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Canada Tunes into TV – And Ads – In the Classroom

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Are five commercials a day in the classroom all that bad for students?

Canadians may find out this fall, when several dozen schools plan to debut the Youth News Network, a 12-1/2 minute mix of news and ads beamed to school TVs daily.

In return for tuning in, schools will receive a windfall: TVs, a TV-production studio, and a state-of-the-art computer lab. But even as schools are signing on, the prospect of ad-driven newscasts is sparking controversy over whether access to news broadcasts and equipment is worth daily sales pitches to young people already inundated with commercial messages.

Here in this Toronto mega suburb, Peel District School Board trustees voted this month to have Meadowvale Secondary School test YNN starting in October.

"This six-month pilot is an extended 'test drive' to determine the value of the program to our students," board chairwoman Janet McDougald said in a release. "After all, how can we judge a program until we see it in action?... This is in in no way a 'done deal.'"

Principal Laurie Pedwell, new to Meadowvale this year, was initially neutral about the YNN project she inherited. She has been won over by the potential "positive learning outcomes" she sees, including greater news awareness and "community building" as students use the video studio to produce programming about school activities - showing the yearbook editor on camera, for example, or the creation of a Web site.

Meadowvale has long been strong on technology, Mrs. Pedwell says, but the equipment from AEP, which they've had since February, is "better than anything we

could ever afford." The high-tech bonus comes at a time when school finances across Ontario are tight because of government spending cuts.

Despite such benefits, the YNN concept has drawn widespread and adamant opposition from groups such as the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the Roman Catholic bishops' conference -bodies AEP officials dismiss as "special-interest groups."

"There should be no advertising in the classroom, certainly not during class time," says John Pungente, president of the Canadian Association for Media Education Organizations. "There's no question of the importance of state-of-the-art technology in schools, but that should be paid for with money from the province.... We don't sell our children to advertisers."

It's an issue Americans have been grappling with ever since a similar daily broadcast, Channel One, was launched in the United States a decade ago. It now airs in 40 percent of US middle and high schools with an audience of 8 million daily. Channel One continues to face criticism for bringing soda and clear-skin ads -along with news - into schools.

Athena Educational Partners, a private firm in Montreal, has been campaigning to launch YNN in Canada throughout the 1990s, amid questions from critics about how the company can afford to keep pushing this project. The firm found more takers when it sweetened its deal with equipment beyond just TV sets. AEP president Rod MacDonald says that with the dozen or so schools across Canada that have agreed to be guinea pigs, "we already have enough" to start production, but predicts that by launch time, about 40 schools will have signed up.

Revenue from sales of 30-second ad spots - at undisclosed rates - pays for the video and computer equipment as well as funding newscast costs. AEP's partner in YNN, Telescene Film Group, a film and TV production company, will produce the newscasts.

Students at Meadowvale are already divided over YNN. Shaun Abbas, a student member of the Meadowvale school council, plays down the threat of commercialism. "In our media literacy classes we're taught how to pick apart commercials," Shaun says. "We know what they're trying to do.... We're not mindless drones. "The small minority who oppose the project forget about the news in the program, and they focus only on the commercials."

Lindsay Porter, who graduates this year, says the opportunities the new equipment provides are "cool," but adds "I just think it's at the wrong cost." She has been active this year in a student group called SAY NO - Students Against Youth News Network Organization - and says the group is planning "walkouts and such for this fall." "I don't think [the pilot program] will go past the six months," she says.

Lindsay is skeptical that students are that well able to "decode" commercials. "No one would admit to being taken in by corporate advertising." The bottom line: "School and church should be a sanctuary from commercialization," she says.

AEP's Mr. MacDonald isn't rattled by such opinions - "We will make converts out of our critics."