DEBATE >> Forming an Opinion

Should Schools Court Corporate Sponsors?

With budgets tight, some school districts are trading space for corporate sponsorships. Does this sell out students and their education? Or are schools fair game for marketing?

By Sean McCollum

Yes, schools need corporate sponsorships to save educational and extracurricular programs.

TIMES ARE TOUGH FOR U.S. SCHOOLS. TAX CUTS and economic troubles have sliced into the education budgets of many communities. Many of our schools have been forced to get rid of music, sports, and some educational programs in order to make ends meet.

Thankfully, many U.S. companies are sticking their checkbooks into the financial breach. The Sweetwater Union High School District near San Diego, for example, has signed sponsorship contracts with nearly 300 national and local businesses. The money has helped launch freshman sports teams at 12 high schools and has helped start

OR

No, schools should reject corporate sponsorships in order to protect educational integrity.

BUSINESS MARKETERS HAVE WANTED TO GET into schools for decades. Know why? Picture rows and rows of captive students who can't leave, switch channels during the commercial, or drag away the giant machine that plugs sugar-loaded soda. That's money in the bank for any company that can bypass the school doors.

Corporate sponsorship is no free lunch. Take Channel One, the 12-minute TV program beamed into 12,000 middle and high schools across the U.S. Students are required to watch 10 minutes of boiled-down news along with two minutes of commercials each day. In return, the broadcast company loans the school TVs, VCRs, and a satellite dish. But who pays for the classroom time that Channel One eats up? Taxpayers do. A 1998 study by the University of Wisconsin and the Economic Policy Institute found that U.S. taxpayers contributed the equivalent of $1.8 billion worth of class time to Channel One.
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In 2003, grocery giant Safeway donated $50,000 to the West Contra Costa Unified School District in the San Francisco Bay area. The gift came after the district laid off 200 teachers. “We believe in the ideology that business takes, what can we give back?” Teena Massingill, Public Affairs Manager for Safeway USA, told The Galt Global Review. “Giving back to the community is a pleasure and a responsibility.”

Of course companies want some kind of quid pro quo for their generosity. In return for sponsorship, most ask for a sign on the gym wall or football scoreboard. In Miramar, Florida, Everglades High School banked $500,000 for naming rights to its football stadium. New York City’s board of education is selling ads on school buses for millions of dollars. “It’s the wave of the future,” Bruce Darrow, President of the Brooklawn, New Jersey, school board, told The New York Times. “I’m looking into selling advertising on the children’s basketball uniforms.”

The strategy makes business sense. If parents, students, and teachers see that a supermarket or shoe company is helping them out, they’re more likely to patronize that retailer or manufacturer. And such sponsorships don’t need to affect the quality of learning. Besides, we deal with marketing from TV, radio, magazines, and billboards every day. The messages bounce off most of us like beach balls. Why shouldn’t schools take advantage of this income source if no harm comes of it?

If government isn’t willing to supply public schools with the money they need, then no one should complain if schools go where the money is—and do what they have to in order to get it.

Schools are finding it harder and harder to draw the line between marketing and education. As the Center for Commercial-Free Public Education puts it, “Commercialism in schools brings up many legal and ethical questions: Who owns the school when it is sponsored by a particular company? Who controls the curriculum? What kinds of long-term effects will commercialism have over teaching and freedom of speech in the classroom?”

If Nike sponsors the athletic program, will we be pressured to surrender our Reeboks? Will a company CEO someday ban certain books from our school libraries?

If corporations are truly interested in helping out schools, there are less smarmy ways to do it. Turning public school basketball players into running, jumping billboards by sewing ads on their uniforms is just bizarre.

Lastly, our schools aren’t perfect but they’re still special places. The integrity of education and learning should be protected from people whose main goal is to make a buck. “Schools should be all about teaching students to make their own choices, not coercing them to buy things they don’t need,” a parent told the Seattle, Washington, school board when it considered selling advertising space in its schools. “Schools should not be selling my child as a consumer to corporations.”

Your Turn! Do some first-person research by checking with your school’s administrators. Does your district have corporate sponsors? If so, what do the businesses get and what does your school get? Be specific. Based on your findings, write a letter to your school or local newspaper arguing for or against corporate sponsorship of your school.