargo, after his bank announced it paid $12,000 for naming rights to a new high school athletic conference in central Arizona. "The publicity alone, I don't know how much that would cost" (Roberts, 2001).

Corporations pay for or subsidize school events, activities, or scholarships in return for the right to associate their names with a good cause and to increase brand recognition in important market segments. Unfortunately, corporations also target classrooms, playgrounds, or athletic fields to tap captive, impressionable audiences.

In California, some high schools rich in athletic talent are known as "shoe schools" because Nike, Reebok, Adidas, and others give their products to students in hopes of courting future superstars. "The shoe companies are using the high school programs to increase their visibility, and that has created an uneven playing field," says Dean Crawley, a retired commissioner of the California Interscholastic Federation (Davidson & Spears, 2001). Athletic Director Jim Perry of La Quinta (California) High School says that shoes even play a role in school choice. "Open enrollment and shoe companies allow parents to shop their kids around for exposure and benefits, and that makes me sick" (Davidson & Spears, 2001).

Exclusive Agreements

In March, Coca-Cola announced it was backing away from the exclusive pouring rights contracts it pursued with schools during the past several years. The company said that it would allow competing drinks such as juice, water, and vitamin-rich products into school vending machines where it was a supplier. Coke executives also told the media that they were urging local bottlers to let schools limit sales of soft drinks at lunch and remove corporate branding from the fronts of vending machines (Toppo, 2001).

The change came after years of growing criticism about soft drink sales in schools. Two months before Coke's announcement, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2001) criticized schools for sending mixed messages about nutrition by selling sodas and snacks on campus and asked Congress for authority to regulate food and beverage sales in schools. The request was a clear warning to Coca-Cola and other soda producers and a response to studies showing that sodas have negative nutritional value and that as little as one can of soda a day contributes to teen obesity (Ross, 2001; Toppo, 2001).

Despite the much-publicized policy shift, Coca-Cola officials said this summer that they would continue to sign exclusive contracts if local school boards wanted them. More than a few school boards apparently did. In Maryland, school administrators and such organizations as the National Association of Secondary School Principals joined forces with local bottlers, vending machine lobbyists, and Channel One to defeat a bill aimed at limiting commercialism in Maryland public schools (Manning, 2001).

Incentive Programs

Principal Jan Britz of Simi Valley (California) High School became a hit with her students last April when she waded into a tub of specially cooked noodle soup during an assembly and sang a rendition of the alternative pop hit "Pretty Fly (for a White Guy)" (Haight, 2001).

The stunt was one of several that a local radio station required southern California high school students to arrange to compete for an all-expenses paid prom at Six Flags Magic Mountain. Among other things, students had to write down every artist and band played on the station between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. on a weekday and get on television holding a sign that included the names of the radio station, their school, a rock group, and two local disc jockeys.

Corporate incentive programs—especially for reading—have become part of the education landscape. One of the best known is Pizza Hut's Book It! program. Last year, former U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley teamed with Pizza Hut representatives on a four-day back-to-school bus tour. The "Success Express" made stops in 15 cities promoting reading—and pizzas (Book It!, 2000).

Appropriation of Space

Corporations are moving into school space by using school facilities for commercial activities and placing advertisements on rooftops, bulletin boards, walls, and textbooks. Corporate sponsorships have paid for everything from $15,000 electronic scoreboards to seat cushions during the past year; the media produced more stories dealing with this issue than during the three previous years combined.

One area of concern was the increas- ing use of student-targeted publications by the entertainment industry to advertise violent R-rated films. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (2000) criticized the entertainment industry for the practice in a follow-up study on the 1999 Columbine High school shootings ("Studios Should Not Sell Violence to Kids," 2000).

An emerging appropriation of school space occurs on schools' Web sites. Utah's Jordan Board of Education announced last April that it would place banner ads and links to Internet retail services on school Web sites. Board members said they hoped the "e-advertising" tactic would create "a cash cow for student programs" ("E-Commerce Guidelines," 2001; Toomer, 2001).

Probably the most controversial appropriation of space last year was a program by Philip Morris to give away 13 million textbook covers. The brightly colored covers were distributed by Cover Concepts of Braintree, Massachusetts, and carried Philip Morris's name with a picture of a young snowboarder beneath the words: "Don't Wipe Out. Think. Don't Smoke." A history teacher in Mesa, Arizona, used the covers as part of his lesson on tobacco's role throughout U.S. history and asked students whether they knew about subliminal advertising. When several said the snowboard resembled a lighted cigarette, teacher Mike Evans helped his class organize a press conference that prompted Mesa school administrators to recall the covers (Spethmann, 2000). Similar controversies surrounded Philip Morris give-aways in other states, including California, Rhode Island, and Utah (Groves, 2000).

Sponsorship of Educational Materials

Corporations and trade associations continue to supply schools with materials that purport to offer educational content. A prominent example from the past year was in Stockton, California, where several corporate sponsors teamed up to produce a 27-minute educational video entitled "Sally Says Your Manners are Always Showing." Stockton's Food4Less grocery chain and Brower Durable Transmissions funded the video and an accompanying workbook, which featured the two businesses. Local Head Start classes and lst graders in the Stockton and Lodi Unified School Districts received copies of the videos, and cable giant AT&T Broadband broadcast the program on local cable channels (Benston, 2000).

Electronic Marketing

Channel One, the commercial television venture that pioneered electronic marketing, remains a leader in the field with access to 8 million teenagers in 12,000 elementary and high schools. In March, Channel One signed a multiyear programming deal with the National Basketball Association that allows it to cover all major events of the NBA and WNBA and to feature players from both leagues as cohosts on its programming (Shirkani, 2001).

Another commercial television venture, DirecTV, announced in May that it would give educational programming to up to 50,000 K–12 schools and fit 2,000 schools in low-income areas with the equipment needed to access the programming. Gina Magee, senior public relations manager for DirecTV, said that the company introduced the scheme for philanthropic reasons. Most of the 65 channels in DirecTV's school choice package, however, include advertising (DirecTV, 2001).

Leading electronic marketing efforts have been in the computer field, where corporations have provided equipment in return for rights to target students with advertising. Two key players, ZapMe! and N2H2, were dealt setbacks in 2000–2001. N2H2 agreed to remove banner advertisements from computers used by 47,000 students in Seattle after a citizens' movement criticized the practice (Ervin, 2001), while ZapMe! changed its name to rStar and announced it was getting out of the education business (Benner, 2001). Consumer advocate Ralph Nader once described ZapMe! as a "corporate predator" for bombarding school computers with advertisements and collecting online profiles of students (Ruskin, 1998).

Privatization

Media attention to the management of public schools—especially charter schools—by private, for-profit corporations or other nonpublic entities has been intense during the past year, receiving more media citations than any other commercial activity in schools.

On May 2, 2001, Indiana became the 37th state, along with the District of Columbia, to pass a charter school law (Garrett, 2001). Charter school legislation often is the legal framework used by for-profit education management firms to conduct business. Since the first charter schools began operating eight years ago, 2,073 schools have opened, mostly in Arizona, Michigan, California, Florida, and Texas. The nation's largest for-profit education management corporation, Edison Schools, operates 113 charter schools with more than 57,000 students and is scheduled to take over another 17 schools in Las Vegas and Miami soon (Edison Schools, 2001b; Heins, 2001).

Edison, however, is under pressure. The San Francisco Board of Education conducted an investigation last spring into charges that Edison violated state education policy and discriminated against minority and special education students to inflate performance ratings. The board gave Edison 90 days to make improvements, then voted in June to sever its contract (Guthrie, 2001). Edison Charter Academy eventually was allowed to stay open under a new contract with the California Board of Education ("Edison Wins Charter to Keep School Open," 2001), but voters in New York dealt Edison another blow in March by rejecting the company's bid to take over five public schools (Chiles, 2001). Despite Edison's troubles, the company continues to expand. In June, a new school management company, LearnNow, merged with Edison (Edison Schools, 2001a).

A recurring point of contention about for-profit school firms is how to assess performance. Edison touted its academic success in a series of press releases last year. Critics, however, contended that those pronouncements were based on internal data framed to make Edison look good (Safer, 2001).

Fund Raising

School fund raising used to mean bake sales or car washes. These days, fund raising is big business. Students, parents, and members of the public routinely collect product labels or cash register receipts from particular stores to help raise money for school operations or extracurricular activities.

In upscale La Canada Flintridge, California, the latest fund-raiser was a black-tie ballroom gala packed with more than 600 donors that netted $200,000 for local public schools. But fund raising often underscores inequity. In nearby Inglewood, California, an urban district filled with low-income students, PTA groups raised only about $60,000 all year (Fox, 2001).

Future Trends

During the past year, the media have focused less attention on such commercial activities as corporate-sponsored programs and electronic marketing in the schools but more attention on privatization and appropriation of school space. Two possible explanations for these trends emerge.

One is that growing resistance to school commercialism is beginning to take effect. The citizens' movements that plagued Edison Schools and Philip Morris are signs of that resistance. So, too, were such legislative initiatives as the attempt to pass a bill to shield schools in Maryland from commercializing activities and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's efforts to convince Congress to impose greater control over nutrition in schools.

Another possible explanation is that schools are becoming so highly commercialized that corporate encroachments may no longer be news. When commercializing activities in schools become commonplace, those efforts tend to lose their news value. The norm is not news. Perhaps the trends reflect a little of both: inroads by opponents of commercialism and an acceptance of commercialism as the norm.

Of particular note again this year was the lack of voice in the education media on commercializing activity in schools. With the exception of a sharp increase in articles on appropriation of space in 2000–2001 and mild ongoing interest in the privatization issue, education journals have largely ignored school commercialism.

This year's report underscores the need for a serious, systematic look at the impact that commercialism is having on the nature of teaching and learning and on the ability of schools to achieve high levels of academic performance.

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