

SHEILA HARTY

Corporate Influence  
in Schools

# U.S. Corporations: Still Pitching After All These Years

If we continue to allow commercial exploitation in the schools, we are partners in the transformation of education from a free marketplace of ideas to a common marketplace of goods.

Schoolchildren are for sale to the highest bidder. This was true in 1979, when my book *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools* was published, and the situation is even more threatening today. Today's corporations are slicker, more sophisticated in their marketing strategies than they were a decade ago. Intrusions into the classroom by business interests continue unabated—some blatantly promotional, others more subtly biased.

But schools are not alone in being transformed into commercial vehicles for advertising to children. Book covers, lunch boxes, coloring books, comics, T-shirts, radios, and toys—everything in the child's world becomes ad space. Toy gas trucks bear *Mobil* or *Shell* on their sides, toy cargo trucks carry make-believe loads of *Pepsi Cola* or *Budweiser*, and toy telephone trucks are labeled *Bell Systems*.

### Sophisticated Tools in a Power Game

However, commercial exploitation of curriculum is qualitatively different from—and more reprehensible than—other forms of market advertising to children precisely because it masquerades as "education." Under the tutelage of business, knowledge becomes the means to an end—quantitative, pragmatic, and marketable.

The result is an anti-intellectual em-

phasis that creates a trade school mentality to secure jobs and a consumptionist drive to purchase status goods. Thus, corporate handouts are not simple supplementary gifts but sophisticated marketing tools for a high-stakes power game that alters the purpose of public education. As a marketplace of ideas, the school should offer a balance and diversity of views, not free access for those who pay entrance.

**Book covers, lunch boxes, coloring books, comics, T-shirts, radios, and toys—everything in the child's world becomes ad space.**

### Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

But teachers need help seeking out alternative resources and counterbalancing perspectives. They often lack the time and the expertise to compensate for subtle or flashy Madison Avenue bias. Insufficient disclosure labeling of the sponsoring company's vested interests, for example, prohibits a teacher from adequately weighing the advocacy perspective within a balanced lesson plan.

And who decides if it's public service or propaganda? Corporate public relations easily drape their commercial motive with artistic form or focus, transforming specific product promotion into a civic discussion of the needs and difficulties in a product field. Thus, "image" advertising is used to promote the company name without any direct selling; "issue" advertising is used to argue the company's position on current public controversies.

Advertising through either approach entraps educators in the maneuvers of language and the camouflage of public relations. Thus, firms with significant access to capital can skew social, economic, or political debate through sustained education or media campaigns. Electric utilities, re-member, promoted nuclear power as "energy education."

If we defer to commercial exploita-

tion of the curriculum—masquerading as “education”—corporations will continue to avoid accountability, and we will continue to participate in the transformation of education from a free marketplace of ideas to a common marketplace of goods.

### Safeguards and Boundaries

We are, therefore, in dire need of safeguards to curb commercial intrusions in our schools. It's time to draw some boundaries. In the U.K., a government agency called the National Consumer Council has issued evaluation guidelines for commercially sponsored education materials in their country, as has the International Organization of Consumers Unions worldwide. Perhaps education associations or government agencies should take responsibility for this oversight in the U.S. For example, we might consider:

- disclosure labeling of corporate sponsorship and vested interests but not trademark logos or mascots;
- recruiting alternative materials from government, consumer, profes-

sional, and academic sources in counterbalance;

- training teachers and students in critical selection and assessment of commercial materials and methods;
- promoting more evaluative study on the form and content of corporate materials and their effects on students.

Certainly, the problems of financing education and the budget constraints on school resources need reevaluation. Yet drawing on private monies to underwrite instructional materials is contrary to the structure and principle of tax-supported public education. Curricular materials, like teachers' salaries, should come from public monies without intervention from private interests. Would we trust a teacher endowed as an Exxon Fellow? Let's look at alternatives—reforms in school finance, tax assessment, and tax enforcement to offset the lack of local funds for instructional resources.

### What's Really at Stake

Left unchallenged, pervasive commercial influence, as we can observe

among today's youth, replaces values with commodities. Artificial expectations are created as a result of overexposure to material goals. The effects are a numbing of critical inquiry into motives, a monopoly of economic power in society, and a dearth of ethical values in life—a kind of cultural poverty.

We must take precautions now to curb commercial exploitation in the schools, lest our schools fall farther and farther from their intellectual and social purposes. Do we really want the Jolly Green Giant teaching nutrition, Reddy Kilowatt teaching energy, and chemical companies teaching about the environment?

Schoolchildren are not the rational consumers for whom advertising provides information relevant to logical market behavior. We must not allow them to become pawns in the game of building corporate images. □

**Sheila Harty** is a writer/editor, 2032 Belmont Rd., N.W., Washington, DC 20009.

## Call for Manuscripts

Themes of *Educational Leadership* for 1990–91

### Student Success

Ways to increase students' sense of achievement and self-worth, including early intervention, teaching study skills, invitational learning, and community service.

Deadline: March 1

### Strategic Planning

Use of strategic planning processes at district and school levels. Implications of changes in demographics, international trends, technology.

Deadline: April 1

### Social Responsibility

Ways to educate for citizenship, including global awareness. Needed changes in social studies curriculum.

Deadline: May 1

### Choice

Advantages and disadvantages of allowing parents to choose among public schools. Also the role of choice in other aspects of education: elective courses, independent study, student projects.

Deadline: June 1

Papers should be written in direct, conversational style and be as brief as possible (1,000–2,500 words).

We prefer that references be cited briefly in the text (Jones 1986) and listed in bibliographic form at the end of the article, but citations in the form of numbered endnotes are also acceptable. For examples of either style, see *The Chicago Manual of Style* or a recent issue. Please double-space everything.

Unsolicited manuscripts judged to merit further consideration are sent for evaluation by three to five reviewers, usually including both scholars and practitioners; but final decisions on publication are made by the editors. Manuscripts are returned only if the author supplies a self-addressed envelope with the necessary postage.

Send a letter-quality original and one additional copy to Dr. Anne Meek, Managing Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 1250 N. Pitt St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1403.

### Standards

Effects on local schools of the movement to develop national standards and the trend toward greater nationalization of curriculum. How best to state expectations at national, state, and local levels. Alternative approaches to assessment.

Deadline: August 1

### The Reflective Educator

Programs and practices that encourage educators to think deeply about the purposes of education and the most appropriate ways to achieve them.

Deadline: September 1

### Restructuring

Reports of efforts being made to change established practices and relationships. Emphasis on grass roots activity and results.

Deadline: November 1

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.