



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

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Testimony of Dr. Susan Linn in support of House Bill 489: An Act Relative to the Public Health Impact of Commercialism in Schools

I'm Dr. Susan Linn. I'm the Associate Director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center and Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. I am also the author of *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* and the co-founder of the national coalition, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

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Thank you for allowing me to speak today. I am here to offer my strong support for HB 489. This bill is an extremely important piece of legislation that, if passed, would make Massachusetts a national leader in the growing effort to protect children from commercialism in schools.

Children today are bombarded with marketing as never before. In 1983 companies were spending about \$100 million marketing to children.¹ Now they are spending \$16.8 billion.² School age children engage more than 40 hours a week with media outside of schools, most of which is commercially based.³ While children see an estimated 40,000 commercials a year on television alone,⁴ marketers today employ a host of more subtle techniques to reach them--including brand licensing, product placement, and viral marketing.

Marketing is known to be a factor in many public health problems including obesity, youth violence, precocious and irresponsible sexuality. It is also a factor in the erosion of children's creative play, rampant consumerism and family stress.⁵ Therefore, it is more important than ever before to carve out and preserve commercial-free time in children's lives. Yet at a time when schools could and should be a refuge from the commercial onslaught, marketing in schools is escalating exponentially. In 2000, the G.A.O. declared it a growth industry with Coke and Pepsi leading the way.⁶

From the perspective of marketers, schools are an ideal venue for hawking their wares. To quote Joel Babbit, former president of Channel One, the commercially based news program broadcast in 12,000 schools nation wide, "The advertiser gets kids who cannot go to the bathroom, cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo."⁷

Marketers also like in-school marketing because it bypasses parents, many of whom are unaware that it is occurring at all. Schools exert extra influence on children because even children who don't like school know that it is supposed to be good for them. Any product marketed in a school carries that school's endorsement.



Marketing in schools undermines children's education, particularly the capacity for schools to teach critical thinking skills, which are so essential to a successful democracy. Will teachers be as likely to encourage students to explore the labor practices or environmental policies of corporations whose marketing funds school programs or materials? Will they be encouraged to think critically about consumption if they are being exhorted to buy sodas to support their sports teams?

In the past year, a Massachusetts called Bus Radio has convinced several Massachusetts communities to pipe commercialized satellite radio into school buses. In addition to the 8 minutes of commercials and two minutes of promotions every hour on Bus Radio, students as young as six are repeatedly urged to log on after school to BusRadio.com which includes a video game column that routinely recommends games such as *God of War 2*. According to the video game industry's Entertainment Software Ratings Board, *God of War 2* is rated M-- unsuitable for children under the age of 17--because it contains for "Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Nudity, Sexual Themes, and Strong Language."⁸

Sponsorship of School Programs: McDonald's holds job interviewing assemblies for high school students.⁹ They also send Ronald McDonald into schools to promote reading, ecology and other programs.¹⁰ Coca Cola has a mobile reading program for early elementary school students.¹¹ Corporate sponsored sports teams are common. Nike sponsors the Nike Outdoors Nationals competition for track and field which bills itself "The nation's premier high school outdoor event."¹² Through a company called The Field Trip Factory, companies such as PETCO can sponsor school field trips to their stores, extending the marketing experience by providing children with stickers and coupons and other branded paraphernalia.¹³

Incentive Programs: Pizza Hut, for instance has a reading program based on exchanging coupons for fast food to encourage children to read.¹⁴

Exclusive Agreements: Beverage companies such as Coke and Pepsi buy the exclusive rights to sell their products not just at vending machines but also at school events.¹⁵

Sponsored Educational Materials: McDonald's has created "Passport to Play,," which consists of teaching materials and giveaways replete with the McDonald's logo that are supposed to be suggestions for getting children to be more active. They expect to be in at least 31,000 schools nation wide.¹⁶ Through the American Petroleum Institute, the oil and gas industries produce classroom materials about energy. These can be downloaded at a site called classroom-energy.org.¹⁷ In addition to their own materials, the site includes links to science materials produced by oil and gas companies. The list is endless. Disney has whole kits for creating school music concerts of Disney Music and creates downloadable teaching materials such as an "Ice Breaker Bingo Game" for the first day of school sporting the image of Mickey Mouse.¹⁸

According to Consumer Union's review of 77 corporate-sponsored classroom kits that claimed to be educational, nearly eighty percent were found to be biased or incomplete, "promoting a viewpoint that favors consumption of the sponsor's product or service or a position that favors the company or its economic agenda. A few contained significant inaccuracies."¹⁹

Fund Raising: Companies like Campbell's Soup, and General Mills have labels for education programs²⁰ which encourage children to put pressure on parents to buy particular brands, even if they may be more expensive or less desirable than brands a family will normally buy. Children are encouraged to sell everything from gift wrap to M&M's²¹ in order to raise money for schools.²²

Massachusetts is not exempt from this escalation. By supporting this bill, the strongest in the nation, we will enable schools to become the commercial-free zones they ought to be and take our place in the forefront of a growing nation-wide effort to stop the commercial exploitation of children.

¹ Schor, Juliet (2004) *Born to Buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer culture*. New York: Scribner.

² James McNeil quoted in USA today. *Six Strategies Marketers use to Make Kids Want Things Bad*.

³ Rideout, Victoria, Dorers, Donald F., Foehr, Ulla G. (March, 2005) *Geration M: Media in the lives of 8 to 18 year olds*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Menlo Park, California.

⁴ Kunkel, Dale (2001) , "Children and Television Advertising," in *The Handbook of Children and Media*, eds. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). 396.

⁵ Linn, Susan (1984) *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: The New Press.

⁶ General Accounting Office , *Public Education: Commercial Activities in Schools: Report to Congressional Requesters*, (Washington, D.C.: United States General Accounting Office, 2000), 26.

⁷ Joel Babbit quoted in: Ralph Nader, *Children First: A Parent's Guide to Fighting Corporate Predators*, (Washington, D.C.: Children First, 1996), 64.

⁸ <http://www.esrb.org/ratings/search.jsp>

⁹ Linn, pg. 75

¹⁰ http://www.mcdonaldsnymetro.com/html/body_ronaldappearancepage.html

¹¹ Hacket, Kim. (2005) Coke's Reading Program can Leave a Funny Taste. Sarasota Herald-Tribune. August 19. Pg. BV4

¹² <http://nikeoutdoor.nationalscholastic.org/>

¹³ Linn, pp. 91-92.

¹⁴ Ibid p. 75.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 84-89.

Hellmich, Nancy (2005) McDonald's Kicks Off School PE Program. USA today. September 13. Pg. 7D.

¹⁷ American Petroleum Institute, "Classroom Energy!: Lesson Plans," Available at: <http://www.classroom-energy.org/teachers/plans/index.html>. Accessed 12 November 2002.

¹⁸ <http://dep.disney.go.com/educational/lessons?id=200>

¹⁹ Consumers Union, "Evaluations," *Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids in School*, (Washington, D.C.: Consumer Union, 1998, 3. Available at: www.consumersunion.org/other/captivekids/evaluations

²⁰ <http://www.americanteachers.com/fundraising.cfm#4100>

²¹ <http://www.school-fundraisers.com/brandcandy/index.html>

²² <http://www.school-fundraisers.com/magazines/index.html>