
In These Times, Mt. Morris, IL

Teaching Commercialism

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Remember the field trips you took in elementary school—maybe to the fire department, a farm, a radio station or other places where you learned a bit about how things work?

Well, now those old-fashioned field trips are being updated ... and commercialized. Why send kids to the farm when we can send them to Petco, the national chain that sells animals to kids? Teachers bring classes into the local Petco outlet, where the kids hear a talking parrot, see an exotic lizard, pet a puppy ... and get coupons for free goldfish. “By the weekend,” says a Petco official, “at least 10 [of the kids] will be here with their families to show them what they got to see—and to redeem the coupon.”

Good grief ... they’re turning field trips into come-ons for tiny shoppers, teaching the crass art of consumerism. If we let this go on, they’ll be taking the tykes into toy stores next. Too late. Toys “R” Us already is hosting school field trips, offering a “mighty minds” tour of the store that lets students use the toys, puzzles, art supplies and other goodies for sale there.

This branding of young minds has become its own industry, with companies like the Field Trip Factory operating as go-betweens to link local schools with corporate chains. This one company set up 3,300 of these student tours at Petco stores last school year.

Obviously, the chains get access to impressionable little buyers who’re conveniently delivered to them by their teachers—no advertising campaign could match that. But what do the schools get? In these times of cutbacks in school budgets, they get a prepackaged, cheap outing for their classes. As one school official happily exclaimed about the corporate jaunts, “We can provide kids with experiences at no cost.”

No cost? The cost is in the integrity of the educational experience and in the commercialization of our children. To help stop it, get support behind the Parents' Bill of Rights being circulated by the watchdog group Commercial Alert. Call 503-235-8012.