

Corporate Influence  
in Schools

# Business Involvement in Schools: Separating Wheat from Chaff

Educators can't bar corporations from the schools,  
but we can formulate sound policies for  
structuring the relationship.

Photographs by Ann M. Bradford

Educators could not keep business out of the schools if we wanted to. Even a casual review of the historical record reveals that our profession has always sought the advice and counsel of business people and has been wide open to the influence of the business community. To suggest otherwise would, among other things, leave generations of superintendents (who went to their eternal reward with Rotary Club pins proudly shining on their lapels) spinning in their graves. We haven't the power to "just say no." The issue we confront is not *whether* business will be involved in the schools. The questions before us are: What manner of involvement shall we support, and what shall we oppose, and why?

If we take education for democratic citizenship as our starting point, then clearly the involvement of individual business people on policymaking bodies and various task forces is a desirable manifestation of democratic participation as well as a way of making the views of the business community available to educational policymakers. In our democracy individual business people have the same right to advocate particular policies and programs that any citizen does. Our public life is often made richer by their contributions.



However, we must make a distinction between business people as citizens and business people as representatives of a powerful special interest group. Business interests may be quite different from the national interest, the interests of educators, or the interests of students and their parents. The business community has, after all, spent the better part of a decade lobbying hard and effectively to undermine political support for social welfare programs of every description—including public education. And it was business, according to Ohanian (1985), that gave us Wonder Bread, the Pinto, hormone-laden beef wrapped in

styrofoam, and *People* magazine . . . ,” to which I would add the Exxon Valdez, the public transportation system of Los Angeles, and Saturday morning children’s television.

In most educational policy forums and in political debate, the conflict between business interests and the interests of other groups in our society is relatively open and clear. This is as it should be. However, when business involvement takes the form of “resources” offered to schools by non-educational firms, groups with opposing views often lack the money, and teachers the training, to provide alternative views or point out bias. In addition, in the guise of advancing a socially desirable goal (e.g., the reduction of drug

use), businesses sometimes attempt to conceal what is, in fact, nothing more than an advertising campaign for any number of products. Proponents sometimes argue that advancing the commercial or ideological interests of the provider of a particular “resource” is an acceptable condition for receiving the “resource” or is a good way of promoting school-business “cooperation.” What this argument fails to acknowledge is that if the cooperation of a business in support of public education carries with it a quid pro quo that advances that business’ special interests, then what we have is not a civic-minded contribution to education but a commercial transaction in which schoolchildren are, in effect, uninformed participants.

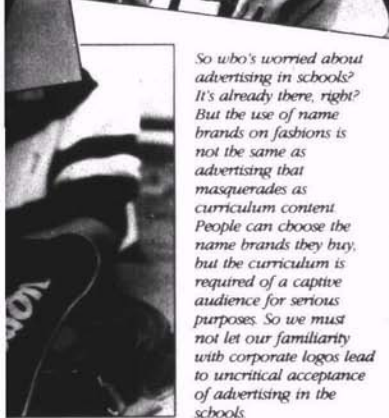
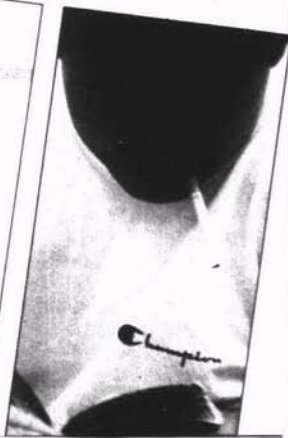
As educators in a democratic society, it is our obligation to encourage the constructive participation of all citizens in their schools. However, that obligation must not be construed to mean that schools may be used to advance the commercial or ideological interests of a particular business or business group under the guise of promoting some putative educational good. Nor can school-business relationships be allowed to degenerate into vehicles for marketing business products, services, or points of view to a captive audience of students in the service of a spurious concept of “cooperation.”

The contributions to this month’s “Contemporary Issues” feature raise issues about legitimate business involvement in schools and exploitation of the schools by business. We hope this discussion will help you formulate principled policies for structuring school-business relationships in your school district. □

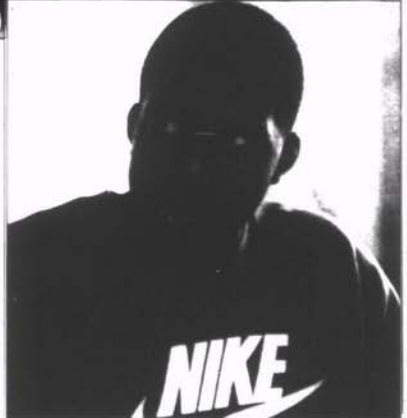
#### Reference

- Ohanian, S. (January 1985). “Huffing and Puffing and Blowing Schools Excellent.” *Pbi Delta Kappan*: 316.

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*So who's worried about advertising in schools? It's already there, right? But the use of name brands on fashions is not the same as advertising that masquerades as curriculum content. People can choose the name brands they buy, but the curriculum is required of a captive audience for serious purposes. So we must not let our familiarity with corporate logos lead to uncritical acceptance of advertising in the schools.*



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