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Savvy School or Capitalist Tool?

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The names of major U.S. corporations are routinely splashed across the front of professional sports stadiums, from the Arco Arena to Enron Field to 3Com Park. Soon, a California school district could enjoy a similar fate.

Officials in California's Belmont-Redwood Shores district are weighing a proposal to offer corporate and philanthropic sponsorships of the district's six elementary and middle schools to lessen the blow of statewide budget cuts.

The proposal could bring as much as \$1 million to the district, which stands to lose \$4 million, or 20 percent, of its \$20 million annual budget under Gov. Gray Davis' proposed spending plan.

"That's a very large hit to take," said Anne Campbell, superintendent of the Belmont-Redwood Shores School District.

Increasingly, the naming rights to aspects of American society that were previously off-limits to corporate sponsorship have been auctioned off to the highest bidder -- and not just in the world of professional sports.

Entire towns have sold their naming rights. In 2000, the town of Halfway, Oregon, became the first official "dot-com" city when it temporarily changed its name to Half.com, in collaboration with a Philadelphia Internet startup. In exchange, the town received \$75,000 and 22 computers for the local elementary school.

Corporate messaging has also found its way into the public schools, where ads and logos can be seen in cafeterias, buses and even textbooks, as well as on soft-drink machines and scoreboards.

Advertisers sponsor programs like Channel One, the controversial television service that gives schools free televisions in exchange for delivering ads to grades 6 through 12.

Across the nation, more schools are raising money by granting naming rights to corporations, according to an annual report (PDF) by Arizona State University's Commercialism in Education Research Unit.

Last year, New Jersey's Brooklawn School District sold the naming rights of its elementary school gymnasium to grocery store chain ShopRite for \$100,000.

When Thompson Middle School in Newport, Rhode Island, needed to raise \$1 million for its facilities, the school district proposed auctioning the right to put corporate ad logos on anything from books to entire school buildings.

However, until recently, the right to name an entire school after a company was considered beyond the realm of propriety.

If the California proposal passes, the Belmont-Redwood Shores School District will become the first district to sell naming rights to an entire school.

Advocates say that corporate sponsorship can help cash-strapped schools generate enough revenue to maintain high-quality education.

But critics maintain that to license naming rights to corporations is to exploit students, who could become captive audiences to brands in the classroom.

"This school district has sunk to new depths in crass commercialization in licensing naming rights to an entire school," said Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, a watchdog group that tracks commercialization in schools.

Naming school facilities after CEOs and corporations, instead of after public heroes and civic leaders, sends a misguided message to students, Ruskin said. "It teaches kids that what matters is not content of character but the depth of your wallet," he said.

Brita Butler-Wall, executive director of the Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools, said school districts shouldn't be allowed to sell naming rights to the public.

"Public schools belong to the public," she said. "It is absurd to sell them for commercial gain."

District officials say it's unlikely that the school board will grant full naming rights for an entire school, since most of the district's schools are already named to honor individuals who have made significant civic contributions. However, the board is likely

to approve measures that would allow a corporation to adopt a particular program, like a school music department.

"To all of sudden change a school's name because someone gives you some money, that would be something to think about," Campbell said. "I would be very surprised if our board approved this."

The board will seek guidelines when it meets next month before taking any action. These guidelines will help the district determine which corporations might be eligible for sponsorship. A tobacco company would most likely not be granted naming rights, for example.

"There are some (corporations) whose mission will not be as compatible with a school's mission as others," Campbell explained.

Still, critics say the additional revenue gleaned from corporate sponsorship won't be enough for schools to overcome the long-term costs of losing credibility. What's needed, they say, is additional federal funding to prevent schools from seeking corporate sponsorship.

"(Selling naming rights) is a shortsighted solution to school funding," Butler-Wall said. "This really lets the lawmakers off the hook."

"Parents and other stakeholders need to be strong advocates for adequate, stable public funding," she added. "That includes making corporations pay their fair share of taxes. When a large corporation doesn't pay federal taxes, it does impact schools."

However, cash-strapped school district officials say they can't afford to count on public money to pay their bills.

"As corporations start to become more involved, I would hope that they would become very powerful allies and become advocates of public education," Campbell said. "I think that schools are going to have to figure out how to provide services to kids with very limited public resources. I think they are going to get creative."