



**EPSL** | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**  
Commercialism in Education Research Unit

## **Virtually Everywhere: Marketing to Children in America's Schools**

**The Seventh Annual Report on Schoolhouse Commercialism Trends  
2003-2004**

### **Executive Summary**

Schools have become integral to the marketing plans of a vast array of corporations as commercial interests—through advertising, sponsorship of curriculum and programs, marketing of consumer products, for-profit privatization, and fundraising tied to commercial entities—continue to influence public education. The trend persists despite growing criticism of—and to some degree, attempts to resist—practices that create tighter bonds between public schools and private, for-profit corporations. It is driven in large part by continued financial struggles of public school systems to meet the demands of educating children in the face of tighter resources.

For the period from July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2004, media references to schoolhouse commercialism rose in five of eight categories monitored by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory's Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) at Arizona State University. CERU uses media references to measure schoolhouse commercialism by conducting searches on relevant terms in the media databases

Education Index, Google News, and the news, marketing, and business databases of Lexis-Nexis, and counting the number of citations each search produces. The categories are: Sponsorship of Programs and Activities; Exclusive Agreements; Incentive Programs; Appropriation of Space; Sponsored Educational Materials; Electronic Marketing; Privatization; and Fundraising.

The two leading trends uncovered in the 2003-2004 study were growing criticism of marketing practices perceived to contribute to poor health in children, and the rise of virtual charter schools.

Individual school districts, cities, and states passed regulations and laws limiting or banning the sale of junk food, soft drinks, or both on school grounds, citing the danger of increased childhood obesity. At the same time, food industry lobbyists and in some cases school district officials—fearful of lost revenues—resisted such controls.

Separately, as part of a larger trend that saw the maturing of the for-profit public education industry, represented by Education Management Organizations managing public schools or public charter schools under contract, virtual charter schools grew substantially, often enabled by state legislation. The leading firm involved in the industry is K12 Inc., founded and headed by William Bennett, a former US Education Secretary.

The 2003-2004 study found an overall increase in schoolhouse commercialism references of 9 percent, to 5,742 references in 2003-2004, compared with 5264 references in 2002-2003. By category:

- References to Sponsorship of School Programs and Activities rose 9 percent in the 2003-2004 survey, with 1,317 references recorded, making it the largest category of schoolhouse commercialism activities to be reported for 2003-2004.

By comparison, the category recorded 1,206 during 2002-2003. Since 1990, references have risen by 146 percent.

- References to Exclusive Agreements more than doubled compared with 2002-2003, with 560 references recorded, compared with 252, a 122 percent year-to-year increase. Since 1990, references to exclusive agreements have risen by 858 percent.
  
- References to Incentive Programs, which provide some sort of reward in the form of a commercial product or service in return for students who achieve an ostensibly academic goal, such as perfect attendance or increased reading, were essentially flat, dropping by about 0.8 percent to 351 in 2003-2004 from 354 references in 2002-2003.
  
- References to Appropriation of Space—the use of school property to promote individual corporations through mechanisms such as naming rights or general advertising—rose by 87 percent, to 611 references in 2003-2004 from 326 in 2002-2003. Since 1990, such references have risen 394 percent.
  
- References to Sponsored Educational Materials—curriculum materials produced largely by an outside corporate entity for use in public schools—fell 7 percent, to 287 in 2003-2004 from 310 in 2002-2003. References since 1990 have risen 1,038 percent, however.
  
- References to Electronic Marketing using broadcast, Internet, or related media in schools in order to target students as consumers rose 24 percent, to 341 references in 2003-2004 from 276 in 2002-2003.

- References to Privatization—the private management of public schools, of public charter schools—dipped 30 percent in 2003-2004, to 1,100, from 1,570 in 2002-2003.
- References to Fundraising increased 21 percent in 2003-2004 over 2002-2003, to 1,175 from 970.

The study also found widespread references to schoolhouse commercialism issues in the international press, but extremely limited coverage of the topic in the US education press, with only 1 percent of all references being recorded in education publications.