

# BRANDED: CORPORATIONS AND OUR SCHOOLS



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## Resources

Alex Molnar, [Giving Kids the Business](#) (1996). Explores a range of commercialism issues.

[Schools Our Children Deserve, Education Inc. & What to Look For in a Classroom](#) All by Alfie Kohn. The first title covers dangers posed by high-stakes testing schemes. The latter two are collections of short essays. Education Inc. compiles many writers and is focused directly on corporate influence. Classroom collects Kohn's essays on numerous educational issues.

**The Center for Commercial-Free Public Education** is the home of Unplug!, a campaign to rid schools of Channel One and much more on combatting school commercialism: [www.commercialfree.org](http://www.commercialfree.org).

**Center for Media Education** works to improve of electronic media for kids: [www.cme.org](http://www.cme.org)

The Consumers Union has produced a comprehensive report: [Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School](#). See: [consumerunion.org](http://consumerunion.org)

[Cashing in On Kids](#), a report from the Center for Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE) is available online: [www.asu.edu/educ/eps/Archives/cashinginonkids.htm](http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/Archives/cashinginonkids.htm)

**“If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come.”** --Mike Searles, former president of Kids-R-Us children's clothing store, on marketing to kids

Competition in the corporate marketing arena is fierce. No news there. But as companies vie for brand recognition, brand loyalties, and market share, schools have emerged as lucrative marketing venues. Ongoing funding challenges faced by public schools have enabled marketers to jump in with "donations"—free or low-cost supplemental materials, equipment, and cash. What does this mean for our kids and schools?

The following excerpt, from a letter to principals of School District 11 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, from John Bushey, the district's director of “school leadership,” demonstrates one effect of corporate influence in our schools. One year into an \$8 million exclusive vending contract with Coca-Cola Corp., Bushey wrote:

Dear Principal: Here we are in year two of the great Coke contract...we must sell 70,000 cases of the product... Here is how we can do it: Allow students to purchase and consume vended products throughout the day. If sodas are not allowed in classes, consider allowing the juices, teas and waters.

John Sheehan, vice president of the Douglas County, Colorado, school board, was the sole dissenter to a 10-year, \$27.7 million deal struck between a three-school district consortium and Coca-Cola. Sheehan explains vividly the challenge of providing quality public education on a tight budget:

Education and marketing are like oil and water. Public education has an agenda that is already crowded enough. When we become marketers and distributors, we confuse our mission. I worry about a time when our educational goals might be influenced or even set by private companies targeting our students with their

own narrow messages. . . Yes, schools need money, but turning to commercial sales for income is a cop-out. It sends the message to our voters and legislators that we can let them off the hook—that advertising and sales of consumer products can fill the gap when it comes to supporting education.

Are corporations, with priorities of profit and shareholder return, proper partners for public education?

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University, in a study released September 2001, indicated commercializing activity in and around schools has increased nearly 500 percent since 1990.

Children encounter the corporatization of their schools in their cafeterias, their classrooms, their buses, and on their stadium scoreboards. Companies engage kids by distributing free product samples and coupons through their schools. Even learning itself is laced with commercialism: textbooks feature brand-name products to demonstrate math and science problems, and advertisements saturate classroom magazines and television programs.

## Methods Corporations Use to “Go To School”

Electronic marketing such as Channel One, a daily, ad-bearing news program for grades 6-12 broadcast “free” to 40% of all schools contracting it as a mandatory part of the curriculum. The incentive to schools? Installation and unlimited use of the provided satellite dish, VCRs, and classroom TVs. Channel One Communications owns, maintains, and insures the equipment--and repossesses it if the school drops its contract. Two minutes of each daily 12-minute program contain commercials for which corporations pay over \$800 million yearly to deliver their propaganda to 8 million captive students.

“The advertiser gets a group of kids who cannot go to the bathroom, who cannot change the sta-

tion. .who cannot have their headsets on.” -- Channel One executive Joel Babbit on value for advertisers.

**Exclusive agreements** to sell or use products, primarily with companies like Pepsi and Coca-Cola. (Has your child asked for money for Friday’s Taco Bell lunch?) So-called “shoe schools” arise from athletic shoe agreements with corporations like Nike and Reebok—and add unintended stress on schools that compete for students in open-enrollment districts.

**Incentive programs** like General Mills’ Box Tops for Education, Pizza Hut’s Book It!, and Campbell’s Soups’ Labels for Education encourage school fund raisers to influence family purchases of specific brands or to frequent certain businesses. In-school fundraisers using items like magazines or candy turn kids into salespeople. Company sponsors gain an unpaid sales force and can inflate prices since the enterprise appears charitable. Increasingly, schools are engaging in the absurd practice of encouraging purchases from certain websites like schoolpop.com, robbing their community businesses and their own sales tax base—a key part of school funding in many districts! Another ethically questionable appeal urges parents to acquire and use credit cards that provide a kickback to schools, condoning consumerism and debt.

**Sponsored Educational Materials** SEMs are best described as public relations materials disguised to look like classroom activities and lesson plans a la the Chips Ahoy counting game in which kids calculate the number of chocolate chips in their cookies. Even more disturbing are nutrition lessons taught by McDonald’s and environmental issues discussed by the Shell and Chevron Corporations, all contained in widely distributed resources.

**Sponsorship** of programs and activities such as Canon’s National “Envirothon” high school competition and “Coke in Education Day.” Now, some high school regional and state athletic championship games--and even regions themselves--have corporate sponsors. Wells Fargo bank paid \$12,000 for naming rights to an athletic conference in central Arizona.

**Contests** sponsored by companies like Brainstorm USA through schools to obtain demographic information on students and parents for marketing purposes. Companies are

promised a potential market of over 14,000 teachers and two million students.

**Privatization** that shifts school or program management from public accountability to private, for-profit corporations whose accountability is to stockholders, such as Edison Schools, Inc. You have to wonder if teachers gain stock options after a year’s tenure, where their loyalties lie.

## Can We Rely on Teachers?

While some argue that teachers can serve as gatekeepers against biased messages often found in sponsored materials, most teachers haven’t been taught how, may not see the need, or lack knowledge in the topic addressed. Similarly, claiming teachers can defuse advertising messages in sponsored materials and programs and salvage something worthwhile from them is like using textbooks containing gender or ethnic discrimination and claiming it’s a good way to teach about diversity. “The only genuinely educational use I can see for corporate propaganda in the classroom is to inoculate students against it, so that they will not swallow it uncritically without considering other sides of the question.” David Lunney, teacher, Greenville, NC.

## Why Target Kids at School?

America’s kids represent a large and growing market. Elementary-aged children spend around \$15 billion per year and influence another \$160 billion of their parents’ spending. Teenagers have even greater economic clout, spending \$57 billion personally and another \$36 billion of their families’ money annually.

**Are Corporations Solving Financial Troubles?** Taxpayers fund classroom time that is being wasted on ads. A 1998 study by educator Alex Molnar and economist Max Sawicky indicated that taxpayers in the U.S. pay \$1.8 billion per year for the class time--twelve minutes spent by students on the required nine out of ten school days--lost to Channel One. Channel One’s commercials alone cost taxpayers \$300 million per year, and taxpayer cost for just the advertising time exceeds the equipment’s total value.

So what can we do about all this? See sidebar.

*By Jennifer Rockne, Assistant Director*



### What You Can Do

Citizens can act to keep schools free of commercialism schools in several ways:

1. Support adoption and enforcement of guidelines ensuring public debate on commercialized money offers and keep commercially-sponsored programs out of classrooms (contact us for specific local and state model policies).
2. Teach children to evaluate commercial content and bias in materials they receive in school, Tv shows, commercials and other sources. Discuss your purchasing and finance decisions with kids where appropriate. ReclaimDemocracy.org is developing and testing a critical thinking curriculum for use in K-12 classrooms—contact us for details.
3. Raise the commercialism issue with school fundraising committees—or better yet, get involved—and directly impact how schools augment funding.
4. Proactively address the larger problem of school funding and disparities between communities, which leads well-intentioned administrators to rely on corporate sponsorship and advertising revenues.
5. Push to eliminate corporate tax breaks for contributions carrying commercial messages to schools, insisting corporations pay their fair share of school funding.