

The Ninth Annual Report on Schoolhouse Commercialism Trends: 2005-2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

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In the year 2006, commercial forces in the nation's schools beat a strategic retreat that, paradoxically, secured their standing. While the soft-drink industry reached a seemingly path-breaking agreement to step back from advertising and selling sugared soft drinks in schools – on the surface, an important victory for opponents of school commercialism – the overall legitimacy of marketing in schools remained largely unchallenged and showed little sign of abating. This was so even though over the past decade and a half commercialism has become increasingly controversial.

Over the course of 15 years of data collected by the Education Policy Research Laboratory, media references to schoolhouse commercialism have generally shown a steady increase in references to all of eight categories: **Sponsorship of Programs and Activities; Exclusive Agreements** (with product vendors such as soft-drink manufacturers); **Incentive Programs** (which link achievement of academic goals with the consumption of commercial products); **Appropriation of Space** (advertising in various forms on school property); **Sponsored Educational Materials** (such as lesson plans and curricula furnished by commercial interests and frequently promoting products or ideas in the interests of their sponsors); **Electronic Marketing; Privatization;** and **Fund-Raising** (in conjunction with commercial product marketing). References to all

eight categories totaled 6,505 in the period from July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006.

Most references have been found in either the general press or presses specific to business, advertising and marketing. Meanwhile, the education press (searched through Education Full Text service), accounted for 1 percent of all references. In recent years, however, the Markets and Industry and Business/Finance News searches have shown a consistent and marked increase in every category, while the Popular Press searches have shown a parallel decrease. These numbers suggest that, to editors working in the business, advertising, and marketing sectors, the subject of schoolhouse commercialism is becoming one of intense interest.

Schoolhouse commercialism results from the volume and intensity of marketing in our society in general and increased focus on children and youth in particular. The hunt by schools for additional revenue also plays a role, as schools perceive a direct benefit from programs that provide them with funds or relieve them of certain expenses.

There is limited evidence that a shift in public consciousness about commercialism is reshaping the way it manifests itself, and commercial interests are responding accordingly, finding ways to reframe their activities in light of such controversy. The most remarked-upon trend in 2005-2006 was the expansion of local and state regulation to curtail the sale and marketing of so-called junk foods in schools, culminating in a voluntary agreement by the American Beverage Association and market leaders Coca-Cola and PepsiCo to ban sugared soft drink sales in schools. The agreement forestalled a threatened lawsuit by consumer groups against the industry. It did not, however, fundamentally challenge the overall legitimacy of marketing in schools.

The 2005-2006 Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism marks the last

one in which the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) relies on measuring media citations to assess schoolhouse commercial activities, because of inherent limitations in the methodology. Future Trends reports will move away from the reporting of numbers of citations and toward a qualitative approach that seeks to analyze and critically interpret the findings that emerge, both through media accounts and through direct, primary source information on the topic.