Commercialism Is Rampant In The Schools

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Is your schoolchild watching too much television? Eating too many junk foods and drinks instead of what's healthy? Nagging you to buy expensive sneakers? Too easily swayed by advertising? If so, why are the schools encouraging all those things?
Commercialism in the public schools is "widespread and on the rise," according to a recent report of the Government Accounting Office requested by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. Advertising hits the school children hard, in signs on school buses, in the classroom, through exclusive soft drink contracts, and through the in-class television program called Channel One, which includes two minutes of commercials every school day.

In-school commercialism exists in all 50 states, but only 19 states regulate in-school commercial activities. There is a wide variety in the way school policies address this issue.

Michigan fails to regulate commercial activities at all, while New Mexico specifically allows advertising on school buses. California, New York, Florida, Illinois and Maine have policies expressly permitting or prohibiting at least three types of commercial activities.

New York generally prohibits commercial activities on school premises. In California, school boards must hold hearings before approving many commercial contracts.

In 1994 a preschool teacher launched the fad of featuring brand- name products in a children's book. After it was turned down by 35 publishers, her "M&M's Brand Counting Book" became Charlesbridge's biggest seller.

Now we see children's books featuring many brand-name candies and snacks such as Froot Loops, Cheerios, M&Ms, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish, Reese's Pieces, Skittles, Hershey's chocolates and Oreo cookies. This trend has become popular with some preschool and kindergarten teachers who say they like the books because the children can count the candies or pieces of cereal and then be rewarded by eating them.

More recently, brand-name books have been turning up in elementary school classrooms. Titles include "Reese's Pieces: Count by Fives," "Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bar Fractions Book," and "Skittles Math Riddles."

Not everyone approves of this trend. Some specialty children's bookstores have refused to stock these books and some teachers have described them as "an abuse." Some parents, pediatricians and educators worry that such books "will engrave snack food brands in toddler's impressionable minds, hook them on junk food, and lead to eating problems later in life."

Though books peddling brand-name products have sold millions of copies ("The Cheerios Play Book" has sold 1.2 million copies) and have been published by major publishing houses, some publishers disapprove of the trend. A spokesman for Random House's children's division called the books "advertising and P.R. for the food manufacturers, and as such, vaguely reprehensible."

Classroom commercialism began with when an outfit called Channel One began offering schools free television equipment in exchange for airing 12 minutes of programming, including two minutes of commercial advertising, in class every school day. Since 40 percent of middle and high school students nationwide now watch these commercials every day, corporations lined up fast to pay prime-time rates to peddle their products to captive student audiences.

Channel One's commercials advertise junk foods, soft drinks, video games, expensive sneakers, movies, magazines, and TV sitcoms. The most objectionable are the many hard-sell ads for movies and television shows that contain vulgarities, obscenities, blasphemies, sexual innuendoes, disrespect for parents, or violence.

The legacy of Channel One is that Coke, Pepsi, Burger King, Nike, Kellogg and other corporations are now paying schools to place their ads in hallways, gymnasiums, cafeterias, and on school buses and book covers. Multi-million-dollar contracts have turned some schools into virtual sales agents for Coke and Pepsi.

One 10-year, $8.4 million contract requires a Colorado school district to sell 70,000 cases of Coke products per year. A letter from a district official to school administrators urged them to meet sales goals by allowing students virtually unlimited access to Coke machines, locating the machines where they will be accessible to students all day, and even allowing students to drink Coke products in class.

Some school boards and parents are striking back against this tide of commercialism. The Bucks County (PA) School Board voted 7-0 in September to reject Channel One because of its "heavily commercialized content."

ZapMe!, another corporation that offers computer equipment to schools in return for advertising to captive students, announced after its stock took a nose-dive in October that it will turn the company toward a new direction.

Even some students are waking up to how they are being used. An enterprising high school sophomore in Oil City, PA has created a web site to expose what he calls the "problem" of Channel One, principally its advertising for "junk food, shoes and video games."