

9 SIMPLE STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING AND PUSHING BACK AGAINST IN-SCHOOL COMMERCIALISM

When Marketers Invade the Classroom

Parents hoping to limit their kids' exposure to excessive commercialism are understandably frustrated when marketers invade traditionally "commercial-free" venues outside the home. The classroom is a particularly troublesome battleground. The American Psychological Association warns that parents should be especially concerned about the rise in in-school commercialism because children have little choice to avoid such content. Moreover, in-school advertising may be assumed to have the "tacit endorsement of respected teachers and school officials, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the advertising."¹

By taking steps to push back against the rampant

commercialism in our children's schools, we can help promote a healthy understanding of the effects of commercialism on our quality of life, the environment, and a just society. We need to raise a generation of young people who can lead happier and healthier lives as they build better and stronger communities. With the support of our schools, we can help to raise humans, not consumers.



Ready to take action at your school?

Here are some key steps to get a campaign started:

“[A]dvertising to children is intended to shape how children see themselves and how they think about such topics as their families, friendships, romantic relationships, and the world at large. No one particular advertisement or advertising campaign has this effect on its own, but each contributes to framing the values of consumption and consumerism as the highest good.”

— National Education Policy Center ²

STEP 1 Understand how to assess the threat

1 Researchers at the National Education Policy Center believe that advertising doesn't belong in schools at all. But they recognize that it's hard to convince school policymakers to ban all forms of advertising. The Center therefore offers the following questions to help schools determine the types of advertising programs that are more likely to pose educational, psychological, and health threats to students: ³

1. Do the commercial messages in your school threaten students in only one way, or in several ways?
2. How likely is it that students will be exposed to a given advertisement?
3. Are students aware that the material they are encountering is promotion rather than instruction?
4. Do students encounter the commercial message repeatedly?
5. Do authority figures engage in promoting the commercial message to students?

STEP 2 Conduct a school walk-through

2 With the above questions in mind, walk through your local school and take note of any obvious (or not so obvious) signs of advertising. For example:

- Are there **signs or banners** advertising a particular product or service? If so, do these signs appear prominently and repeatedly? Do they displace curricular messages? What type of product is being advertised? Is it a flyer for a local tutoring service on a bulletin board or a banner for a fast-food restaurant in the cafeteria?
- Are there **vending and/or soda machines** in the cafeteria or elsewhere on campus? A 2014 study in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that 49.5% of U.S. middle school students and 69.8% of high school students attend schools that have “pouring rights” contracts with companies like Pepsi or Coca-Cola.⁴ When a school grants these rights, students are continually exposed to branded items, such as soda cans and merchandise, in school.
- Are there **televisions** in the classrooms? If so, ask your children whether they watch Channel One. For more than two decades, Channel One has provided schools across the country with AV equipment if they agree to use class time to watch a daily news show with embedded commercials.

STEP 3 Familiarize yourself with your child's curricula

3 Even more worrisome than banner ads and vending machines is when marketing makes its way into the school curricula. Scholastic, for example, has supplied public school fourth graders with materials funded by the American Coal Foundation, including a “United States of Energy” curriculum that offers a one-sided view of coal, failing to

mention its negative effects on the environment and human health.⁵ In New Jersey, the accounting firm Deloitte LLP provided business teachers with glossy classroom materials designed to “help” students figure out their future career paths, profiling careers that included a writer, a magician, a town mayor—and five employees from Deloitte.⁶

STEP 4 **Review your school’s incentive programs and fundraisers**

Does your school host Scholastic book fairs? According to a company representative, 35–40 percent of the books sold at the typical Scholastic fair are linked to a movie, TV show, or video game.⁷ Scholastic has generated millions in revenue by providing cover for major companies like Disney and Nickelodeon to sell their products in schools. If your school hosts book fairs, talk to your librarian about working with independent booksellers to hold less-commercialized events.

Check out the [Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood](#)’s useful guide to changing the culture of school book fairs and finding independent booksellers that support such fairs.

If your school engages students in fundraisers that involve peddling junk food, check out the Center for Science in the Public Interest’s guide, [Sweet Deals: School Fundraising Can Be Healthy and Profitable](#).

STEP 5 **Record and report your findings**

Record the information you’ve gathered and report your findings to your kids’ teachers as well as to the administration. Be sure to check out our [Schools Unbranded](#) resources, which include a PowerPoint presentation that can be used at a PTA or school board meeting, as well as handouts that can be shared with your community. If your local school or school district is unwilling to enact changes, consider writing a letter to the editor in your local newspaper to bring attention to the issue.

STEP 6 **Find community members interested in pushing back against in-school commercialism**

If your school or school board is slow to take action, identify people in your community who are excited about the idea of protecting their kids from excessive and/or manipulative advertising. Encourage neighbors, friends, teachers, and others to get involved, and share your ideas on social media sites and community lists. Raise the idea in a school meeting and assemble a working group to rally around the concept. Hold a meeting to designate key roles, such as a policy expert, an outreach coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, and a researcher who can gather information on the types of advertising allowed in local schools. Consider coordinating or joining with a local [New Dream Get2gether](#) team.

STEP 7 **Establish a target and goals for your campaign**

Targets can range from the removal of banners in the cafeteria to encouraging your school district to develop acceptable advertising guidelines. Consider a phased approach, starting with awareness-raising and working toward broader policy change. To raise awareness about the dangers of in-school commercialism, create a Facebook page or website to lay out your arguments and post updates about the campaign. Through social media, invite colleagues, friends, and family to events and tag them in photos and start discussions. At school, hand out flyers and offer to speak at staff and PTA meetings. Contact local scout groups and other school organizations and invite them to get involved.

STEP 8 **Push for formal policy change**

Get a real commitment in writing! Formal policies, including legislation, can provide an institutional mandate for reducing or eliminating the amount of advertising found in schools, and can help to ensure timely action and accountability. Getting the top players involved is key to any campaign. Request a meeting with your principal, where you can provide information, present your case, and ask for support in drafting a policy or ban on in-school advertising. Convince a school board member to introduce a district-wide motion to stop specific types of advertising, such as pouring rights contracts, and to move toward a phase-out of advertising on school property. Gather petition signatures from staff and parents.

STEP 9 **Celebrate your successes, and don’t take no for an answer!**

Continue to get people excited and involved, and celebrate your successes, especially if you’re encountering hurdles. Reach out to reporters and send them announcements when your campaign hits a milestone. Document your efforts and share your stories with others. Host a community celebration to acknowledge your hard work and raise awareness of your efforts, so more people will want to become involved as you push for further action.

Learn More

For more information, be sure to check out the Center for a New American Dream's [Kids Unbranded](#) campaign at www.newdream.org

Endnotes

1. Brian Wilcox et al., *Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, February 20, 2004), 7.
2. A. Molnar et al., *Schoolhouse Commercialism Leaves Policymakers Behind—The Sixteenth Annual Report on Schoolhouse Commercializing Trends: 2012-2013* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2014), 14.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 144.
5. Tamar Lewen, "Coal Curriculum Called Unfit for 4th Graders," *New York Times*, May 11, 2011.
6. Anne Marie Chaker, "High Schools Add Classes Scripted by Corporations," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2008.
7. Grace Bu, Scholastic Sales Representative in Los Angeles, phone conversation with CCFC volunteer Rebecca Weiker, August 2, 2006, as reported in "Kids & Commercialism," *Mothering.com*, March 5, 2009, www.mothering.com/community/a/kids-commercialism.

About the Center for a New American Dream

New Dream's mission is to improve well-being by inspiring and empowering all of us to shift the ways we consume. We seek to cultivate a new American dream—one that emphasizes community, ecological sustainability, and a celebration of non-material values. We envision a society that pursues not just "more," but more of what matters—and less of what doesn't. Learn more at www.newdream.org.