
**Commercialism in Education Research Unit, Education Policy Studies
Laboratory, Arizona State University, Tempe**

**Fifth Annual Report on Commercialism in Schools / The
Corporate Branding of Our Schools**

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Media reports of commercial activities in U.S. schools appear to have leveled off in some categories, but more schools are raising money by granting naming rights to corporations, finds Arizona State University's Commercialism in Education Research Unit in its fifth annual study.

The author reports the results of the fifth annual survey of commercialism in public schools, conducted by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory's Commercialism in Education Research Unit. The survey of media reports from July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002 found that references to corporate sponsorship of programs and activities showed a distinct increase. The article cites examples of schools and districts that have sold corporations the right to put their names and logos on school buildings, gymnasiums, libraries, and instructional materials. Reports of other categories of commercial activity—such as exclusive agreements, fund-raising, and electronic marketing—have leveled off or declined, according to the survey. Even so, the author expresses grave ethical concerns about the pervasiveness of schoolhouse commercialism.

When a school in Brooklawn, New Jersey, needed funds last year to help defray the cost of its new gymnasium, the superintendent borrowed an idea from big-time sports. Just as Milwaukee's new baseball stadium carries the name of Miller beer and the Chicago Bulls' basketball arena is named for United Airlines, so the Brooklawn School District agreed to name the new gym for the only supermarket in town, ShopRite, for \$100,000 (Graham, 2001).

The district didn't stop there. It assigned school board vice president Bruce Darrow to the new post of "Director of Corporate Development." Armed with glossy sales brochures showing the school building emblazoned with the words "YOUR NAME

HERE," Darrow was given the job of selling naming rights for everything from baseball field foul lines to the school's proposed new library.

Brooklawn superintendent John Kellmayer defends the district's decision to sell naming rights:

American corporations spend billions of dollars on the Olympics. All we're saying is, Why don't you spend some of that on our public schools? (Graham, 2001)

The Trouble with Naming Rights

Kellmayer's question is a fair one, but one that may miss the point. With widespread documentation that property tax burdens have shifted away from businesses to individual homeowners over the past two decades, we might ask why corporations have not been spending more on public schools all along—as members of society, not in return for the opportunity to promote themselves.

Yet even that analysis overlooks the chief problem with naming rights, whether in major league sports parks or public schools. Naming rights are usually portrayed as a way to acknowledge a corporation's contributions to a civic institution. In fact, however, they give businesses substantial marketing mileage in return for a comparatively small investment.

For example, Miller Brewing Company will pay \$40 million over 20 years for naming rights to "Miller Park," home of the Milwaukee Brewers and site of the 2002 Major League Baseball All-Star Game. In return for that substantial recognition, the nation's second largest beer manufacturer is paying just a fraction of what Wisconsin taxpayers are contributing toward the cost of the stadium. Estimates of public commitment for the stadium range from the official figure of \$310 million (Ballparks.com, n.d.) to more than three times that amount over 30 years (Murphy, 2001). Yet no one has clamored to name the stadium the more apt "Taxpayers' Park" or "People's Park."

Schools have now joined full swing in the trend once limited to professional sports stadiums and convention centers. Stories of the Brooklawn School District and other districts following the same path show the pervasiveness of the corporate practice of strategic donations that leverage much larger public expenditures for the benefit of private businesses and their owners. Moreover, the actual return to schools often turns out to be strikingly small. The ShopRite agreement "appears unlikely even to begin to pay off the bonds" for the new gym, the Washington Post observed:

The borough's debt will rise from \$82,000 next year to \$182,000 in 2020. The pledge from Jeffrey Brown, owner of six ShopRite supermarkets, including the now-

famous Brooklawn store, comes down to \$5,000 a year, which Kellmayer said will cover maintenance and operation of the gym. (Russakoff, 2001)

Part of a Larger Trend

The proliferation of school naming-rights proposals reflects a larger trend in which schools are becoming subsumed in the corporate branding of virtually every public space. This trend emerged in the 2001–2002 survey of commercialism in schools by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory's Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University.

The study, conducted annually since 1998, searches media databases to document reports of commercial activity in public schools.¹ It monitors eight categories of schoolhouse commercialism: sponsorship of programs and activities; exclusive agreements (for example, when soda companies establish contracts restricting schools from selling competitors' products); incentive programs (which reward student behaviors with commercial products); appropriation of space; sponsorship of education materials (including the creation of curriculums that advance corporate interests); electronic marketing; privatization; and fund-raising programs.

This year's survey revealed some interesting trends. Between July 1, 2001 and June 30, 2002, references to corporate sponsorship of programs and activities showed a distinct increase, underscoring the way corporate branding has penetrated the schoolhouse. For the second year in a row, however, references to some other categories of commercialism showed signs of leveling off or declining.

Program and Activity Sponsorships

Many of the media reports this year involving sponsorship of school activities revolved around naming rights. When Thompson Middle School in Newport, Rhode Island, needed to raise \$1 million for its facilities, the school district proposed auctioning off to corporations for as much as \$250,000 the right to put business names and logos on anything from individual books to entire school buildings (Pane, 2001).

Other schools jumped on the naming-rights bandwagon in the quest for more cash. At least one firm has taken to brokering naming rights agreements between schools and companies. Home Team Marketing, a sports marketing company in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, aggressively worked to create a network of Northeast Ohio schools that it sought to market as a single block to companies looking for new ways to advertise. The firm promised participating schools up to \$30,000 a year once the program got underway (Thomas, 2001).

In Omaha, Nebraska, the school district made plans to rip up a high school gym floor, replacing it with one bearing up to 10 corporate logos to be sold at \$10,000 apiece

(Matscak, 2001). The Lancaster, Pennsylvania, school board agreed to a plan that allowed corporations to hang advertising banners, hand out coupons and other promotional items, and broadcast advertising over the school public address system during games at McCaskey High School in return for sponsoring athletic teams ("SDL OKs Corporate Support," 2001). The athletic director who devised the plan asserted that he was merely borrowing the idea from other schools in Texas and California (Glatfelter & Schweigert, 2001).

Exclusive Agreements

Agreements granting soft drink companies and other marketers exclusive distribution rights within particular schools or districts continue to generate attention. In reaction against such agreements, California legislators weighed a bill that would tax soft drink syrup and use the proceeds to fund anti-obesity programs for children, and the Public Health Institute of Berkeley released a report charging that companies had too much selling and marketing power in schools (Seaton, 2002).

Still, exclusive deals continued to hold sway. Although Coca-Cola announced in March 2001 that it was backing away from exclusive pouring-rights contracts with schools and would not block more healthful drinks such as juices and water from its school vending machines, the soft drink manufacturer continued to look for ways to exercise market leverage with youth outside schoolhouse walls. In Oakland, California, for example, the company promised the city \$500,000 for community youth programs in return for a 10-year agreement banning the sale of competitors' soft drinks on city property (Homsy, 2001).

Incentive Programs

Incentive programs, through which corporations reward students and teachers for achieving certain academic goals, have taken on new wrinkles.

One of the most enduring of such programs, Pizza Hut's "Book-It" promotion, which awards individual-size pizzas to students who complete an allotted amount of reading, expanded in 2001 to include children who aren't yet literate. Younger children participating in the new addition to the program use stickers tied to the public television reading show "Between the Lions" to keep track of books read to them by teachers or parents (Pizza Hut, 2001).

In Hartford, Connecticut, The Hartford Insurance Company rewarded 20 randomly chosen elementary students from the 38 who had perfect summer school attendance records with a shopping spree at a local mall. The 18 students not chosen received free movie passes and a store discount coupon (Hartford Insurance Company, 2001).

Appropriation of Space

Many of the reports on naming rights also reflect appropriation of public school space to convey a commercial message.

A novel and more subtle variation of this strategy emerged in 2001 in the form of the International School Licensing Corporation, a sort of cross-promotional effort between schools and businesses. Under the program, corporations donate a percentage of sales to be distributed to schools. In return, they receive the right to display a star-shaped "America's Schools" logo on their products. Participating schools earn donations by displaying the logo "in school materials, on Web sites or school newspapers, on purchase orders, and in letters to the local PTA" (McKay, 2001). For corporations, the program provides a way to win goodwill—and, they hope, more revenue. "People will buy their products because they support their schools," the program's director told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (McKay, 2001).

Sponsorship of Education Materials

Businesses continue to find ways to insert their brand names into lesson materials. Perhaps mindful of widespread criticism of cellular telephone users who talk while they drive, Verizon Wireless distributed a driver's education curriculum called "Vehicle Intelligence Quest," which "teaches new drivers about wireless safety behind the wheel" (Verizon Wireless, 2002). The lumber company Weyerhaeuser pays teachers to join the company's science center as researchers for six weeks each summer, and the industry group Pacific Logging Congress distributes brochures and photos purporting to depict "environmentally responsible clear cuts." As one critic noted: "If you just start educating people at young ages around these facts, then they accept it as truth" (Moran, 2002).

Electronic Marketing

Electronic marketing citations showed a dip in the 12-month period under study, perhaps due to retrenchment in the Internet industry. One issue that emerged was a recurrent dissatisfaction with Primedia's Channel One commercial television news service, which claims to reach 40 percent of middle schools and high schools in the United States on a daily basis (Nulady, 2002). Several reports took note of schools severing ties with the program.

For example, the Rockwell, Texas, School District suspended broadcasts of Channel One for two weeks in August 2001 and cut its ties with the company entirely in December in response to parent complaints (Mosier, 2001a, 2001b). The Martin County, Florida, school board dropped its contract with Channel One in part because some board members objected to its commercial segments (Chapman & Shah, 2001). Commercial Alert, an anti-commercialism group based in Oregon, gave Seattle schools \$5,000 for

shutting down Channel One, saying that the news program is fraught with commercials for "junk food, overpriced sneakers, and video games" (Nulady, 2002).

Privatization

Public schools and charter schools operated by for-profit corporations dominated media reports on privatization this year. Much of the reporting covered continuing controversy surrounding Edison Schools, the largest operator of for-profit schools in the United States. Edison appeared repeatedly in the news, often in an unflattering light.

At the beginning of 2002, coverage focused on government scrutiny of Edison's accounting procedures. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) announced in May that Edison was settling a complaint charging that about half the company's fast-growing revenue consisted of money that its client school districts paid to others—teachers, bus companies, and cafeteria vendors, for example—on Edison's behalf. (Henriques & Steinberg, 2002)

Edison's strategic response is instructive in understanding the limits, and even the inherent contradictions, in proposals to privatize public education. Historically, the company had articulated its strategy as one based on economies of scale that demanded sharp growth (Molnar, 1999). The company's most recent troubles have led Edison executives to adopt the opposite strategy, cutting back growth targets from 60 percent a year to about 30 percent, "so that it could both reduce the amount of cash it consumes and move toward making a profit" (Henriques & Steinberg, 2002).

Both prior to and following the SEC's action against Edison, there was a sharp spike in coverage of the company, its continuing failure to turn a profit, disappointing test scores at a number of its schools, and its loss of contracts with client schools and school districts as a result. Edison's woes also appeared to prompt some coverage of other companies involved in school privatization.

Fundraising

Long-standing fundraising programs expanded during the 12-month period. For example, the General Mills campaign, which donates money to schools based on the number of General Mills box-top coupons that students turn in, extended the program to reward schools that boosted parental involvement (General Mills, 2001). New programs have emerged that donate funds to schools when people buy through certain retailers, many of which are online (Pep Boys & Electronic Scrip Inc., 2001).

Future Trends

As noted before, with a few exceptions, the overall number of media reports of commercial activity shows signs of reaching a plateau. Criticisms from local communities and activists may account for some of this leveling off. For instance, earlier this year CNN considered a plan to include limited commercial spots in CNN Student News, which airs in high school classrooms (Bauder, 2002). But after a campaign by the California-based Center for Commercial-Free Public Education, the Alabama-based watchdog group Obligation, and others, CNN withdrew the proposal (Heath, 2002; Bauder, 2002).

In Seattle, grassroots organizers helped prod school board members to phase out the commercial news program Channel One and to sharply limit in-school advertising (Ervin, 2001). Although the board did not go as far as some community members wished, the school district's action represented a U-turn from just five years ago, when the district welcomed expanded advertising to raise money.

Although growing wariness about schoolhouse commercialism may explain the leveling off of the number of citations, we must also consider alternative explanations. Possibly, the media have become jaded about the topic of commercialism, so that they now perceive formerly novel activities as routine and therefore unworthy of coverage. In addition, the events of September 11 and its aftermath may have crowded out some coverage during the autumn of 2002.

Another possible explanation is that new, creative types of commercial marketing in schools either eluded the survey's media database searches, or, if found, did not fit clearly into one of the eight categories currently being tracked. For example, the firm Field Trip Factory (www.fieldtripfactory.com) provides schools with free field trips to commercial establishments such as pet stores in the name of teaching about academic subjects such as "animal welfare."

Using secondary sources, such as media reports, is a valuable tool for tracking the growth of schoolhouse commercialism, and provides a benchmark for understanding the phenomenon. At the same time, the technique has limitations. A scientific survey of schools or school districts, supplemented by on-site visits and interviews, would yield a more precise understanding of the extent of commercialism in schools and its effects on students and the quality of education they receive.

A Continuing Concern

Regardless of the exact numbers and means of measuring schoolhouse commercialism, the continued pervasiveness of the practice raises grave ethical concerns. Should we give private companies—whose primary motivation is enhancing their own profits—access to our public institutions of learning? Regarding the Brooklawn School District's decision to sell naming rights for its gym to the ShopRite supermarket, superintendent John Kellmayer acknowledged that selling a school's naming rights represented "the privatization of public responsibility." He added:

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. (Russakoff, 2001)

Such "sophistication" comes at a high price, however. We might just as well say that we hope our children will 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, the willingness to commercialize public schools speaks volumes about what adults actually mean by "virtue" and "character."

Endnote

1 The full text of the What's in a Name: The Fifth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism is available on the Web site of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory's Commercialism in Education Research Unit (www.schoolcommercialism.org).

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