

Testimony in Support of HB 489: An Act Relative to the Public Health Impact of Commercialism in Schools

Good morning. My name is Professor Juliet Schor. I would like to express my thanks to the Committee, and Representative Koutoujian and Senator Fargo, for allowing me to speak here today. I am currently the Chair of the Department of Sociology at Boston College. Before coming to Boston College I taught for 17 years at Harvard University, mainly in the Department of Economics, as an Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and a Senior Lecturer. My Ph.D. training is in economics. I have been working in the field of sociology since joining the faculty at Boston College in 2001. In 1997 I co-founded a national organization called The Center for a New American Dream, which has worked on the issue of the commercialization of childhood for a number of years. I also serve on the board of Commercial Alert, another national organization that has done extensive advocacy work on school commercialism. Since 1995 my research has focused on issues of consumer culture, and in the fall of 2004 I published a book entitled *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. It is the research from that book which has led me to come to speak here today. I am also a mother of two school-aged children.

I am here to voice my strong support for this bill. I believe the establishment of legislation to prohibit advertising in the public's schools is vital and overdue. As you are no doubt aware, the level of commercial activity in schools has accelerated dramatically, and in ways that no one could have anticipated even 10 years ago.

Corporations have used the presence of funding shortfalls in schools to gain access, and indices of school commercialization skyrocketed in the late 1990s. While some of this activity is longstanding and harmless (such as ads in yearbooks) a whole new range of problematic commercial activities have emerged which careful research has linked to a variety of adverse physical and emotional health outcomes.

Beginning in the mid 1990s, children's marketers began aggressive campaigns to put their brand messages into schools. The school environment is lucrative for a number of reasons: There is a captive audience. What advertisers call "clutter," or the proliferation of ads, is relatively low, in comparison to TV or the internet, so recall is high. Schools also allow marketers to avoid the watchful eye of parents. Finally, when brands appear in schools they are often thought to be there with the approval and imprimatur of school officials and teachers. This grants them a "wholesome halo," and enhances their appeal. Because school is a place whose purpose is to educate and help children, this is not an unreasonable expectation on the part of parents and children. But when fast food, soda, candy, and violent

entertainment are what is being advertised, it is an expectation that has been violated.

However, marketing in schools is not popular with parents, who overwhelmingly believe that brand-name products should not be advertised in schools. (For example, in a survey done by the Center for a New American Dream a few years ago, we found that 78% of parents opposed such advertising.) Therefore I believe this bill will be popular among the citizens of the commonwealth. Parents understand that using schools to advertise undermines the position of school administrators and teachers vis a vis children, it undermines the learning atmosphere and violates the basic purposes of public education. Furthermore, because so much of what is advertised in schools is junk food, i.e., food of little or no nutritional value, and because this advertising has been shown to be effective in affecting what children eat, the presence of advertising in schools is now undeniably linked to adverse impacts on children's physical health.

Even among children's marketers there is little demonstrated support for in-school advertising. A Harris survey of 878 professionals in the field found that many marketers know in-school advertising is wrong. Significant majorities of children's marketers (69%) say it is inappropriate for them to put ads on buses, 65% believe that book covers with ads are inappropriate, 61% believe that branded curricula are inappropriate. More than half believe vending contracts are wrong, and more than half believe that in-school location ads are inappropriate.

I imagine that others who speak today will discuss the proliferation of junk food advertising in schools and the high fraction of schools which allow junk food ads (About 67% of schools nationwide have advertising for these foods.) This happens through a variety of means—television advertising on Channel One, science and “nutrition” curricula by candy companies, incentive programs, contests, in-location ads, vending contracts and so forth. It is also important to point out that stealth tobacco promotion is still going on in our schools—Channel One, a daily commercial broadcast, advertises movies which include extensive smoking. Smoking in movies have been shown in recent years to be among the most powerful factors predicting youth likelihood of trying, and then becoming addicted to tobacco.

I would like to mention a few aspects of in-school advertising that are less well known. While researching for my book, I was able to gain access to the inner workings of advertising agencies that market to children. I sat in on client meetings, interviewed key people in the field, and watched marketing in action. I focused on the newest techniques and uncovered a number of insidious methods companies are using in schools. It is important to remember that in-school

advertising is no longer just print ads on school halls or even television ads through Channel One.

The new techniques include viral marketing. I found viral programs that operate out of school yards, and enlist children to market to other children. I found companies that enlist teachers to serve as “brand ambassadors” within the classroom. Many of these programs owe their success to their secretive nature—they market to children without their being aware they are being marketed to. One of my informants discussed how she used designed in-class television advertising (through Channel One) that appeared to students to be a public service announcement, but was in fact an ad. This technique has been documented in other research as well. The viral marketing stunt that led to a city-wide terrorist alert some months ago was a predictable outcome of a wild-west, anything goes attitude that pervades this industry. There is virtually no regulation, oversight or industry norm structure to structure this rapidly growing field. Indeed, the field is moving so fast it is impossible to keep up without a blanket policy such as the one that this bill offers.

The marketers who design corporate curricula, which are distributed free to teachers, also operate on similar clandestine principles. They attempt to present material as factual, rather than as advocacy for a brand or industry point of view. Research by Consumers’ Union has found this type of stealth bias is common in certain types of curricula. For example, at a time when our city and state is expending considerable funds and effort to teach our young people to be environmentally responsible, energy companies with strong vested anti-environmental messages are able to blanket schools with phony “science” curricula. These materials cost millions to produce, and are very sophisticated propaganda. Foreign governments produce stealth curricula promoting their agendas, and it is legal for them to flood schools with their disguised propaganda.

I also uncovered the payment of money to schools in return for using class time for filling out survey questions on brand preferences and other market information. I talked to marketers who have been able to get schools to assign homework that is actually collecting brand data. I learned about the use of class time to conduct focus groups. These are violations of the trust of parents and children.

Ironically, this kind of “sale” of our children’s time and attention yields very little for the schools, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Most schools that allow advertising receive almost no revenue from these activities on a continuing basis—and are seduced by over-optimistic predictions from marketers.

I would like to add one more point my research findings. In 2001-2 I surveyed children aged 10-13 here in the Commonwealth, and measured the extent to which

they have become involved in commercial culture. I found that commercial involvement has a significant negative impact on children's well-being. In my survey, the students who are more involved with the commercial culture are more likely to have bad health and social outcomes—such as higher rates of depression and anxiety, lower self-esteem, more psycho-somatic disorders such as headache, stomach ache, and boredom. Exposure to media and advertising, including the advertising they are exposed to at school, increases their consumer involvement, and heightens their risk for these disorders. More generally, there is now a vast body of research that documents the harmful effects of branded products and messages including junk food, tobacco, alcohol and drugs, violent and sexualized media, and excessively materialist values.

Industry has spent millions, often through stealth sponsorships of non-profit groups and through lobbying, to stop bills which attempt to regulate advertising in schools. The soft-drink, fast food, and media companies may try to stop this bill. But this legislative body has spent millions of taxpayer dollars to improve the health and well-being of the children of the Commonwealth. Those efforts are being undermined by advertising in schools. We owe it to our children to make sure this bill passes. Thank you.