

NEWS RELEASE

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For More Information Contact:
Gary Ruskin (202) 296-2787

GAO Report Shows Most Kids Not Protected from Ads in Schools

A U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report released today shows that few states or local school boards make any real effort to protect students from the drastic increase in commercial advertising in the public schools. In response, Commercial Alert demanded action to stem this tide and to give parents and children more power to fight it.

The GAO report, titled "Commercial Activities in Schools," found that "In-school marketing has become a growing industry. Some marketing professionals are increasingly targeting children in school, companies are becoming known for their success in negotiating contracts between school districts and beverage companies, and both educators and corporate managers are attending conferences to learn how to increase revenue from in-school marketing for their schools and companies."

The report found that only "19 states currently have statutes or regulations that address school-related commercial activities, but in 14 of these states, statutes and regulations are not comprehensive..."

"Parents beware: public schools are permitting commercial advertisers to have free access to children, and do little to prevent it," said Gary Ruskin, Director of Commercial Alert. "Many public schools even show ads to promote violent entertainment, junk food, video games, and other products parents may not want their children to have."

This year, broad coalitions of progressive and conservative organizations, educators and scholars urged schools to get rid of Channel One, a marketing company that has enlisted schools to compel about eight million children to watch two minutes of ads each school day. A similar coalition has challenged the ZapMe! Corp for its efforts to turn school computers into ad-delivery systems which extract information from unsuspecting children for market research purposes. A coalition of progressive and conservative organizations and health professionals recently called attention to the way many public schools aggressively market high-calorie junk food, even as childhood obesity is skyrocketing.

"While marketers have tried to turn the public classrooms into free-fire zones for corporate advertising, few states and school boards have protected vulnerable schoolchildren from these commercial invasions," Ruskin said. "Most states and local school boards haven't done their job. It is time for Congress to step in."

Commercial Alert opposes the use of the compulsory school laws to deliver a captive audience of schoolchildren to corporate advertisers. Commercial Alert supports state legislation and local policies to prohibit schools from contractually obligating students to watch commercial advertising during school time. It also supports federal legislation to make such prohibitions, as a condition of receiving federal education funds.

Given the desperate lack of funds in many public schools, Congress “ought to spend some of the budget surplus on the public schools, so that children won’t have to attend schools that are multiplexes of commercialism,” Ruskin said. “A little extra money could reduce the temptation for the schools to sell their kids to advertisers.”

Commercial Alert works to restrain the excesses of commercialism, advertising and marketing. Commercial Alert’s web address is <<http://www.essential.org/alert/>>.

The GAO report is number GAO/HEHS-00-156. It was requested by Rep. George Miller and Sen. Christopher Dodd. It is available at <<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/he00156.pdf>>.