

School Commercialism

High Costs, Low Revenues

February 2012



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Acknowledgments

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About Commercial Alert

Commercial Alert is a project of Public Citizen that aims to keep commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy

About Public Citizen

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I. Executive Summary

In the face of an unrelenting economic downturn and significant state budget cuts, many school districts across the country are facing considerable financial pressures. Building on a trend that has emerged over the last two decades, growing numbers of schools have begun to turn to selling commercial advertising on school properties as an alternative revenue stream. From lockers to lunch trays, corporate logos and messages increasingly infiltrate school environments, leading to an ever more commercialized public education sphere.

Commercial advertising conflicts with the values and purposes of the educational system. Researchers and advocates have highlighted the damaging effects of schoolhouse advertising on children's health, self-esteem, values, body-image, learning processes, and personal development.

In response to these concerns, school districts and advocates of school commercialism often suggest that, given its potential to generate a lucrative alternative revenue stream, school advertising is worth the drawbacks it may create. This report highlights key examples of school districts' advertising programs that call into question these claims. Most school advertising schemes bring in minimal revenues – especially when compared to the size of districts' total operating budgets. Few districts manage to raise more than a fraction of one percent of their total operating budgets from advertising schemes.

Our research uncovered an array of examples of school districts that are engaged in commercial advertising programs generating minimal revenues. In Florida, the Orange County Public Schools have raised \$500,000 by permitting commercial advertising of various types over the past two years. With its \$1.5 billion budget, OCPS's advertising program raises revenue amounting to 0.02 percent of the total operating budget. Houston Independent School District's 2010-2011 advertising revenue amounts to less than 0.01 percent of the district's 2011-2012 budget. The Dallas Independent School District has an operating budget of \$1.174 billion for the 2011-2012 academic year; the district's advertising revenue will likely amount to 0.002 percent of the total operating budget. The report offers several other examples of similarly paltry financial gains from commercial advertising in schools.

The report also flags a growing concern: the mushrooming of businesses set up to profit off of the commercialization of schools across the country. Including here-today gone-tomorrow start-ups with little experience in the education system, as well as more ambitious companies interested in pursuing national-brand level advertising across

multiple districts, these “middlemen” take anywhere from a 20 to 50 percent cut of the already trivial revenues generated by advertising. Furthermore, these companies sometimes lock school districts into multi-year contracts that offer the districts few benefits, yet keep advertising in place and prevent them from making alternate arrangements.

In addition to the need for increased awareness about the damaging effects of school commercialism, it is important that school districts considering permitting advertising are aware of the minimal revenues that await them. As of January 2012, at least five of the largest twenty five school districts in the country were actively considering or had recently embarked on commercial advertising programs as a means of generating revenue. About as many (and possibly more) already have such programs in place. Across the country, dozens of other school boards are considering such moves, some prompted by school advertising agencies proposals to the boards themselves. Between corporations that aggressively pursue the opportunity to pitch their products to the potentially lucrative youth market and businesses that stand to profit from encouraging school districts to allow advertising, further growth of school commercialism is a pressing concern that must be addressed with increased awareness and advocacy.

School Commercialism: High Costs, Low Revenues

A Report by Public Citizen's Commercial Alert

II. Introduction

In the face an unrelenting economic downturn and significant state budget cuts, many school districts across the country are facing considerable financial pressures. Building on a trend that has emerged over the last two decades, growing numbers of schools have begun to turn to selling commercial advertising on school properties as an alternative revenue stream. One survey conducted in the 2003-2004 academic year found that 82.6 percent of public schools allow at least one type of commercial advertising on campuses.¹ Although no similar study has been done since, it is likely that not only have the number of schools exposing children to advertising increased, so too has the scale of this advertising within schools. From lockers to lunch trays, corporate logos and messages increasingly infiltrate school environments, leading to an ever more commercialized public education sphere.

Commercial advertising conflicts with the values and purposes of the educational system. Researchers and advocates have highlighted the damaging effects of schoolhouse advertising on children's health, self-esteem, values, body-image, learning processes, and personal development. A growing body of research shows that the negative effects of advertising on children are far ranging and long lasting.²

In response to these concerns, school districts and advocates of school commercialism often suggest that, given its potential to generate a lucrative alternative revenue stream, school advertising is worth the drawbacks it may create. This report highlights key examples of school districts' advertising programs that call into question these claims. Most school advertising schemes bring in minimal revenues – especially when compared to the size of districts' total operating budgets. Few districts manage to raise more than a fraction of one percent of their total operating budgets from advertising schemes. Drawing on existing media coverage, district financial documents, and personal interviews with school administrators and school marketing agency representatives, this report offers snapshots of the negligible fiscal benefits of school advertising programs across the country.

The report also flags a growing concern: the mushrooming of businesses set up to profit off of the commercialization of schools across the country. Including here-today gone-tomorrow start-ups with little experience in the education system, as well as more ambitious companies interested in pursuing national-brand level advertising across multiple districts, these "middlemen" take anywhere from a 20 to 50 percent cut of the

already trivial revenues generated by advertising. Furthermore, these companies sometimes lock school districts into multi-year contracts that offer the districts few benefits, yet keep advertising in place and prevent them from making alternate arrangements.

In addition to the need for increased awareness about the damaging effects of school commercialism, it is important that school districts considering permitting advertising are aware of the minimal revenues that await them. As of November 2011, at least five of the largest twenty five school districts in the country were actively considering commercial advertising programs as a means of generating revenue. About as many (and possibly more)³ already have such programs in places. Across the country, dozens of school boards are considering such moves, some prompted by school advertising agencies proposals to the boards themselves.⁴ Between corporations that aggressively pursue the opportunity to pitch their products to the potentially lucrative youth market and businesses that stand to profit from encouraging school districts to allow advertising, further growth of school commercialism is a pressing concern that must be addressed with increased awareness and advocacy.

Research for this report indicates that even among the largest 25 school districts in the country, many officials are either unaware of the extent of commercialism within their own districts or unwilling to provide accurate information to the public about existing commercial advertising in schools. Without a good sense of the ubiquity of commercialism on their own campuses, district officials may be unable to make informed decisions about policies and practices that deeply affect students' educational experiences. Moreover, it is crucial that school districts that do permit commercial advertising on school property collect accurate data about such programs – whether they are administered at the district level or at the individual school level – and make this data available for evaluation by the public and media.

III. Methods

To gather data for this report, we did a broad survey of media coverage of school commercialism, conducted interviews with school district officials and representatives of agencies that sell advertising on behalf of schools, evaluated financial statements and other school district documents, filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and reviewed research papers and reports on school commercialism.

Our initial analysis targeted the largest 25 school districts in the country. (Table 1 below provides a summary of the responses we received from inquiries made to the 25 largest school districts.) We focused on these districts because of the large numbers of

students are affected by their decisions regarding school commercialism. We also gathered data about other districts that fall outside of the top 25. We pursued these districts when their advertising schemes were featured in the media and/or information about their programs was readily available. While we do not claim to offer a representative analysis of school districts across the country, we believe the report offers significant and telling examples of a range of districts' experiences implementing commercial advertising programs.

Table 1: Inquiries and Responses from 25 Largest School Districts

| Size Ranking | School District (State) | Type of Inquiry | Commercial Advertising? |
|--------------|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | New York City Public Schools (NY) | Telephone interview | No commercial advertising (NCA)* |
| 2 | Los Angeles Unified (CA) | Telephone interview | NCA |
| 3 | City of Chicago SD 299 (IL) | Filed FOIA | Had not responded at press time. |
| 4 | Dade (FL) | Telephone interview/ filed FOIA | Currently negotiating with school advertising agency. |
| 5 | Clark County School District (NV) | Telephone interview | NCA |
| 6 | Broward (FL) | Telephone interview | Has small number of ads on banner spaces at sporting events, newsletters. Exploring expansion. |
| 7 | Houston ISD (TX) | Filed FOIA | Yes. See data in Section VI/Table 2. |
| 8 | Hillsborough (FL) | Filed FOIA | NCA |
| 9 | Hawaii Department of Education (HI) | Media coverage | Currently considering advertising program |
| 10 | Orange (FL) | Telephone interview/media coverage | Yes. See data in Section VI/Table 2 |
| 11 | Palm Beach (FL) | Telephone interview | Currently considering advertising program. |
| 12 | Fairfax County Public Schools (VA) | Telephone interview | Currently piloting advertising and sponsorship programs. |
| 13 | Philadelphia City SD (PA) | Filed FOIA | FOIA request denied. |
| 14 | Gwinnett County (GA) | Filed FOIA | NCA except some fence advertising by local business at sporting events. |
| 15 | Dallas ISD (TX) | Telephone interview | Yes. See data in Section VI/Table 2. Considering broader program. |
| 16 | Wake County Schools (NC) | Email exchange | NCA |
| 17 | Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) | Telephone interview | NCA |
| 18 | Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC) | Telephone interview | NCA |
| 19 | San Diego Unified (CA) | Filed FOIA | District "does not have any documentation in response to [Public Citizen's] request." |
| 20 | Prince Georges County Public Schools (MD) | Telephone interview | Yes. Recently began advertising on school websites with Google ads. |
| 21 | Duval (FL) | Telephone interview | NCA |

| | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| 22 | Memphis (TN) | Filed FOIA | NCA |
| 23 | Cobb County (GA) | Filed FOIA | Had not responded at press time. |
| 24 | Cypress-Fairbanks ISD (TX) | Filed FOIA | Yes. See data in Section VI/Table 2. |
| 25 | Baltimore County Public Schools (MD) | Telephone interview | NCA |

*N.B. It was difficult to independently verify that school districts who claimed not to permit any commercial advertising did not in fact have any on their campuses or websites. Shading key: **Considering**, **Has advertising**.

Our analysis of the “middle man” firms that broker advertising agreements between districts and advertisers focuses on a small sample of existing companies engaged in this sort of work. We pursued companies of this nature that were featured in the media or that we learned about in conversation with officials whose districts were using their services. While some of the firms we contacted were willing to share information about the services they provided and the percentage they take from advertising revenues, others refused to provide this information. We are grateful to those companies that provided us with information. Where indicated, some information about these companies was taken from media reports. This information was verified in personal interviews when possible.

While the utmost efforts have been made to verify the accuracy of the data contained in this report, it was often difficult to access information from school districts regarding their advertising programs and the revenues generated from such programs. On many occasions, key school officials in departments of finance, communications, and community partnerships, and business offices did not know the extent of advertising within their districts, the amount of revenue generated from any advertising, or both. Some district officials suggested that their districts did not engage in any advertising, but were contradicted by still other officials in the same districts. We did not receive responses within the statutory required time to several of the FOIA requests we filed. Finally, some districts did not return multiple calls and emails requesting information. This lack of knowledge on the part of key officials, as well as the lack of transparency exhibited by some districts, is cause for concern in and of itself. As we note below, school commercialism raises many concerns for education and child advocates. Moreover, our investigations suggest that school commercialism is rarely lucrative for districts. Given these concerns, those districts that decide to engage in advertising ought to have a clear idea of the revenues their programs are generating.

Some district officials provided clear and extensive responses to our requests for information; we are grateful for their cooperation and assistance.

IV. The Context for School Commercialism: Education System in Crisis

The economic downturn has not been kind to the education system. Reduced economic activity and lower property values have reduced state and local governments' tax revenues, leading to severe cuts in education budgets.

Cuts are pervasive across the country: one study finds that 37 states are providing less funding per student to local school districts in the 2011-2012 school year than they did in the last school year. Thirty of those are providing less funding than they did four years ago. Many school districts are struggling to raise money with property taxes because of the dismal state of the housing market. Two thirds of states are providing less funding per student in K-12 schools in 2012 than they did in 2008.⁵

Compared to pre-recession funding levels, the states of Arizona and Florida have cut \$530 per pupil and \$542 per pupil, respectively. In Florida – a state where school advertising is particularly pervasive – this has meant cuts of over \$13 million from school-readiness programs that provide early childhood education for low-income families. Over 15,000 children will no longer be served. Meanwhile, in Illinois, \$17 million in cuts may lead to 4000 fewer pre-schoolers and 1000 fewer at-risk infants receiving services. New York's \$1.3 billion in cuts (6.1 percent) have delayed implementation of court-ordered additional funding for under-resourced schools for the third year in a row. In both Texas and North Carolina, pre-kindergarten programs for at-risk children have taken serious hits. Textbook funds in North Carolina have been cut by 80 percent.⁶

This dire state of affairs makes school districts throughout the U.S. particularly vulnerable to the forces aiming to commercialize our education system. The prospect of alternative revenue streams is tantalizing to school boards everywhere, and advertisers and advertising management companies are quick to take advantage.

V. Types of Advertising

Just as advertisers have found a multitude of ways to market their products to the general public, so too have they embraced a variety of methods in the educational system. Aiming to “saturate” school communities – including children, parents, and employees – with their messages, commercial advertisers have left virtually no school spaces untouched in their pursuit of profits.

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) at the National Education Policy Center offers one useful way of categorizing school house commercialism, delineating seven categories.⁷ The categories are:

- Sponsorship of school programs
- Exclusive agreements
- Sponsorship of incentive programs
- Appropriation of space on school property
- Sponsorship of Supplementary Educational Materials
- Fundraising
- Digital Marketing

Our analysis of recent media coverage, school district commercialism policies, and personal interviews with district officials shows that all of these categories of schoolhouse commercialism are alive and well. Some of the most frequently mentioned forms of advertising include:

- **In-school advertising:** Advertisers now pitch their products in spaces throughout the physical learning environment, including on lockers, cafeteria lunch trays, cafeteria menus, banners and wall spaces throughout school buildings, on white/blackboards, and on televisions screens placed in common areas.⁸ Athletic facilities are prime spaces for advertising, with ads found on gymnasium floors, fields, backboards, scoreboards, etc.⁹ Advertisements can also be found on documents and advisories sent home to parents from schools, including on report cards.¹⁰
- **School bus advertising:** The Colorado Springs School District was the first to launch external school bus advertising, beginning in 1993. Since then, Texas, Arizona, Tennessee, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Utah have joined Colorado in passing laws that allow for external ads. Currently, nine more states are considering legislation to allow external bus advertising.¹¹ Some advertisers also direct their ads to students more overtly: their logos and slogans can be found affixed to the interior of the buses. Several states that do not have laws on the books allowing for external ads allow districts to advertise inside the vehicles. For example, districts in Florida, California, and Michigan have engaged in such internal bus advertising.¹²
- **Naming rights:** Schools are increasingly selling naming rights to corporate donors. Advertisers can purchase rights to affix their names to stadiums and other sporting venues, school buildings, rooms, and equipment.¹³
- **Corporate sponsorship:** In exchange for the opportunity to advertise, corporations are sponsoring school sports teams, plays, musical performances, and other school activities. Advertisers may display signage or logos, give out free samples, make announcements over PA systems, or buy space in programs for events.¹⁴

- **Digital Advertising:** Many school districts allow advertising on their websites as well as on the websites of individual schools.¹⁵

VI. Schoolhouse Commercialism: A Threat to Health, Self-Esteem, and Learning

Commercialism in our schools is dangerous for children. Children are already besieged by advertising in many facets of their lives. The consequences of widespread advertising targeting children are alarming; children's physical and mental health is suffering, while companies turn a profit. Advertising in schools and elsewhere has a negative effect on children's health, self-esteem, body image, social relationships, gender socialization, and values.¹⁶ The increase of advertising in school environments threatens to exacerbate these negative effects, transforming the education system into a place that produces consumers instead of good citizens. The goals of educational institutions and those of marketers run counter to one another. Allowing market values, instead of civic values, to permeate the classroom is a disturbing trend.

Advertising directed at children is frequently for unhealthy food products, raising particular concerns about the health effects of school commercialism. Outside of the classroom, children and teenagers are bombarded with advertisements for junk food and sugary beverages – foods that contribute to the escalating epidemic of childhood and adult obesity in the United States. Research has clearly established that such advertising poses a serious threat to children's health. Food and beverage advertising has spread into the classroom at a staggeringly high level. A national survey found that 67.2 percent of schools displayed advertising from at least one corporation marketing foods that have minimal nutritional value and are high in sugar and fat. The survey estimated that between 26.6 and 30.3 million students are exposed to unhealthy food advertising in their schools.¹⁷ A survey of California schools found that 60 percent of schools surveyed used food or beverage coolers with corporate logos on them, while 71 percent had the logos of sugary drink manufacturers displayed on their sporting equipment.¹⁸ In Montgomery County, Maryland, a survey of schools found that 83 percent had advertising for food and beverage.¹⁹ In a 2000 report, the Government Accountability Office state that the most prevalent form of direct advertising in schools was for soft drinks.²⁰ Adolescents are particularly at risk: research has demonstrated the psychological and physiological vulnerabilities of teenagers to the messages conveyed in advertising.²¹

In addition to the physical health damages that school advertising contributes to, widespread commercialism within schools also affects students' capacity to learn and their personal development. According to Molnar, Boninger, and Fogarty, commercialism in

schools “discourages aspects of critical thinking that might lead to disagreement with or discrediting of the sponsor’s message—especially critical thinking skills having to do with identifying and evaluating sponsors’ points of view and biases, considering alternative points of view, and generating and evaluating alternative solutions.”²² Running counter to the goals of education, this potential subversion of development of critical thinking skills reinforces a cycle by which children and adolescents are made increasingly vulnerable to advertising, rather than critically aware. Studies also suggest that the consumer culture emerging out of marketing-heavy environments leads to lowered self-esteem and higher insecurity.²³ At the same time, as they develop into ideal consumers rather than citizens, students exposed to intense commercialism become focused on material goods rather than creative pursuits and healthy social relationships.²⁴

Marketers of all stripes have increasingly focused their attention on communities of color as key targets. Youth marketing specialists are particularly keen to exploit what they see as an important and growing market. In part because they make use of new media platforms more than white children and adolescents, young people of color are already more likely to be exposed to advertising, particularly for unhealthy food and drink.²⁵ A recent study of sugary drink marketing to kids found that black and Hispanic youth viewed 80 to 90 percent more TV ads for sugary drinks compared to their white counterparts.²⁶ Marketers specifically target youth of color, employing specialized agencies to appeal to minorities. School commercialism can also exacerbate and perpetuate this inequality. A study of Pennsylvania and New York School Districts found that districts with less wealth were more likely to turn to advertising as a means of generating revenue. Thus, children in poorer districts are more likely to face the negative effects of school advertising. In the U.S., there continues to be a significant racial disparity in school funding.²⁷ As a result, if those districts that are most cash-strapped are most likely to turn to school commercialism to generate revenue, it is disproportionately students of color that will suffer the effects.

VII. School Commercialism is Not Very Lucrative for Districts

Despite the concerns that opponents to school advertising have raised, many districts describe a desperate need for funding that they believe warrants the intrusion of advertising into the educational system. Though they may acknowledge the validity of some objections, district officials often claim that the financial benefits are worth what they perceive to be relatively insignificant risk. However, the realities of school advertising suggest a different picture. In fact, a nation-wide study of 391 schools found that in the 2003-2004 school year, 67.4 percent of schools that engaged in commercial advertising activities meant to generate income received *no income* at all. (The study defined advertising broadly, including instances ranging from vending machines displaying logos to signage in sports fields to corporate sponsorship of curricular materials.) The remainder

received negligible amounts of money, particularly when compared to the total operating budgets of schools. The study found that, at that time, only 0.4 percent of schools generated more than \$50,000 from commercial advertising.²⁸ Our analysis of more recent media coverage and interviews with a selection of school officials found that commercial advertising continues to generate similarly trivial revenues for schools. Some school districts generate significantly more than \$50,000, but their earnings are still a drop in the bucket compared to total budgets *and* budget shortfalls, which the districts commonly claim are the motivation for their forays into commercialism to begin with.

Table 2: Examples of School District Revenues from Advertising Programs

| School District | Revenues Raised from Commercial Advertising Program (per year) | Advertising Revenues as Percentage of Budget |
|--|--|--|
| Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District, Texas | \$181,770 | 0.03% |
| Dallas Independent School District, Texas | \$24,119 | 0.002% |
| Houston Independent School District, Texas | \$62,250 | 0.01% |
| Jefferson County Public Schools, Colorado | \$125,000* | 0.01% |
| Orange County Public Schools, Florida | \$250,000 | 0.02% |

*Figure is approximate. Private broker's cut of revenues has not been subtracted from total (information not provided by district.)

Our research uncovered an array of examples of school districts that are engaged in commercial advertising programs generating minimal revenues. These include:

- Orange County Public Schools:** With approximately 179,000 students and an operating budget of \$1.5 billion, OCPS is the eleventh-largest school district in the country.²⁹ This Florida district, which includes the city of Orlando, embarked on an advertising strategy two years ago and has raised \$500,000 over two years. It has an in-house advertising program that includes online advertising, athletic sponsors and stadium advertising, stadium naming rights, media licensing, apparel licensing, and the sale of ads in parent's guides. The district states on its website that companies may place ads on school menus (online and in print), sponsor school plays, advertise in parking garages, post signage at sporting events, put decals on the floor of gymnasiums, and can give away promotional items at sporting events. A district representative says that the school system avoids "trapped environment" advertising, such as ads in classrooms or school buses. Corporate partners include: Pizza Hut, the U.S. Army, PowerAde, Buffalo Wild Wings, AT&T, Panera, and others. **The district's advertising**

program raises revenues amounting to 0.02 percent of the total operating budget.³⁰

- **Houston Independent School District:** HISD is the seventh-largest school district in the country and the largest in Texas. With 203,000 students, the district has a total budget of \$1.58 billion for the 2011-2012 school year.³¹ This budget represents a nearly \$100 million dollar reduction from the 2010-2011 year, most of which is the result of \$77.4 million in state funding cuts.³² In 2010-2011 the district's advertising programs brought in \$62,250. For the current school year, as of November 2011, the advertising programs have brought in \$43,112. These funds come from a combination of signage, scoreboards, and school bus advertising.³³ **The 2010-2011 advertising revenues amount to less than 0.01 percent of the district's 2011-2012 budget.** The district also reports that even with its deep cuts, it will likely face a \$40 million funding shortfall for the following year. **If advertising revenues continue at the same rate for the current year, they will amount to approximately 0.2 percent of this shortfall.**
- **Dallas Independent School District:** DISD is the fourteenth largest school district in the country. With 157,000 students, the district has an operating budget of \$1.174 billion for the 2011-2012 academic year.³⁴ The district cut \$76.9 million from the previous year's budget.³⁵ **DISD's advertising program generated \$12,059.44 between August 2010 and February 2011.³⁶ Assuming a similar amount of revenue for the remainder of the school year, the district's advertising revenue amounts to 0.002 percent of the total operating budget.**
- **Jefferson County Public Schools:** Jeffco Public Schools is the largest school district in Colorado, with 86,000 students and a total budget for 2012 of \$932,285,100. The County is located just west of Denver. The district has an agreement with First Bank, allowing the bank to advertise on buses and in stadiums. A District official says that First Bank pays \$125,000 per year, with the agreement lasting five years. But this figure is *before the unspecified cut taken by a private agency* that brokered the deal. As well, the district faced one-time costs to set up buses and print banners. **Jeffco's advertising deal with First Bank generates funds equal to 0.01 percent the total budget. The District must cut \$70 million over the next two years; two years of advertising revenue will amount to less than half a percent of the amount that must be cut.³⁷** Jeffco recently adopted a new means of generating revenue through school commercialism: the district is selling ads on students' report cards. This scheme is expected to bring in \$30,000 per year over the course of the three-year contract the

district has signed. Needless to say, the additional \$30,000 does not bring the district much closer to addressing the \$70 million cuts it must make.

- **Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District:** The third largest school district in Texas, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD has a projected enrollment for the 2011-2012 school year of close to 110,000 students. The district is located in Houston. For this academic year, its total budgeted expenditures amount to \$673,690,208. The district has commercial advertising agreements that include advertising on electronic scoreboards in stadiums, school publications, and on the exterior of school buses. **These programs raised \$181,770.50 in the 2010-2011 school year, which amounts to 0.03 percent of the districts expenditure budget.**³⁸ The district's advertising program revenues have been in a downward trend. Cypress- Fairbanks cancelled its book cover advertising in 2011 after a decrease in revenues from the program the previous year. Although they remain in place, bus and scoreboard advertising revenues in the district have also decreased in the past year.³⁹
- A study of school districts in **Pennsylvania** and **New York** found that the revenue generated from school commercialism in those states is slight. Among districts that responded to the survey, 74 percent of districts in Pennsylvania and 90 percent of districts in New York allowed corporations to display their logos on scoreboards, blackboards and sports equipment in exchange for the equipment and payment. Yet, despite their ubiquity, these forms of commercialism, which authors Brian Brent and Stephen Lunden refer to as "appropriated space," generate miniscule revenues. **The average annual revenue flow from scoreboards, backboards, and sports equipment for Pennsylvania school districts was \$3,265, which amounts to 0.01 percent of total revenues and 0.02 percent of local revenues for the districts. In New York, these means of advertising generated an average of \$4,620 per year, which amounts to 0.02 percent of total revenues and 0.05 percent of local revenues for the districts.**⁴⁰

Brent and Lunden's study of Pennsylvania and New York indicates that despite the trivial earnings school commercialism generate, many district officials whose school systems have made use of these programs claim they would recommend other districts do the same (68 percent in Pennsylvania and 55 percent in New York). More troubling still, the study indicates that more than half of officials in both states would continue to rely on school commercialism even if public funds became available.⁴¹ In light of such recommendations and enthusiasm, it is perhaps not surprising that districts presently

considering allowing commercial advertising have rosy views of what will likely not be a very lucrative pathway.

In Florida, Miami-Dade School District is planning to sign a contract with an agency that brokers advertising agreements for school districts. District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho claims the arrangement will bring in “millions” for the district.⁴² As the examples above suggest, such a scenario is extremely unlikely.

In Virginia, Prince William County Public Schools recently signed a contract with Education Funding Partners, an advertising sales agency (see “Middlemen” below). A official from the district, which is located just outside of the District of Columbia, says she expects the contract to bring in approximately \$200,000 per year by allowing for advertising on signage, announcements in classrooms, and a variety of other mechanisms that the official said would “saturate the students and our community.” EFP will take 20 percent of the proceeds from the new arrangement and the district will bear the cost of unspecified infrastructure costs for signage. If the EFP contract lives up to expectations, Prince William, the second largest school district in Virginia, will still only generate funds equal to .03 percent of its \$811 million budget. The district already raises approximately \$75,000 a year from local advertising on school websites – funds that have gone to pay for the creation of a uniform set of websites for schools.⁴³

Whether they have unrealistic expectations for their planned advertising programs or distorted conceptions of the impact that a few hundred thousand dollars will have on their district, school officials seem unaware of the lack of financial benefits that await them and relatively unconcerned about the effects of these plans on their students.

VIII. The Middlemen: School Advertising Sales Agencies Take a Big Cut

A compelling sign that the American public educational system is increasingly becoming a prime site for profit-making in the eyes of private corporations is the burgeoning number of companies that specialize in selling school advertising. These companies contract with school districts to recruit corporate advertisers ranging from local hardware stores to multinational corporations. While some school districts have an “in-house” employee who handles the process of selling ads, many are turning to these middlemen in order to save the expense of paying additional personnel. School advertising middlemen offer a seemingly ideal situation: districts typically pay nothing upfront for their services. Yet, many take a significant cut of advertising revenues, while locking districts in to multi-year exclusive agreements. Especially considering the often miniscule profits that advertising brings in to begin with, this leaves schools with trivial profits and a commercialized educational institution.

Table 3: Examples of Middleman Companies Cuts of School Advertising Revenue

| Company | Cut of School Advertising Revenue |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Educational Funding Partners | 20% |
| Alternative Revenue Development | 33% (regional advertisers) to 50% (local advertisers) |
| Steep Creek Media | 30% to 40% |
| School Sports Media | 25% to 30% |
| Alpha Media | 30% to 50% |

Agencies that specialize in selling corporations advertising space in schools present further problems where oversight and accountability are concerned. Though many school districts adopt guidelines specifying what advertising they will accept, the introduction of an additional, private entity to broker deals with advertisers presents further opportunities for particularly harmful and inappropriate messaging to infiltrate the educational sphere.

- **Education Funding Partners:** Colorado-based EFP focuses on large public school districts – 50,000 students or more – and aims to connect them with national brand. The company, which has been in existence for less than two years, says it intends to set up multi-district advertising arrangements with corporations such as Nike, Whole Foods, and State Farm. It currently has a contract with pharmacy chain CVS to advertise flu shots in districts in Florida and Virginia. The company has a B-Corp designation, which means that it has met certain standards of social and environmental responsibility.⁴⁴ **EFP takes 20 percent of advertising revenues.**⁴⁵
- **Alternative Revenue Development:** A Michigan-based business that started in 2010. The company focuses on “website integration” (digital advertising on district websites), as well as direct-to-home advertising (printed and electronic) and public television. ARD works with 20 programs across Michigan, with 40 presently in final stage discussions. They plan to expand to create an “E-Mall,” from which districts could take a cut of transactions; advertising signage; and “experiential opportunities” (booths at football games and parent-teacher conference nights). The company describes itself as engaging in “social responsibility marketing,” but admits to selling advertising to fast food restaurants. **ARD takes a 1/3rd cut of regional advertising sales and a 50 percent cut of local advertising sales.**⁴⁶
- **Steep Creek Media:** A Texas-based business that employs approximately twenty people and works only with Texas school districts. The company started in 2007 and is primarily engaged in the school bus advertising business, though it also sells school advertising in stadiums, on websites, and naming rights. **Steep Creek has exclusive five year contracts** (one year contracts with four automatic renewals) **with 18**

districts, as well as less comprehensive contracts with an additional 13 districts. **The company takes a 30-40 percent cut of advertising revenues.** Advertisers are primarily local businesses, such as car dealerships, credit unions, and hospital systems. Some national advertisers have recently taken an interest, including H&R Block and the College Board. Steep Creek's website features photographs of each customer District's Superintendent standing on a school bus, waving cheerfully at the camera.⁴⁷

- **School Media Inc.:** A Minnesota-based business that is best known for selling advertising "wraps" on school lockers. The company also sells ads on school floors and walls. School Media Inc. claims to allow only advertising promoting "health, education, nutrition, and safety."⁴⁸
- **School Sports Media:** SSM was launched in 2010 and is a subsidiary of Mission Media Services. This company focuses only on school sports marketing, using mediums such as: field banners, scoreboards, entrance signs, publications, website advertising, and uniform logos. It has signed up over 400 schools across seven states. **Reports suggest that SSM takes between a 25 and 30 percent cut of revenues from advertising.**⁴⁹
- **Alpha Media:** A Texas-based business that focuses primarily on outside ads. The company says that on average, in a district with 150 buses, advertising generates \$500,000 over four years (\$125,000 per year). The company works with 30 districts in Texas and has opportunities in Florida and Kentucky on the horizon.⁵⁰ **News reports suggest that Alpha Media takes a 30-50 percent cut of advertising revenues.**⁵¹

The above listing represents just a tiny fraction of the "middle man" companies in existence across the United States. We identified these companies primarily through media reports and conversations with school officials whose districts are working with them or considering doing so. But many more exist: when the Miami-Dade School District in Florida recently put out a request for proposals for such companies to assist them in setting up a commercial advertising program, the District received proposals from 17 companies offering these services. None of these companies were among those listed above. The District subsequently made agreements with nine of the companies, eight of which are based in Florida.⁵² Eager to profit off the commercialization of our education system, these companies play an important role in persuading districts to embark on commercial advertising programs.

IX. Conclusions

Facing increasingly desperate financial situations, school districts are eager to find alternative streams of revenue. School commercialism is an ever more popular option in the eyes of school administrators. Justifying school commercialism on the premise that children are already exposed to endless streams of advertising, these officials may concede that they would rather not take such steps. However, they argue, the financial benefits far outweigh the costs. This claim is unpersuasive. Although some districts and advertising agency middlemen claim that advertising will bring “millions” into the school systems, little evidence of such lucrative arrangements is available. Most districts raise less than a half a percent of their operating budget through school advertising. Yet, the students feel the costs of these arrangements, regardless of how unprofitable they may be. As districts turn to commercial advertising within schools as a revenue stream, they also provide justification for future cuts and weaken the sense that the public is responsible for public education.

Private companies that assist school districts in selling advertising on their properties exploit the desperation of district officials to address their budget woes. These unregulated entities present a seemingly golden opportunity to cash-strapped districts: they pay nothing upfront and then simply wait for the cash to roll in. But private companies are not bound by the same moral obligations as public educational institutions.⁵³ They seek to profit from the financial turmoil of the education system, taking sometimes appallingly large cuts of the funds intended to assist districts in need. These companies deserve much more public scrutiny as they threaten to woo increasing numbers of school districts across the country into arrangements that threaten students and raise little money.

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Notes

¹ (Molnar et al., 2006, 1 January) Molnar et al.'s study conceives of advertising activities quite broadly. Our analysis includes primarily more overt forms of marketing, such as signage and naming rights, whereas Molnar et al.'s study includes a wider set of displays of corporate logos and corporate sponsorship agreements. In Molnar et al.'s study, advertising activities included: sponsorship of school programs and activities; exclusive agreements, such as those with soft drink companies; sponsored incentive programs, such as those which provide sponsors products to students as prizes for school-run reading or other contests; appropriation of space on school property, including naming rights, signage, vending machines with logos and corporate names, and cups; sponsorship of curricular materials; electronic advertising, such as on Channel One; and fundraising initiatives that require purchase of certain products to generate donations.

² See for example: (McGinnis et al., 2006; Molnar et al., 2011; Molnar et al., 2010; Montgomery et al., 2011)

³ See following section regarding difficulties of verifying information regarding advertising programs.

⁴ See, for example, this article describing one company's pitches to multiple districts in Michigan: (Hrin, 2011, 16 November)

⁵ (Oliff & Leachman, 2011)

⁶ (Williams et al., 2011)

⁷ (Molnar, et al., 2010; National Education Policy Center)

⁸ See for example: (DiBacco, 2011, 27 October; Hardy, 2011, 16 October)

⁹ See for example: (Balona, 2011, 17 January; School Sports Media, 2011, 27 September)

¹⁰ For example, (Strauss, 2011, 14 November)

¹¹ (*Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood School Bus Ad Action Center Website*; Rampell, 2011, 15 April)

¹² (Sampson, 2005) (York, 2008)

¹³ See for example: (Savana, 2011, 28 September)

¹⁴ See for example: (Medina, 2010, 15 December). Los Angeles Unified School District does not allow commercial advertising on campus, but does allow corporate sponsorships, which may include signage with the sponsor's logo on school property. The line between these two forms of school commercialism can be a fuzzy one. The District

attempts to make this distinction clear in its guidelines, where it also encourages school officials to attempt to redirect corporations who wish to advertise toward sponsorship opportunities. See (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2011, May 24)

¹⁵ See for example: (Martin, 2010, 18 March)

¹⁶ (Molnar, et al., 2010, pp. 8-15)

¹⁷ (Molnar, et al., 2006, 1 January)

¹⁸ (LEAN, 2006)

¹⁹ (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2008)

²⁰ (Office, 2000)

²¹ (Pechmann et al., 2005)

²² (Molnar, et al., 2011, p. 9)

²³ See citations in (Molnar, et al., 2011)

²⁴ (Molnar, et al., 2010)

²⁵ (Montgomery & Chester, 2011)

²⁶ (Harris et al., 2011)

²⁷ (Miller & Epstein, 2011, 5 July)

²⁸ (Molnar, et al., 2006, 1 January)

²⁹ (Orange County Public Schools, 2011a)

³⁰ (Orange County Public Schools, 2011b; *Orange County Public Schools Advertising Program Website*) ("Telephone Interview with Brian Siatowski, Orange County Public Schools,")

³¹ (Houston Independent School District, 2011a)

³² (Houston Independent School District, 2011b)

³³ (Houston Independent School District, 2011, 1 November)

³⁴ (Dallas Independent School District, 2011)

³⁵ (Blaize, 2011, 24 June)

³⁶ ("Telephone Interview with Dallas Independent School District Business Office,")

³⁷ (*Jefferson County Public Schools Website*; "Telephone Interview with Betty Standley, Jefferson County School District,")

³⁸ (Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District, 2011, 1 December)

³⁹ (Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School Board, 2011)

⁴⁰ (Brent & Lunden, 2009, p. 322)

⁴¹ (Brent & Lunden, 2009, p. 327)

⁴² (Isensee, 2011, 19 October)

⁴³ ("Telephone Interview with Sharon Marcus, Prince William County Public Schools,")

⁴⁴ (*B Corp Website*)

⁴⁵ (*Education Funding Partners Website*; "Telephone Interview with Mickey Freeman, Education Funding Partners,")

⁴⁶ ("Telephone Interview with Sam Curcucu, Alternative Revenue Development,")

⁴⁷ (*Steep Creek Media*; "Telephone Interview with Wilson Calvert, Steep Creek Media,")

⁴⁸ (*Chisago County Press*, 2011, August 18; Ford, 2010, 17 November; Molnar, et al., 2011) During a telephone interview, a representative of School Media refused to provide information about the percentage of revenues the company takes.

⁴⁹ (Kramer, 2011, August 20; *School Sports Media Website*; Vegh, 2011, May 21)

⁵⁰ ("Telephone Interview with Alpha Media Representative,") The representative of Alpha Media did not provide information about the percentage of revenues the company takes. Figures below are from news reports.

⁵¹ (Meyers, 2009, August 19; Mungenast, 2010, 14 October)

⁵² (Miami Dade School District, 2011, 30 November)

⁵³ EFP's "B Corp" status is meant to convey higher standards of social responsibility. While the company takes less of a cut from advertising agreements than others do, it is still engaged in large scale commercial advertising to children, which calls into question its moral purity.