

What's in a Name? The Corporate Branding of America's Schools

The Fifth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, Year 2001-2002

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Executive Summary

Commercial activities increasingly define children's experience of school. The manner and degree to which commerce is woven into the fabric of American schools is evident from the numerous examples provided in *The Fifth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, Year 2001-2002*.

The report examines eight categories of commercialism. One category, the sponsorship of education programs and activities, marked a sharp increase in the number of citations in popular, business, marketing, and education media. The increase is revealed most clearly through widespread reports on the sale of naming rights to school property and events.

Naming Rights

Naming rights, a practice borrowed from the world of professional sports stadium construction, and the erection of public buildings such as convention centers, are usually portrayed as a means for acknowledging corporate contributions to civic institutions. In fact, they allow business to leverage substantial public expenditures in the service of their own marketing goals. Now schools have begun to participate in this practice.

One example is the Brooklawn, N.J., school district which sold the rights to name its new gymnasium to the town's only supermarket.

In addition to sponsorship of programs and activities, the report examines trends in seven other categories of commercialism:

- Exclusive agreements. **Example:** Schools look more critically at agreements granting soft drink companies, like Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola, exclusive distribution rights.
- Incentive programs that reward students with commercial products in achieving certain academic goals. **Example:** The Hartford, an insurance company in Hartford, Conn., rewarded 20 randomly chosen elementary students, who had perfect school attendance records, with a shopping spree at a local mall.
- Appropriation of public school space by commercial entities promoting their names, brands, logos, etc. **Example:** Confectioner Cadbury Schweppes distributed a half-million book covers to middle schools to market its Sour Patch Kids and Swedish Fish candies.
- Sponsorship of educational materials and curricula. **Example:** Lawry's Foods Inc. worked its name into the curriculum of a Los Angeles middle school by sponsoring a one-night, student-run restaurant.
- Electronic marketing targeted at schools and students. **Example:** In Point Breeze, Pa., NetworkNext signed 500 high schools to display "discreet" advertising messages from companies on free mobile computer equipment that would carry the advertising along with lecture content.
- Privatization. **Example:** For-profit school management firms like Edison

Schools continue to produce questionable academic results, operating losses, and controversy.

- Fundraising. **Example:** General Mills' long-standing fundraising program donates money to schools based on the number of special box top coupons students turn in from the company's products—and extended the program now to reward schools that involve parents.

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.

Messages Target Children

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.

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.

Corporate curricula that promote distorted views of important issues do not teach critical thinking. Adding schools to the long list of public spaces that have been given over to the aesthetics and the principles of the marketplace seems certain to encourage the reduction of all issues to matters of buying and selling. The end result seems likely to be a society of pliant shoppers valued mostly for what they can buy rather than one of independent thinkers who can build and maintain a democracy.

Paying a Price for Commercialism

Consider the Brooklawn, N.J., school district that sold the rights to name its new gymnasium to the town's ShopRite supermarket. Schools Superintendent John Kellmayer 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, report author Professor Alex Molnar warns. "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'."

Author Information

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