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Report: Cash-Strapped Schools Raise Only Minimal Revenues Through In-School Advertising

Advertising in Schools Poses Threat to Children's Education and Development, Doesn't Address Districts' Budget Woes

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Faced with state funding cuts and shrinking budgets, many school districts across the country are seeking to raise funds by selling commercial advertising on school property. Ads appear on school lockers, lunch trays, wall spaces, athletic facilities, websites, school buses and elsewhere. But the risks to children of commercializing schools far outweigh the miniscule revenues raised by these schemes, according to a report released today by Public Citizen.

In “School Commercialism: High Costs, Low Revenues,” Public Citizen found that school advertising programs are providing less than half of one percent of school revenues, and often far less. Public Citizen surveyed the nation’s 25 largest school districts; 10 reported that they maintained in-school advertising programs or were considering such programs. No program reported raising more than \$250,000. No program reported raising more than 0.03 percent of the school system’s overall budget.

Those school systems that report having in-school advertising programs include: Cypress Fairbanks, Texas, Independent School District; Dallas Independent School District; Houston Independent School District; Jefferson County, Colo., Public Schools and Orange County, Fla., Public Schools.

Advocates of commercial advertising in schools point to the need for alternative revenue streams to offset budget cuts. They defend such programs, claiming that children already are exposed to ubiquitous advertising in their daily lives. But the numbers in Public Citizen’s report belie these claims: School districts with budgets exceeding \$1 billion bring in revenues only in the tens of thousands. Often, a portion of these already miniscule revenues goes to commissions for middleman agencies or administrative costs for putting advertising programs into place. These revenues do not compensate for the effects of advertising on children, the report said.

“Not only does advertising in schools expose kids to marketing for harmful products, it teaches students that everything is for sale,” said Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen. “Kids are of course exposed to advertising all the time, but schools should not endorse and add to the constant marketing messages in kids’ lives.”

Added Elizabeth Ben-Ishai, campaign coordinator for Public Citizen’s Commercial Alert project and author of the report, “School officials’ reasons for allowing harmful advertising are flawed; in-school advertising and other forms of school commercialism are rarely lucrative endeavors. Revenues raised are a drop in the bucket compared to the cuts many districts are faced with. Previous research has shown that children who are exposed to excessive advertising face negative repercussions to their health, self-esteem, values, body-image, learning processes and personal development.”

The report points to another disturbing trend: the mushrooming of private agencies acting as middlemen between school districts and advertisers, often locking districts into multi-year contracts. These agencies take anywhere from 20 to 50 percent of the already negligible revenues generated by advertising, leaving schools with only a fraction of profits – and the negative effects of school commercialism, the report said.

“At the outset, these schemes seem like a good idea to school districts, which may pay nothing up front. But in the end, they benefit only the agencies, while harming students and leaving school districts with little to show for their efforts,” said Ben-Ishai.

To read the report, visit:

http://www.commercialalert.org/PDFs/SchoolCommercialismReport_PC.pdf.

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Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.citizen.org.