

Looking for Funds in All the Wrong Places

*Exclusive agreements and incentive programs
may be doing more harm than good.*

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Over the past 20 years, educators have increasingly turned to corporations to raise money by participating in a variety of activities. Some of the projects are laudable, but many are not. One of the most disturbing trends is schools attempting to raise money by engaging in activities that undermine their curricular message and, in some instances, promote unhealthy student lifestyles.

Exclusive Agreements

Shortly after the 1998 school year began, a district administrator in Colorado Springs, Colorado, sent a memo to all principals in the district. The subject: how to encourage students to drink more Coca-Cola. If that sounds like an unusual priority, consider that the administrator was responsible for the district's signing an exclusive contract with Coca-Cola.

The administrator's memo, which attracted the attention of the *Denver Post*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, pointed out that, under the terms of the contract, in which the district agreed to allow only the sale of Coca-Cola products in its schools, students would need to consume 70,000 cases of those products for the district to receive the full benefit of the agreement.

The memo urged principals to "allow students to purchase and consume vended products throughout the day," and to "locate machines where they are accessible to the students all day." The administrator even offered to provide schools with additional electrical outlets if necessary. Enclosed with the memo was a list of Coca-Cola products and a calendar of events intended to help promote them.

The exclusive contract with Coca-Cola is representative of one of the fastest growing areas of schoolhouse commercialism. According to the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, in April 1998 there were 46 exclusive agreements between school districts and soft-drink bottlers in 16 states. By July 1999, a little over a year later, there were 150 such agreements with school districts in 29 states—and the numbers continue to rise.

These contracts can produce situations like that which occurred two years ago at Greenbrier High School in Evans, Georgia, when Principal Gloria Hamilton made international headlines by suspending senior Mike Cameron. He was with a group of 1,200 classmates who lined up in the school parking lot to spell out the word "Coke." It was to be the highlight of Greenbrier's "Coke in Education Day," during which about 20 Coca-Cola executives were on hand to lecture on economics, assist home economics students in baking a "Coke cake," and help chemistry students analyze the sugar content of Coca-Cola. Photographers using a crane were prepared to capture the defining moment on film—when Cameron exposed a shirt that boldly spelled out "Pepsi."

According to Cameron, he not only received a dressing down from the principal in her office, but was told that he was being suspended for disrespect—and for possibly costing the school \$10,000 in prize money offered by Coke to the winning high school in a national marketing campaign.

Newspaper reports of the incident were hardly flattering. Under the headline, "Student's Act of Cola Defiance Was Refreshing," the Norfolk, Virginia, *Virginian-Pilot* editorialized, "Enlightened, responsible corporate investment of time and money can be of significant help to hard-strapped schools everywhere; but to make the boosting of a business a part of the day's curriculum is counterproductive."

Incentive Programs

Close kin to exclusive marketing deals are marketing incentive programs that enlist schools to steer students and their families to certain brands. These programs have long been a staple of corporate marketing efforts in schools. For example, Campbell's Soup's Labels for Education program, launched in 1973, now reaches 50 million schoolchildren, while Pizza Hut's Book It! reading incentive program, launched in 1984, is in 53,000 schools. The popularity of these and other incentive programs, such as General Mills' Box Tops for Education, Giant Foods' Apples for the Students, and AT&T's Learning Points has led to a number of variations. In 1996, Blockbuster video stores launched a program in Hawaii called Viewing Can Reward. In this program, districts received video cassette recorders when their students or family members turned in punch cards showing that a combined total of 5,000 movies or video games had been rented. Also in 1996, Pepsi-Cola initiated a School Caps program in 110 schools. Students were asked to collect blue bottle caps from select Pepsi products and turn them into their school, which then received five cents for each cap.

But while schools may receive some money from such programs, it is the marketers who reap the lion's share of the financial rewards. In 1997 the *Boston Globe* reported that General Mills had "... managed to switch thousands of Special K eaters over to marshmallow-laced Lucky Charms by giving cash to students." The story went on to explain that students at one elementary school had collected 27,000 General Mills box tops (117 per student) as a result of a General Mills promotion that paid 15 cents per box to the school.

Incentive programs are at best considered by some a type of "cause-related" marketing; by purchasing a product or service, customers can promote a worthy cause. For example, Pizza Hut's Book It! program rewards schoolchildren who meet reading goals with Pizza Hut products. The idea is to associate the company's pizza with the desirable social goal of literacy—and at the same time promote its consumption.

Seven Categories of Schoolhouse Commercialism

The Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education has identified seven sometimes-overlapping categories of commercial activity in schools:

1. ***Sponsorship of Programs and Activities.*** Corporations pay for or subsidize school events and/or one-time activities in return for the right to associate their names with these activities.
2. ***Exclusive Agreements.*** Schools agree to give corporations exclusive rights to sell and promote their goods and/or their services in a school or district. In return, the school or district receives a percentage of the profits derived from the arrangement. Exclusive agreements may also entail granting a corporation the right to be a sole supplier of a product or service.
3. ***Incentive Programs.*** These are corporate programs that provide money, goods, or services to a school or district when students, parents, or staff engage in a specified activity, such as collecting product labels or cash register receipts.
4. ***Appropriation of Space.*** Corporations pay for the right to place corporate logos and/or advertising messages on school scoreboards, rooftops, bulletin boards, walls, and book covers.
5. ***Sponsored Educational Materials.*** These are instructional materials supplied to schools by corporations and/or trade associations.
6. ***Electronic Marketing.*** Corporations provide electronic programming and/or equipment in return for the right to advertise online to students, families, or community members.
7. ***Privatization.*** The management of schools or school programs by private for-profit corporations or other non-public organizations.

The Downside

Despite their appeal, incentive programs have a social and economic downside, as General Mills found out when the Catholic Diocese of Gary, Indiana, ordered Box Tops for Education out of its schools because the General Mills Foundation had awarded a grant to Planned Parenthood of Minnesota. (In response, the foundation "phased out" the grant.)

Exclusive agreements also carry a heavy price. Health experts have become increasingly concerned about the rising amounts of soft drinks young people consume, and the consequent harm done to their health. In a period of slightly less than 30 years, the annual consumption per capita of soda more than doubled, from 22.4 gallons in 1970 to 56.1 gallons in 1998. The Center for Science in the Public Interest found that a quarter of the teenage boys who drink soda consume more than two 12-ounce cans per day, and that 5 percent drink more than 5 cans. Girls, although they drink about a third less soda than boys, face potentially more serious health consequences. With soda pushing milk out of their diets, an increasing number of girls may be early candidates for osteoporosis.

Richard Troiano, a National Cancer Institute senior scientist, says that data on soda consumption suggests a link with childhood obesity. According to Troiano, overweight children tend to take in more calories from soda than those who are not overweight. With childhood obesity rates soaring up to 100 percent in 20 years, William Dietz, director of the nutrition division at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suggests, "If the schools must have vending machines, they should concentrate on healthy choices, like bottled water."

Rather than promoting healthy choices, though, it appears that exclusive agreements put pressure on school districts to increase the number of vending machines in schools in order to increase sales of soft drinks. Colorado Springs is just one example. Last year, Daniel Michaud, business administrator for the Edison, New Jersey, public schools, told *The Washington Post* that, prior to signing an exclusive contract with Coca-Cola, few of the district's schools had vending machines. After signing the contract, most district high schools had four machines, middle schools had three, and elementary schools one.

As a student at a Rhode Island high school with an exclusive contract commented, "There's really nothing else to drink."

A High-Stakes Game

It is unlikely that the trend toward exclusive agreements with soft-drink bottlers will abate in the near future. According to G. David Van Houten, Jr., Coca-Cola Enterprises senior vice president: "Schools...are important to everyone, and it has recently become a high-stakes game for that very reason. How much is that [school] business worth? I doubt we'll ever be able to answer that question fully. But we're going to continue to be very aggressive and proactive in getting our share of the school business."

The American people are poorly served when our public schools become educational flea markets open to anyone who has the money to set up a table. But that is precisely what the relentless assault on funding for public education and repeated calls for "cooperation" with the business community are pushing schools to do.

The effort to integrate the schoolhouse into corporate marketing plans by securing control of school-based advertising media may well be the trend to watch over the next decade. If so, we can expect schools to serve as launchpads for marketing campaigns with multiple

tie-ins for a variety of products and services aimed at children and their families. Yet, despite the pervasiveness and rapid growth of schoolhouse commercialism, educators and the education press have been largely silent about or, worse, cheerleaders for this fundraising approach.

The failure of the education community to critically assess the impact of commercial activities on the character and quality of schools and their programs reveals an ethical blindness not worthy of a profession that seeks to serve the best interests of children.

For More Information

The Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education will release its 1999-2000 report on commercializing trends in mid-September. Visit the center's Web site at www.schoolcommercialism.org.