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THE EDUCATIONAL COST OF SCHOOLHOUSE COMMERCIALISM

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THE EDUCATIONAL COST OF SCHOOLHOUSE COMMERCIALISM

THE FOURTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT ON SCHOOLHOUSE COMMERCIALIZING TRENDS: 2010-2011

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Executive Summary

Over the past several decades, schools have faced increasing pressure to “partner” with businesses, both to be seen as responsive to the business community and out of the hope that partnerships would help make up budget shortfalls as states reduced public funding for education.

Often, school-business partnerships are little more than marketing arrangements with little if any educational benefit and the potential to harm to children in a variety of ways. The 2010-2011 Annual Report on Schoolhouse Commercializing Trends considers how commercializing activities in schools harm children educationally.

It is relatively easy to understand how corporate commercializing activities harm children educationally by undermining curricular messages (as when candy and soft drink ads contradict nutrition lessons) or by displacing educational activities (as when students spend time focused on a corporate contest rather than the curriculum). A less obvious, though perhaps more serious, educational harm associated with school commercialism is the threat it poses to critical thinking.

Researchers generally agree that thinking critically requires abilities, such as problem-solving, decision-making, inductive and deductive inference-making, divergent thinking, evaluative thinking, and reasoning. According to the research literature, critical thinking is best cultivated in a school environment that encourages students to ask questions, to think about their thought processes, and thus to develop habits of mind that enable them to transfer the critical thinking skills they learn in class to other, unrelated, situations.

It is not in the interest of corporate sponsors to promote critical thinking. Far from it: their interest is in selling their products or services or “telling their story.” Encouraging children to learn to identify and critically evaluate a sponsor’s point of view and biases, to consider alternative points of view or products and services, or to generate and consider solutions to problems other than the ones sponsors offer would, from a corporate point of

view, be self-defeating. For this reason, sponsored messages will necessarily avoid touching on anything that might lead to thinking inconsistent with the intended message.

Although commercializing activities channel student thinking into a corporate-friendly track, the impact on critical thinking of doing so is rarely considered. In part this is because some commercializing activities, such as sponsored educational materials, may, on the surface, appear to have educational benefit. They may, for example, claim to address national standards for basic skills, or to encourage analytic thinking about contemporary issues such as energy policy. Moreover, since marketing is often framed as a "partnership" with schools, even when teachers might want to engage students in thinking critically about the message being marketed, doing so would mean "biting the hand that feeds" the school. Thus, to understand the educational harms of school marketing, it is necessary to understand both how commercial activities cause some things to happen in schools and classrooms and how they prevent or discourage other things from happening.

It's All in a Name

It used to be that the names of places mirrored deeper meanings, values, and our past.

By Jonathan Rowe

Published January 26, 2006 Christian Science Monitor

The news that a town in Texas has changed its name to that of a corporation, in exchange for free TV, made me think about my elementary school, which was named for a local man who died in World War I. I'm not going to pretend that I sat at my desk each day and pondered his bravery, as opposed to, say, the little League Game that evening.

But I still remember the awe I felt when I looked up at the plaque in the main corridor. Somehow the message penetrated my unruly mind, that I was supposed to be brave and unselfish, and to serve my community and my country, the way young Albert Edgar Angier had done.

America once was full of messages like that. Schools, arenas, and public places bore the names of civic leaders and national and local heroes. A Washington Square Park, a Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, was not just a memorial to a dead person. It was a testament to the qualities of character that the nation purports to stand for and to pass along to its young.

Have you ever heard of Joel Elias Spingarn? He was a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, a founder of the Harcourt Brace publishing company, and for many years an executive of the NAACP. His memory lives on in part because Spingarn High School in Washington, D.C., is named after him. His achievements are an example to every student who walks through its doors.

It's not the kind of message that young Americans are getting much these days. Increasingly the Spingarns and Angiers are giving way to corporations eager for yet another hook into the minds of kids. Buses, hallways, classrooms, and even textbooks are filling up with come-ons for junk food and the like. A high school football field in Illinois has become Rust-Oleum Field. In New Jersey, an elementary school now has a ShopRite gym.

It's not just the schools. Piece by piece the civic landscape is collapsing under a deluge of commercial self-promotion. Sports stadiums, parks, and other spaces all are dropping civic names for corporate ones. Ballparks once were a kind of lyric poetry of place. Crosley Field meant Cincinnati. Briggs Stadium meant Detroit. Candlestick conjured up

the San Francisco fog, and the wondrous Willie Mays. Now you hear Cinergy, Comerica, SBC, and you are everywhere and nowhere.

Then there's Clark, Texas. This hamlet of 125 residents has agreed to change its name to DISH, which is a satellite TV system owned by Echo-Star Communications. In exchange, the residents will get free satellite TV for 10 years. When a locality sells its name – its identity – to a corporation, it is both the logical culmination of the trend, and an object lesson in what's at stake.

In scriptural times, the bestowal of a name was an event of great significance. A name was an expression of character; and humans earned new ones in accordance with their inner growth. Jacob, after he spent the night wrestling with his demons, became Israel. His old name means “to seize by the heel.” His new one, “God will rule.” The places where such events occurred acquired new names, too. Jacob called the place of his trial Peniel, which means the “face of God.”

Places had meanings. Their names connected the outer landscape to the inner – to the shared identity of the people, and to that which they most valued. For most of its history, our nation followed a civic version of this same tradition. Our outer landscape mirrored our character, our values, and our past.

The strange part is, it's not the “godless liberals” who have brought about this change. For the most part, it's the same ideologues who lecture us about traditional values on other days. They cut taxes to the point that schools and the rest are desperate for funds. Colorado Springs District 11 was one of the first to sell ads on school buses. It was in a “fiscal crisis” a spokeswoman there explained. “They couldn't pass a bond or any kind of tax increase.”

Ergo, the Coke ads in schools. Across the nation, plaques to the young men and women who give their lives in Iraq now will have to share space with those.

Next time ideologues bemoan the decline in traditional values in America today, and how young people choose self-indulgence over service, they might look at the propaganda they have invited into the schools, and into the culture at large. Character comes with a price; and if you aren't willing to pay for it, don't blame others when it is gone.