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Commercialism in Education Research Unit

*****NEWS RELEASE*****

from the **Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU)**

and the **Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL)**
at **Arizona State University**

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**HIJACKED: COMMERCIAL INTERESTS NAME BUILDINGS,
SELL PRODUCTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

TEMPE, Ariz.— Commercialism now saturates America’s schools, according to “What’s in a Name: The Corporate Branding of America’s Schools,” the Fifth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, Year 2001-2002, produced by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory’s Commercialism in Education Research Unit (EPSL/CERU). EPSL is based in the College of Education at Arizona State University.

The increasing number of schools that sell naming rights to corporations symbolizes the way commercialism has become a routine part of the experience of school children. For example, a school in Brooklawn, N.J., sold naming rights to its new gymnasium to a local supermarket chain, whose name now adorns the facility; Thompson Middle School in Newport, R.I., sought to raise \$1 million for facilities by auctioning off the placement of business names and logos on such things as individual books to entire school buildings, and the Omaha, Neb., school district plans to replace its high school gym floor with up to ten corporate logos at \$10,000 each.

Public Investments Hijacked

“Commercial interests have hijacked public investments in schools to promote their self-interests,” says the report’s author, Professor Alex Molnar. This flood of commercial activity is likely to breed cynicism and to undermine critical thinking and intellectual rigor.”

The report is conducted by doing database searches of popular, business, marketing, and education publications. The most frequent source of citations involving schoolhouse commercialism is the popular press. Business and marketing press sources also yield a substantial number of the citations. The education press, however, appears to largely ignore commercial activity in education, as it has in previous years. The report analyzes eight categories of commercial activity:

1. sponsorship of education programs and activities,
2. exclusive agreements with marketers to distribute only their products (such as exclusive soft drink dispensing contracts),
3. incentive programs that reward students with commercial products for achieving certain academic goals,
4. appropriation of public school space by commercial entities promoting their names, brands, logos, etc.,
5. sponsorship of educational materials and curricula, often with material biased toward the commercial interests of the supplier,
6. electronic marketing targeted at schools and students,
7. privatization, and
8. fundraising.

For most of the last decade, media references to these eight forms of schoolhouse commercialism have been steadily rising. In 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, however, media citations in a number of categories have declined. Nevertheless, the number of citations found during 2001-2002 is greater than the number of citations recorded in 10 of the preceding 13 years studied.

Although critics face severe challenges, efforts to resist commercialism appear to be increasing. School boards, including Seattle, Los Angeles, and Madison, Wis., for example, have implemented limitations on commercial activities, banning exclusive agreements with soft drink companies, and in some cases, ordering the removal of, or limitations on, school advertising.

Public Responsibility Privatized?

Schools Superintendent John Kellmayer, at the Brooklawn, N.J. school district that sold the rights to name its gymnasium to the town's ShopRite supermarket, acknowledged that selling a school's naming rights represented "the privatization of public responsibility." "We'll be the first school district to be branded with a corporate logo. You hope children can become sophisticated enough to deal with it," he said.

Yet such "sophistication" may have its price. According to Professor Molnar, "We might just as well say that we hope our children become cynical enough to dismiss such adult behavior with a wink and a nod. At a time when adults talk at length about the need to teach virtue and character in the schools, incidents such as these teach children about what adults actually mean by 'virtue' and 'character'."

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) conducts research, disseminates information, and helps facilitate a dialogue between the education community, policy makers, and the public at large about commercial activities in schools. CERU is the only national academic research center dedicated to schoolhouse commercialism.

Visit the CERU website at <http://schoolcommercialism.org/>

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), the Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA), the Education Policy Reports Project (EPRP), the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), and the Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU). The EPSL is directed by ASU Professor Alex Molnar.

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