

The Commercial Transformation Of American Public Education

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I would like to thank the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society and your president Deron Boyles for honoring me with the invitation to deliver this year's Phil Smith lecture. Having read Gary Fenstermacher's 1998 lecture I realize that I have some pretty large shoes to fill. I will do my best.

At first glance the subject of commercializing activities in schools seems less important and less central to public education than other, more obviously weighty topics such as racism, technology, economic inequality, or academic standards. Certainly if you had told me when I sat at the feet of Jim MacDonald as a wet-behind-the-ears doctoral student trying to master the intricacies of curriculum theory that I would one day be an expert on curricula such as Lysol's "Germ Alert" I would have laughed. Yet here I am twenty-nine years later about to argue in all seriousness that sponsored material such as General Mills "Gushers" fruit snack curriculum and other commercial activities in the schools are profoundly altering the character of public education, and that this commercial makeover of America's schools is being done with virtually no serious discussion of its consequences.

I come to my exotic expertise quite by accident. In the mid-1970's, while walking through the exhibit hall at an Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development conference, I noticed something odd. McDonald's had set up a booth and was distributing a catalogue of its educational publications. The catalogue itself was attractive. It was designed to look like an old-fashioned composition book with a mottled black and white cover. Inside, I discovered that McDonald's was, among other things, offering free curriculum materials on nutrition and the environment. Nutrition and the environment!

Think about it: children learning about proper nutrition from a multi-national fast food corporation whose food packaging materials were a major source of pollution. The conflict of interest was obvious – yet there was the catalogue being distributed at the meeting of an influential professional association.

When I returned to Milwaukee I asked graduate students in my "Curriculum Planning" class whether or not they had seen instructional materials such as those in the McDonald's catalogue. Their answer was, "All the time." Over time my students brought in boxes of corporate sponsored materials. It was my idea that if such self-interested corporate materials were common in my student's schools it seemed to me that the analysis of these materials should be part of our curriculum class. Thus began my now two-and-a-half decade-long interest in schoolhouse commercialism.

Over the years I have developed a conceptual framework for thinking about the progressive impact of commercialism: marketing to schools, marketing in schools, and marketing of schools. The first category, marketing *to* schools, is uncontroversial. Schools need supplies of every sort, including pencils, desks, books, lunch trays, chalkboards, computers, etc. Schools determine what they need and select vendors based on which one the school believes provides the most value for the money available. The fact that the vendor will make a profit on the transaction troubles no one. This is a good old fashioned arms-length business transaction.

The second category, marketing *in* schools, is problematic for several reasons. No one, even the most ardent capitalist would argue, for example, that children in school are idealized capitalist consumers operating in a free marketplace. In relation to marketers it can not be said that children possess an equal amount of information, or an equal amount of power, or that they are free to enter or not enter into contracts as they choose. In other words, children in school are a captive audience whose immaturity and relative lack of power can be manipulated by advertisers to their advantage. Further, since we encourage children to think that what they are asked to do in school is in their interest, whatever defenses they may have against the manipulations of marketers are likely to be lowered in a school setting, a concern supported by a 1993 study by Bradley Greenberg and Jeffrey Brand that suggested that Channel One encouraged the development of materialistic values. Greenberg and Brand found that children who watched Channel One were more likely than those who did not to agree with the statements "money is everything," "a nice car is more important than school," "designer labels make a difference," and "wealthy people are happier than the poor." [1]

Florid examples of so-called "sponsored educational materials" abound, e.g., a spaghetti sauce science lesson, a potato chip math lesson, a cosmetic company human relations lesson, etc., etc. It is tempting to dismiss such materials as an inconsequential educational side show – goofy aberrations not worthy of serious consideration. I can assure you, however, that these materials are deadly serious business to marketers who now claim to reach millions of children and their parents through such school-based marketing programs. When Willie Sutton the bank robber was asked why he robbed banks he is said to have replied, "because that's where the money is." If Willie Sutton were alive today

there is a good chance he would be in youth marketing. Advertising to children is now a multi-billion dollar industry.[2] In a hyper-commercialized culture, schools are attractive to advertisers because the kids are forced to gather together in one spot for several hours every day and they are, at least relatively speaking, free of commercial clutter. In the words of James Twitchell, author of *Adcult USA*, for advertisers, when it comes to schools, "It doesn't get any better. These people have not bought cars. They have not chosen the kind of toothpaste they will use. This audience is Valhalla. It's the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow." [3]

Marketing products and services is only one type of marketing directed at schools. Ideas and point of view are also marketed. In an age less besotted with commercialism these activities were described as propaganda. In 1929 the "Report of the Committee on Propaganda in the Schools" was presented at the National Education Association meeting in Atlanta.[4] By the mid-fifties in Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the American Association of School Administrators reports "propaganda" had become "free materials." [5] By the 1970's, as Sheila Harty noted in *Hucksters in the Classroom*, [6] "free materials" had become "sponsored educational materials." By the 1990's any company or industry that had a problem or that wanted to establish brand recognition and promote long-term loyalty to its products was likely to have a program directed at schools. Two reports issued by Consumers Union, *Selling America's Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids of the 90's* (1990) [7] and *Captive Kids: Commercial Pressure on Kids at School* (1995), [8] my 1996 book, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (1996), [9] and Deron Boyles recent contribution, *American Education and Corporations*(1998), [10] document the extent to which corporate materials have now penetrated the schools. Which industries and corporations attempt to place sponsored materials in schools? The energy industry does; so do the egg producers, the plastics industry, the extraction industry, the timber and paper industries, the pork producers, candy companies, automobile manufacturers. Virtually any industry you can name is taking aim at schools. This is the curriculum as a flea market open to any special interest with money for a booth. Careful professional assessment of the age-appropriateness, the relative value, and simple truth contained in these materials is often sacrificed in the name of "school-business partnership." Unlike textbooks that are often adopted only after a time-consuming formal review process, corporate sponsored materials often enter the classroom as a form of educational junk mail which an individual teacher uses as she or he sees fit.

Providing sponsored educational materials is one of several mechanisms used by corporations to market in schools. I direct the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CACE>). In each of the past two years we have released an annual report on commercializing trends in American schools. [11]

The reports track seven types of schoolhouse commercializing activity:

1. **Sponsorship of Programs and Activities.** This category includes everything from underwriting athletic events in return for "naming rights" to offering schools

incentives to create activities that showcase a sponsor's products or services. Perhaps the most famous example of the latter is "Coke in Education Day" at Greenbrier High School in Evans, Georgia. In 1998, in an effort to win a national prize and a prize offered by the local Coke bottler, the high school organized a number of events including a photo-op in which students were marched into the school parking lot and formed into the letters "C" "O" "K" "E" as officials invited from Coke headquarters in Atlanta looked on. Senior Mike Cameron wore a Pepsi T-shirt – and was promptly suspended by Principal Gloria Hamilton for disrespect. She also accused him of potentially costing the school a lot of money.

2. **Incentive Programs.** Corporations often attach themselves to a school activity considered valuable, such as learning to read, by offering an incentive if the desired behavior is demonstrated. Perhaps the best known example of a school-based incentive program is Pizza Hut's "Book-It! Program. Pizza Hut provides children with a personal pan pizza as a reward for meeting their reading goals. General Mills' "Box Tops for Education" and Campbell's Soup's "Labels for Education" programs encourage the purchase of corporate products by offering to provide schools with supplies in return for a specified number of cereal box tops or soup labels.
3. **Appropriation of Space.** Schools and classrooms have numerous surfaces that can be used to advertise. Corporations such as Cover Concepts and School Marketing Partners commonly use all hallways, rooftops, school buses, textbook covers, and menus to deliver their message to students.
4. **Sponsored Educational Materials.** As I have already noted businesses and trade associations either produce such materials themselves or hire firms such as Scholastic, Lifetime Learning Systems, and Learning Enrichment, to do the job. Either way the point is to tell the corporate "story," whether it is Exxon discussing the Valdez oil spill or Tootsie Roll providing a history of the chewy brown treat.
5. **Electronic Marketing.** Given the pressure for schools to integrate electronic technologies into their programs, it was inevitable that marketers would seek to use the demand for computers and Internet access to promote products and services. Launched in 1990 by Whittle Communications, Channel One, a twelve-minute current events program with two minutes of commercials, is a pioneer in electronic marketing. The program, currently owned by Primedia, will provide participating schools with television monitors and all of the equipment necessary to pull the program down from a satellite feed – as long as the schools guarantee that about 90 percent of their students are watching 90 percent of the time. It is this contractual guarantee that allows Channel One to charge its advertisers some of the highest rates in the industry. A more recent entry into the field of electronic marketing is ZapMe! Corporation. ZapMe! provides schools with a computer lab and access to an intranet of pre-selected web sites at no charge. However, schools must guarantee that the lab is in use at least four hours each day. The ZapMe! Web portal contains advertising messages and the company gathers aggregated

information on students' web browsing choices that can be sold to third parties.

6. **Exclusive Agreements.** Exclusive agreements has become one of the fastest growing types of schoolhouse commercialism. Over the last two years this category of commercializing activity has been virtually taken over by agreements between soft-drink bottlers and school districts. Although the contract terms vary slightly, essentially, a school district agrees to sell only a particular bottler's products for a specified number of years in return for a guaranteed percentage of the profits derived from those sales. The Colorado Springs school district got considerable publicity in 1998-99 when the school administrator in charge of the district's contract sent a memo to principals warning them that the district was in danger of not meeting its consumption goals and suggesting several ways in which they could encourage students to consume more. He signed his memo "The Coke Dude."

The seventh area of commercialism, privatization, moves us to the third category of commercialism in my scheme, i.e., the selling *of* schools themselves as a product. This is a relatively new phenomenon that first drew widespread public notice in 1992 when Educational Alternatives, Inc. (EAI) signed a contract to run nine Baltimore Public Schools. EAI (now the Tesseract Group) was subsequently forced out of district by allegations of over-billing and under-performing. Chris Whittle launched EAI's principal competitor, the Edison Project (now Edison Schools) in 1991. Originally Whittle's idea was to open a chain of 200 private for-profit schools by 1996. After spending about \$45 million and two years trying unsuccessfully to get his brainchild off the ground, Whittle switched gears and focused on running public schools. [12] At the moment Edison claims to manage 79 schools. [13] The company has yet to turn a profit and its educational performance is most accurately described as mediocre. Nevertheless, the number of firms attempting to find profit in the K-12 public education system is growing. In large measure this growth is being propelled by permissive state charter school legislation and the continuing and well-funded campaign to promote educational vouchers.

The implications of the commercial transformation of American public education are important for a number of reasons. Commercialism erodes the democratic political values that have guided public education in this country since its inception. In their place are market values, i.e., the values of spending and getting. Thus, instead of public education guided by a vision of political equality and social justice we have a vision of the marketplace in which school processes are corrupted and schools themselves may be purchased like other consumer products. This, of course, excludes the majority of citizens who do not have children in schools from any role (except for paying taxes) in shaping the institution.

It is not surprising that there should be pressure to absorb public schools into the marketplace. At the moment, the market appears to be sweeping all non-market values and institutions before it. Even a casual look at the architecture of the age helps make the point. No one who has visited Europe could come away, after having seen the magnificent cathedrals constructed during the middle ages and renaissance, without

understanding that it was religious ideas that dominated European thought during that period. No one who has visited Washington, D.C., or many of the state capitols constructed during the 19th century, could fail to understand that it was political ideas that animated the early American republic. And no one who views the contemporary architectural landscape would miss the point that shopping centers, conference facilities, and office towers devoted to trade are now the dominant form. If I read my architecture accurately, it will take a cultural transformation to protect and extend the public and democratic character of public education. Contemporary culture is dominated by the ethic of consumption.

This has consequences for the way in which children and childhood are understood both in and out of school. In the marketplace children are just another market segment to be studied so that they can be manipulated into thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that lead to the inevitable decision to consume something. The market takes all human desires such as love and transforms them into products that can be bought and sold. Lonely? Buy a candy bar. Feel ugly? Buy herbal shampoo. Feel powerless? Buy a convertible. All of this leads, I think, to a sort of cascading quietism that might be compared to the effect that television viewing seems evoke, i.e., an agitated passiveness. This is the death of the public sphere. It is also, from my standpoint profoundly immoral.

At a time when it is estimated that almost a third of the vegetables eaten by American children are in the form of french fries or potato chips, [14] how can we defend teaching children to eat low fat, low sugar, low salt diets in our curricula while promoting the consumption of soft drinks, candy, and fast food in the policies we implement and programs we accept in our schools and classrooms. How can we have serious conversations about academic standards when more and more school time is devoted to activities that are designed not to increase student knowledge of important subjects but to promote the consumption of this product or that. It is not too strong, I think, to suggest that our children are now routinely, albeit tacitly, viewed as a cash crop to be harvested by adults.

The commercialism engulfing our schools is part of a much larger and long term process. Our market-driven culture is steadily hollowing out humane values and placing mercantile values inside their shell. The principal desire is for more – more televisions, more toys, bigger cars, more clothes and in the end more alienation, more loneliness, and less freedom. David Riesman covered this territory in *The Lonely Crowd* [15] as did Vance Packard in *The Hidden Persuaders*. [16] More recently Sut Jhally has done outstanding work. His video "Advertising and the End of the World" [17] should be required viewing in educational foundations courses. However, despite the power and significance of commercialism in American culture in and out of schools I am struck by the virtual silence of educators on the subject. In doing database searches for each year's report on schoolhouse commercializing trends I have been struck by the virtual absence of any comment, analysis, or discussion of the issues I have discussed today in the educational literature. In my view this represents a failure on the part of our profession to serve as advocates for children, for democracy, and for humane values. We are complicit in the commercial transformation of schooling.

I wish that I could leave you with a hopeful thought. However, in all honesty, I think it unlikely that the commercializing wave will crest soon. For the moment we would do well to inform ourselves, to advocate policies that help protect schools from commercial pressure, and to support political initiatives that show promise for limiting the reach of mercantile activities directed against children.

Footnotes:

[1] Bradley S. Greenberg and Jeffrey E. Brand, "Channel One: But What About the Commercials?," *Educational Leadership* 51 (December 1993 - January 1994):56-58.

[2] Shelly Reese, "KIDMONEY: Children as Big Business," *Arts Education Policy Review* 99, no. 3 (1998): 37-40.

[3] Dan Carden, "Schools Find Soft Drink Cash Refreshing," *The (Bloomington, Ill.) Pantagraph*, 19 July 1998, A3.

[4] Edwin C. Broome, "Report of the Committee on Propaganda in the Schools"(report presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Education Association, Atlanta, July 1929).

[5] ASCD Liaison Committee on Instructional Materials, *Using Free Materials in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1953), and American Association of School Administrators, *Choosing Free Materials for Use in the Schools* (Washington, D.C.: 1955).

[6] Sheila Harty, *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools*(Washington, D.C.: Center for Study of Responsive Law, 1979).

[7] Consumers Union Education Services, "Selling America's Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids of the '90s," (Yonkers, N.Y.: Consumers Union, 1990).

[8] Consumers Union Education Services, "Captive Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids at School," (Yonkers, N.Y.: Consumers Union, 1995).

[9] Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools*(Boulder, Colo.: Westview/HarperCollins, 1996).

[10] Deron Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School*, ed. Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, *Pedagogy and Popular Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

[11] Alex Molnar, "Sponsored Schools and Commercialized Classrooms: Schoolhouse Commercializing Trends in the 1990's," (Milwaukee, Wis.: Center for the Analysis of

Commercialism in Education, 1998), and Alex Molnar, "CashingIn on Kids: The Second Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism," (Milwaukee, Wis.: Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, 1999).

[12] Adam Tanner, "Edison Project's Future Hinges on Financing," *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 December 1994, 9.

[13] Edison Schools, Edison Schools [webpage] (16 December 1999 [cited 22 January 2000]);available from <http://www.edisonschools.com/home/home.html>.

[14] Catherine M. Champagne and H. Raymond Allen, "French Fried Potatoes and Potato Chips as Vegetable Servings: How Much Do They Contribute to the Intakes of Children in the United States?," Poster #30, International Conference Series on Health Promotion Conference on Childhood Obesity: Partnership for Research and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia, May 3-5, 1999.

[15] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953).

[16] Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1957).

[17] Sut Jhally, *Advertising and the End of the World* (Media Education Foundation: Media Education Foundation), video.