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Ads in School

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Arizona State University education professor Alex Molnar is right to be concerned about the consumer culture in public schools. His battle against advertisements and other corporate takeovers in schools is an uphill one, however, unless patrons and the community at large are willing to make greater commitments to their local schools.

Corporate-sponsored lessons raise definite concerns. There is something unseemly about convincing impressionable youngsters to accept the corporate explanation without providing a competing view. Conscientious teachers provide that alternative view.

What is more difficult for teachers to combat is the pervasive advertising that comes on the bodies of the students; the legions of Tommy Hilfiger or other labels on clothes, shoes, and bags. Corporations don't need to do intensive marketing within schools, they have students to do the work for them.

Still, just say the word school uniform and a host of parents will immediately line up at the front office to opt their student out. Therein lies one part of the problem: The consumer culture is often a spillover from the home. Corporate-sponsored lesson plans are no more insidious than parental claims that wearing the same pricey designer label as every other student is a form of "free expression."

Another part of the problem is the ever present issue of funding. Tax monies can only be stretched so far, and it makes fiscal sense for schools to build partnerships with generous private sponsors. Those sponsors provide numerous enhancements a school might not otherwise be able to afford. The clearest example is Channel One.

The media giant behind the program provides televisions and VCRs in exchange for the schools' commitment to show its 12-minute news program at some point in each school day. Two of the 12 minutes are advertisements aimed at students. Many parents

understandably object to the Channel One program, but for schools with limited budgets it is difficult to pass up an offer of free TVs and VCRs in every classroom.

Molnar's cause is a legitimate one. Most schools recognize the problems, but can also attest to the benefits of corporate freebies. Business sponsorships provide equipment and opportunities the schools might not otherwise be able to afford. Convincing the corporations to give without allowing the business to emblazon its name on anything that isn't nailed down takes great skill, and a strict policy on advertising in the school. It also requires a commitment from parents and taxpayers in the community to support the school's policy by replacing lost corporate contributions with large donations of their own, whether time, talent or money.

Advertising-free schools are the ideal. Achieving the ideal requires significant, ongoing community involvement.