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ASU Teachers School Needs Real-world Education

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Bob Schuster

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Arizona State University President Michael Crow, who is well on his way to revamping the institution and connecting it with the real world, should take a minute and look over his left shoulder — far left — to see what the old guard at the ASU College of Education is up to.

While the broader education world, from public schools to universities, is reinventing itself, the Valley's biggest training ground for teachers and administrators seems not only stuck in the 19th century but determined to remain there. Indeed, the college's former dean, David Berliner, co-authored a book in 1995 claiming criticism of the nation's public education establishment for its slide into mediocrity was a fraud and that nothing ailed public schools that couldn't be fixed with more tax money.

Berliner, who remains as an administrator at the college, and his colleagues have spent most of the past decade ridiculing reforms such as school choice, academic standards testing and language immersion programs for English learners. In recent years the college's Education Policy Studies Laboratory (www.asu.edu/educ/epsl) has become more a repository of leftist propaganda than a credible source of objective, well-researched educational studies.

In recent months the policy lab, headed by Alex Molnar, has focused on commercialism in education and its adverse effects on children, such as promoting unhealthy eating habits. It's a worthy topic, one well worth serious, exhaustive research, due to the worrisome epidemic of childhood obesity.

But instead of that serious, exhaustive research, the lab has hooked up with a leftist organization called The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, which wants the federal government to restrict private companies' advertising to children. Last week, the lab issued a press release trumpeting CCFC's latest warning: "PARENTS BEWARE: SPONGEBOB MOVIE RIFE WITH COMMERCIALISM."

Yes, this is what your higher-education tax dollars are paying for in Arizona. A rant about the latest incarnation of a marketing technique that's been around since some corporate type long ago figured out that cartoon characters could get kids to bug their parents to buy stuff.

"Citing the film's promotions with Burger King, Kellogg's and Keebler, CCFC is warning parents to beware of the excessive and harmful levels of commercialism in the new SpongeBob SquarePants Movie," states the news release.

Apparently these people have never set foot in a supermarket.

The news release continues: " 'This movie is essentially a 90-minute commercial for junk food,' said CCFC's Dr. Susan Linn, author of 'Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood.' 'Parents who take their children to see the film should expect to be besieged with requests for products from the movie's promotional partners.' "

Now, I have nothing against groups that want to bring parents' attention to any attempts to manipulate their children. But what parent that hasn't been living under a rock is unaware that companies that make products for children are also marketing those products to children?

My wife and I were buying "Star Wars" spaceships for our sons and Barbie dolls for our daughter when they were kids, and we've lately been buying SpongeBob posters, pillows and bath sponges for our grandkids. They want the toys because they love the characters — and what's not to love about SpongeBob?

When we thought the kids had enough of the stuff, we said so, and our kids and grandkids learned an important lesson of childhood: That there are limits.

But the CCFC isn't about parents setting limits for kids. Rather, it's about demanding that government set limits for business. Its Web site, www.commercialexploitation.com, calls on parents to insist Congress slap Federal Trade Commission controls on advertising aimed at children, to urge Federal Communications Commission regulation of the media be tightened and to "demand a congressional investigation of marketing and advertising to children."

I have another plan. Let parents figure out what's best for their children and regulate their exposure to media and child-oriented products. That's called "parenting."

And let the ASU College of Education find better ways to get our children fully literate, including a solid grounding in economics and our free enterprise system. That's called "education."

BOB SCHUSTER PERSPECTIVE EDITOR -