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Are Commercialized Classrooms Selling Our Kids Short?

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There is a trend in America that has been on a steady rise for the past decade. It involves the quality of education and may have long-term affects on the lives of the children living in America. It has been studied by several major institutions including universities, consumer magazines, and private organizations. The people conducting these studies all agree that this movement has few benefits. Those who seem to benefit most from this trend are major corporations in America, but at what cost to our children? The trend that is being referred to is the commercialization of the American public education system. While corporations have long been involved in marketing their products to schools through fundraisers, the 1990s saw an explosion of corporations marketing their products to a captive audience – a classroom full of children (Butler-Wall 2008). This increased corporate “sponsoring,” or commercialization of classrooms, throughout public school buildings and product placement in school curriculum has had a detrimental effect on the quality of the education children living in America are receiving. Corporations are not wasting any time placing their advertisements in public school classrooms, district buildings, buses and athletic fields under the guise of being community partners. Those in favor of corporate sponsoring say this is necessary because schools lack the necessary funds for even basic classroom materials. Opponents of corporate sponsoring say we have put American children up for sale to the highest bidder.

The commercialization of education can best be defined as “the practice of global corporations altering or disrupting the teaching and

learning process in schools from kindergarten through college” (Butler-Wall 2008). The people responsible for creating the marketing plans for these global companies have made it clear that it is to their advantage to come into the public schools and advertise their products to students. The attitude among corporations is that school is the best place to test market and introduce new products, to promote sampling and to generate immediate sales. The stated goal of advertising agencies is “to brand children as early as possible to consume their client’s products” (Butler-Wall 2008). When those that make the decisions about school policy allow marketers direct access to students’ minds, it not only denies those students a real education by creating a distracting, cluttered environment, but it also allows corporations to influence students’ behavior with word and image manipulation.

In 2000, The U.S. General Accounting Office released a report on the commercialization of public schools in the United States (Spring 2008). The report is a summary of how “in-school marketing has become a growing industry and companies are now becoming known for their success in negotiating contracts between school districts and beverage companies” (Spring 2008). The soft drink industry is the industry most linked to commercializing classrooms. Statistics in the report show that there are approximately two hundred school districts that have signed exclusive contracts with soft-drink companies to sell their beverages in schools (Spring 2008). Public schools are not becoming affiliated with just soft drink companies for funds. They are allowing such corporations as General Mills, Procter & Gamble, Kellogg’s and the National Coal Foundation to distribute lesson plan materials in their schools (Saltman 2000).

The relationship between public schools and corporations is often described as a partnership. However, a more accurate description of a corporate partnership is the straight promotional efforts of a corporation to get their products into the hands and heads of children while they are in school. These partnerships, which are really corporate sponsorships, are becoming more accepted and “allow major corporations in the United States to appear to support education while

actually engaging in marketing goods, services or corporate images to youth” (Saltman 2000). Researchers have categorized corporate sponsoring in two ways: the community partnership and educative involvement.

The first category of corporate sponsoring is disguised as a community partnership, in which the corporation assists the schools in their districts by donating money or equipment to the schools. The increased presence of corporations in schools is being accepted because of the illusion of funds being contributed to public schools. However, the tax breaks offered to corporations has allowed the removal of huge sums of money from the local tax base. Therefore, what is actually being contributed to the schools is only a fraction of the money being removed from the tax base. In 1989, Wisconsin corporations contributed \$156 million dollars to the public schools. This contribution is a fraction of the amount of the over \$1 billion in tax breaks that Wisconsin corporations received during the late 1990s (Saltman 2000). In his book *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol explains that Pfizer and Monsanto, chemical plants located in East St. Louis, do not pay taxes and have formed their own incorporated towns to serve as tax shelters. It must be noted that no one actually lives in these towns (Saltman 2000). These tax shelters allow corporations to be excused from paying taxes. The taxes not paid by corporations because of loopholes in the law or incentives offered by cities is a major cause of schools not being able to fund themselves sufficiently, especially in urban areas (Saltman 2000). According to Jonathan Wilson, former chairman of the Council of Urban Boards of Education, 30 percent or more of the potential tax base in urban areas of Chicago is exempt from taxes, compared to as little as three percent in adjacent suburbs (Kozol, 1991). Kozol points out that “the soft drink companies haven’t contacted East St. Louis yet. The districts getting the easy money are affluent and high-scoring systems” (Bracey 2002).

A second form of commercialism is educative, which cloaks itself as being educational. It begins when corporations send a complete curriculum to teachers at no cost to the school. Overworked teachers

welcome these packets into their classrooms because all the planning has been done for them. Yet, there is no guarantee that these lesson plans are written by anyone knowledgeable about education. The curricula seem to be just another avenue for corporations to promote misinformation and unhealthy products. General Mills promotes its sugary fruit snack, Gushers, in their curriculum on volcanoes entitled “Gushers: Wonders of the Earth.” This curriculum involves activities using this particular snack. The National Coal Foundation wrote in its learning materials that an increase in carbon dioxide cannot damage the earth’s atmosphere, but rather benefits it (Saltman 2000). In *The War Against American Schools: Privatizing Schools, Commercializing Education*, Gerald Bracey writes that “schools should not be in the position of selling captive students to advertisers, whatever the excuse. They are entrusted with children’s minds and they have no right to sell access to them” (Saltman, 2000) Anyone reviewing the marketing plans by these corporations can see that the goal is for the corporations to make money, not do what is in the best interest of children.

It is in the best interests of our children for them to receive an education that is not funneling them towards fulfilling a role in corporate America. Instead, they should receive an education that develops their critical thinking skills and allows them to develop a more general knowledge base. In addition to blurring the line between pure academics and a corporate agenda, the commercialisation of education is affecting our children in several different ways. These ads are well written and may cause students to desire things they do not really need or which may be detrimental to their health or the environment. Children, especially in the higher grades, know these products are not healthy or environmentally friendly, but when schools endorse these products as a positive thing, it lessens the credibility of the staff and fosters an environment of distrust among teachers and students. These advertisements create friction at home because children are being exposed to products their parents cannot afford to purchase or simply do not want their children to have. In this case, the school district is working in total opposition to the parents’ goals and values (CCCS,

2001).

Commercializing public schools sends a message of incompatibility between the district goals and school goals. Schools foster an environment of cooperation, independent thinking and problem solving. A corporation's goal is to make money and they achieve this by convincing children how to think and feel through cleverly worded advertisements. Manipulating images and words to pressure children into feeling or thinking the same way is the very opposite of the school's goals. In addition to creating an environment of mixed messages, the time children spend watching or reading ads is time taken away from real learning.

As schools become more reliant on corporate donations, it will become difficult to convince legislature that full funding of education is necessary. The limited funds schools currently receive go towards time wasted while students read advertisements and watch commercials that precede educational videos and private news shows. A study done in 1998 by educator Alex Molnar and economist Max Sawicky indicates that when students watch a subscription news programs in school just twelve minutes a day for ten days, it costs U.S. taxpayers \$1.8 billion dollars for the class time. It is easy to see how this wasted time adds up to wasted tax dollars and, more importantly, wasted opportunities for real learning (CCCS, 2001). It will become difficult to justify increased funding of public schools when a portion of what is already received is being wasted on propaganda from corporations. There is no evidence of the amount of advertisements in public schools decreasing or being eliminated all together.

Corporations admit to establishing long term plans for gaining our children's loyalty. Joseph Fenton of Donnelly Marketing believes that "the kids we're reaching are consumers in training" (Consumers Union 1990). Advertisers know that children have tremendous spending power. More than 43 million children attend schools and spend at least 20 percent of their time in school (Consumers Union 1990). They have serious influence over which products become popular and which ones fail in the marketplace. Estimates indicate they are spending

about 15 billion dollars a year on everything from food and beverages to video games and clothes (Consumers Union 1990). This makes children a prime target for corporations to begin familiarizing them with their products and to gain their loyalty. Corporations are gaining this loyalty by putting their marketing propaganda into classrooms disguised as curriculum. Alex Molnar, director of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism at the University of Wisconsin, explains that “companies like to say they are promoting education and school-business partnerships, but what they are really doing is going after the kids’ market anywhere they can” (Manning 1999). They are pushing crass commercialism on our children and equating happiness with material possessions. Children are “then immersed in a culture of materialism and are learning that everything is for sale” (Ince 2004)

A survey of hundreds of American students, most of them over age twelve, was done to establish students’ primary value system. Tim Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College in Illinois and one of the researchers conducting this survey, asked the participants to agree or disagree with statements such as:

1. I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
2. The purpose of life is to be rich.
3. The purpose of life is to contribute to the world.

Kasser explains that scientific research shows us that when children are overly exposed to advertisers’ messages, they eventually adopt the belief that money and products will buy them happiness. This belief system causes many long-term problems for the believer. Kasser explains that “a person whose values are based on the pursuit of money report less happiness and fewer experiences of pleasant emotions (Ince 2004). In fact, he argues, they are “disproportionately afflicted with symptoms of physical distress, such as sore throats, headaches and sore muscles” (Ince 2004). Kasser’s research has also found that high school students who have a materialistic value system are more likely to have sex, use drugs, smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol (Ince 2004).

It is not just the social aspects of children’s development that

are affected by commercialized classroom. The commercialization of classrooms also affects students' cognitive abilities to think critically. Susan Linn, a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School, has been studying how the relationship between schools and corporations has affected education (Ince 2004). She says that being overly exposed to all types of marketing messages undermines a child's ability to think independently and that children eventually accept the advertiser's invitation to "Obey Your Thirst" or to "Just Do It." Unfortunately, just doing it might involve drinking alcohol or a variety of things that may not be what is best for them.

The minds of American children deserve better than to be sold to the highest bidder. Teachers need to be able to teach children in a neutral environment that allows students to explore their world from all angles, not just from the viewpoint of the corporate-sponsored lesson of the week. When corporations, whose only goal is to make a profit, come into the classroom to "educate" our children, they take away our children's right to choose how they see their world and make their own decision about where they fit in it. Corporations that would have children educated to meet their future employment needs create a future generation of non-thinkers, which is the cost for children when business is conducted in the classroom. The marketing plans of corporations rely on getting the public to all think the same way and to believe that they cannot live without their particular product. When school administrators and teachers allow this ideology into the classroom, they take away our children's hope of learning how to ask challenging questions and how to think for themselves. Children do not need a fancy DVD or slick, colorful marketing materials to become educated. They simply need a teacher who cares enough to welcome them into a classroom that allows them to discover themselves and their world without being bombarded with corporate messages on how to think or how to act.

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