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The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

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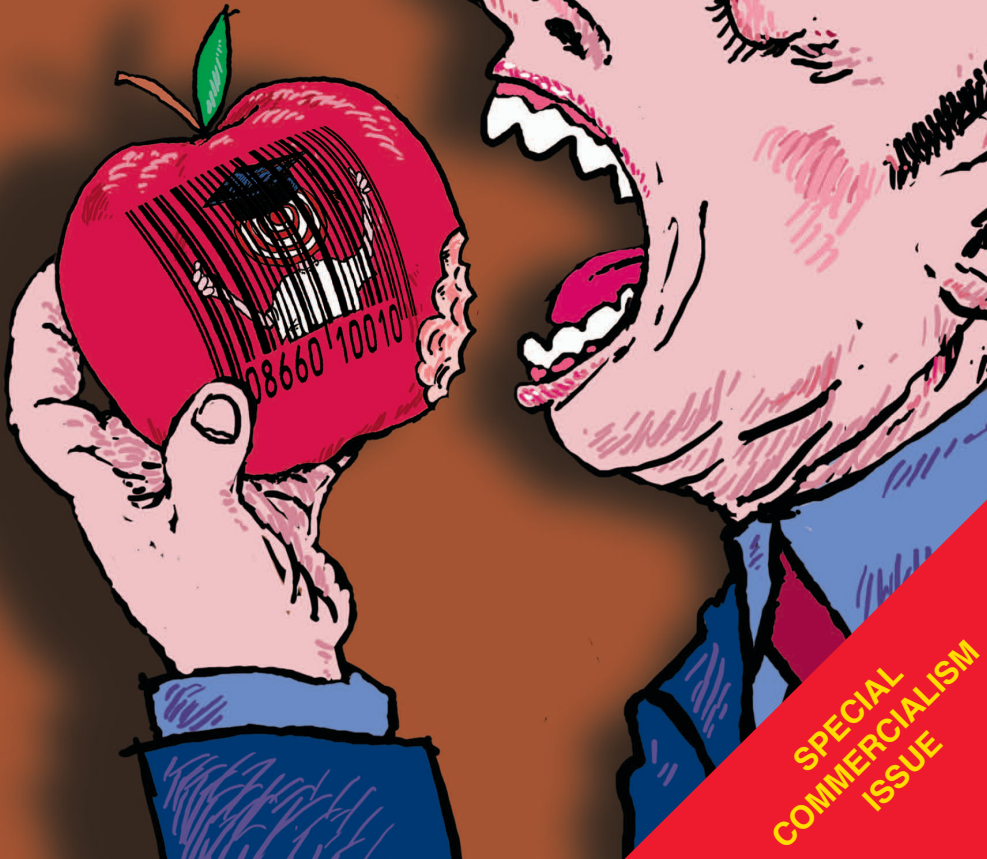
Taking on water
privatization

What's next —
Embryo TV?

Moving towards a
commercial-free
classroom

Beyond the bake sale:

Exposing schoolhouse commercialism



SPECIAL
COMMERCIALISM
ISSUE

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Beyond the bake sale: Exposing schoolhouse commercialism

Let's connect the dots: Over here are corporations persuading public officials to reduce their tax obligations; over there are schools so starved for resources that they must resort to selling advertising space to companies. Lower taxes and a new audience for their ads — this must be what businesses mean by a “win-win” situation.

— Kohn & Shannon

Of bake sales and blood drives

Under the heading “extreme bake sales”, an article on education that appeared in *Mother Jones* magazine cited these examples, some tending to the bizarre, to highlight the extent



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to which some U.S. schools and boards are going to raise much needed funds (Goodman, 2004):

- a school in Oregon held a blood-plasma drive in an effort to save a teaching position
- teachers and principals from schools in 16 states flipped burgers at McDonald's as part of a "McTeacher's Night", earning participating schools a paltry portion of the night's profits
- a school district foundation in Oregon borrowed money to set up a bingo hall to pay for teacher salaries, an ill-fated scheme that was a bust

It appears the one-upmanship continues. When a student at a New England high school attended a mandatory school assembly where students were instructed by uniformed McDonald's employees about job interview skills, he took the opportunity to outline some of his criticism of the corporation. For this, he was publicly reprimanded, forced to write a written apology to the McDonald's representative, and then, under threat of suspension, required to "go on the school P.A. system (which all students have to listen to) and apologize to the school and the McDonald's representative for my statements about McDonald's and for disrupting the assembly." (Kading, 2002)

Then there's the now infamous story of the student in the state of Georgia who made the mistake of wearing a Pepsi t-shirt to school on "Coke Day" (and was subsequently suspended), a story that received wide media coverage. The incident and Coca-Cola's extensive involvement in the high school is described in this passage by Saltman (2004, p. 1):

In 1998, Coca-Cola came under criticism from activists, and subsequently in the press, for their efforts to secure exclusive vending contracts with public schools across the nation. The attention began when a student at Greenbrier High School in Evans, Georgia was suspended for wearing a Pepsi t-shirt on "Coke in Education Day" which was part of a larger promotional "Team up with Coca-Cola Contest." The event involved lectures by Coke executives, science classes that focused on the chemistry of Coke, economics classes about the marketing of the product, and Coke rallies; culminating with an aerial photograph of students

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dressed in red and white spelling out the word Coke with their bodies. It was during this event that student Mike Cameron took off his shirt to reveal a Pepsi shirt underneath, only to be suspended from school for his apparently subversive act.

Presented with such circumstances, one can only imagine even the least rebellious student might feel the overwhelming urge to do the same. For its considerable efforts at promoting Coke, the school was awarded \$500 for winning the district-wide competition and the opportunity to compete against other schools for a larger cash prize.

Beyond anecdotal evidence and media reports, there is little hard data available on the subject of commercialism in Canadian elementary and secondary schools. These are just some examples gleaned from the media and other sources over the past few years:

- School fundraising appears to be on an upward trend; in addition, the emergence of school and board charitable foundations, in some cases with their own professional staff, is taking fundraising to a whole new level (in the U.S. there are approximately 5,000 charitable school foundations, according to the National School Foundation Association).
- Independently operated bank machines (ATMs) are being introduced into some schools; money generated from ATM service fees, split with the machine operators, is being used to fund school activities.
- A McDonald's-sponsored fitness program (the "Go Active! Olympic Fitness Challenge", which has the blessing of the Canadian Olympic Committee) has the burger corporation partnered with 445 schools (nearly 150 in Ontario) involving some 50,000 students in nearly every province and territory except Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador. McDonald's is offering schools a \$200 credit toward the purchase of gym equipment (to a maximum of \$500 per school) for participating schools (MacGregor, 2005). Not surprisingly, fast and junk food companies are quick to blame inactivity for poor fitness and rising obesity levels among children rather than an unhealthy diet (Robertson, 2004). Molnar and Garcia cite the hypocrisy of "McDonald's conversion of Ronald McDonald into a fitness mascot" (p. 79).

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- There is a growing “trade in international students” in which foreign fee-paying students are being recruited for high schools by school boards; tuition fees for international students can be high, \$10-\$12,000 per year, enticing for a cash-strapped board. According to the B.C. Teachers’ Federation, school districts in B.C. brought in \$100 million in tuition fee revenue from Korean, Chinese, Japanese and other international students in the 2004-05 school year, up from just over \$20 million in 1998-99.
- The private tutoring business is booming with companies such as Sylvan Learning and Kumon catering to parents who want to give their children a head start in an increasingly competitive school environment; Robertson (2005) remarks that a “weakened public education system is just a good climate for business, one that an outfit like Sylvan Learning Systems can exploit.”

The marketing mantra — pay as you go

Commercialism is not limited to schools, but is widely occurring in other areas of the public sector such as universities and hospitals. For example, in 1995 the University of B.C. signed an exclusive 10 year deal with Coca-Cola, worth \$8.5 million to UBC and giving the beverage company exclusive rights to sell its products on campus. The deal actually stipulated that students and staff must consume 33.6 million cans or bottles of Coke products by 2005. As actual consumption fell far short of that target (reaching a mere 17 million Coke products), a clause in the agreement allowed the contract to be extended another two years with no additional fees going to the university (*Ottawa Citizen*).

The Polaris Institute has detailed a number of circumstances where some water fountains have been removed from university campuses in order that the exclusive marketing arrangements between the institution and the cola company might benefit corporate water sales. Functioning water fountains apparently hinder corporate profits. (See www.insidethebottle.org.)

There are health ramifications to much of the aggressive food and beverage marketing taking place today — a subject of wide debate

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in public institutions including schools. Given the concerns around increasing levels of childhood obesity and diabetes, a recent study of pediatric hospitals across North America conducted by the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto is startling. It found that most had junk food vending machines and cafeterias serving menu items such as burgers, fries and chips, and nearly a quarter of the hospitals surveyed had actual fast-food outlets such as McDonald's in them. The majority also reported relying on profits from junk and fast-food sales to fund research and programs. One of the study's authors remarked that, "he hopes the research will spark debate within hospitals and in public policy circles, similar to the discussion that has occurred around the quality of food available in public schools." (Picard, 2005) More about this issue later.

There are, of course, a number of broader contexts to the debate over the impacts of commercialism in public schools — or more generally, of a more robust and intrusive private presence in our public institutions. One is clearly financial — that is, the degree to which public funding has declined and the methods by which private dollars are being raised in order to compensate for insufficient public dollars.

This is already widely seen in post-secondary education institutions, where the term "public" is in some cases becoming a misnomer. Tuition fees are, of course, by any other name user fees — and while they are somewhat more accepted in Canadian society, they still represent institutional reliance on private income sources.

A review of financial data from Canadian universities and colleges conducted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) confirms that the trend toward the privatization of post-secondary education continues unabated. The report concluded that the:

rapid decline in core public financial support over the past three decades has led universities to aggressively pursue other sources of revenue. This has come primarily in the form of increased student fees, private research contracts, donations and endowments. In this process, the Canadian university is becoming less

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a public institution and more a private one, less accountable to the public interest and more beholden to private interests. (CAUT, 2004, p. 6)

As tuition fees continue to rise and as students and their families are required to go deeper into debt to finance the pursuit of higher education, the reliance of universities and colleges on these “other sources of revenue” — including tuition fees — takes on additional significance. International students, too, are part of this cycle, as their fees are even higher than for domestic students. In Quebec, international students are referred to in university budgets as “international goods and services”.

The school as a marketing medium

Few parents would argue that public schools are over-funded (or even adequately funded), and the financial squeeze in post-secondary institutions (and subsequent downloading of costs onto students) documented by the CAUT is also present in elementary and secondary schools.

Financial struggles caused by the chronic underfunding of education combined with increased costs and expectations for schools leaves them vulnerable to commercial influence — the “money must come from somewhere” theory of education funding. Molnar and Garcia (2006) state that “the reduction of public funds available to schools and the desire of corporations to be visible in schools have produced a climate in which inadequate public funding is accepted as normal and corporate dollars are eagerly sought.” (p. 78) Certainly the financial and structural stress under which schools operate is cited by education marketers as a situation to be, in effect, taken advantage of by those looking to use the classroom to market products and advertise to a student audience. Simply put, money is tight, and teachers are stressed, overworked and under-resourced — and it’s getting harder for schools to say no or be as choosy when it comes to commercial handouts.

A number of CEOs deny that their in-school activities are “taking advantage” of cash-strapped schools. Rather, they insist, “schools *come to us*”. In a climate of reduced public dollars — which is increasingly seen as a normal state of affairs — many schools find they have few

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choices but to go cap-in-hand to well-heeled “partners”. But is this motivated by the innate positive nature of these arrangements with corporations — or by financial need, pure and simple?

School commercialism is also part of a larger contemporary trend of aggressive marketing to children and youth, a trend that U.S. sociologist Juliet Schor (author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*) found is underestimated.

In addition to commercials, this encompasses increasingly sophisticated and subtle approaches such as covert peer-to-peer marketing campaigns.

Children and youth today have unprecedented spending power and perhaps more significantly, considerable influence on their parents’ spending patterns. According to the 2005 YTV Tween Report, Canadian kids aged nine to 14 spent almost \$3 billion of their own money (up substantially from \$1.1 billion in 1995), and influenced at least \$20 billion in purchases by their parents. This is what YTV refers to as “kidfluence”.

The issue of a growing commercial presence in the classroom is often minimized by the claim that since kids are marketed to on a regular basis, why is it worse to target them in the school. In other words, what’s the big deal?

The classroom is an environment like no other. One school-based publishing company (Paton Publishing) explains the unique school market in this way: “A chance to reach 5.4 million kids and over 300,000 educators in the same place at the same time for 10 months of the year, every weekday for 7 hours each day. It’s a big opportunity ... and teachers and students are reachable.”

The school is a respected location with a comfortable audience that is required to be present and to pay attention. It is a social environment where the target audience — kids — is there to be influ-

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enced, by what they are taught in the classroom and by each other. It comes with added bonus of educators, and a principal: influential authority figures who make excellent corporate spokespeople. And, perhaps most importantly, the school legitimizes products, organizations and messages associated with it.

Clearly, a commercial presence in schools is a very big deal indeed.

Word play and world markets: private trumps public

There is another critically important aspect to the commercialization and privatization of education. Beyond providing corporate marketers with access to a captive audience of impressionable kids with money to spend in the hopes of developing lifelong brand loyalty, commercialism in schools is an issue that goes to the heart of the democratic foundations and goals of public education. Kuehn (2003) sums up the fundamental problem with school commercialism in this way:

The public schools are an integral part of the institutions of democracy. Democracy requires public space, places where debate and discussion inform decision making. And it requires education that prepares people to participate as critical citizens in that public space. If we are to achieve the democratic ideal of equity, there must be a commons, and it must be accessible for all to participate effectively. Public education is an important part of that commons.

The commons is not “free,” in the sense of not costing anything. It does cost. However, if it is to be open to all of us, we must pay that price collectively rather than individually. When we all pay through the taxation system, we ensure that ability to pay is not the criterion for ability to play.

Commercialization encloses the commons and puts up fences, with admission only to those who can pay. It privatizes public

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It's ironic that public schools are routinely accused of being sheltered from economic and business practices — public schools are impacted every day by marketplace decisions.

space. It makes the dollar, not citizenship, the entry point to educational experiences and social and political influence in a democratic society. [emphasis added]

In addition to the lucrative market kids represent (inside and outside the classroom) and the degree to which the classroom as marketing environment makes these commercial initiatives even more effective, there is another ideology at work here. It is the belief that schools — public schools, that is — are sheltered from the marketplace, and it's to the detriment of students that its rough-and-tumble ways are kept hidden from them. So, the application of business practices and business-speak is constructed as part and parcel of helping public education improve and evolve.

This theory introduces itself in a number of ways, beginning with wordplay where students are “clients”, parents are “customers”, and teachers are “front-line service providers” (according to one time Ontario Conservative Education Minister John Snobelen). Further, citizens are “stakeholders” and teachers are required to measure “inputs” and “outputs” to ensure that, upon graduation, students are prepared to take their places as workers and consumers in the New Global Order.

But it's not restricted to vocabulary. Schools, we're told, do not represent the “real world”. Partnering with businesses in a variety of initiatives is a surefire way to make schools relevant, to ensure that kids are taught what they “need to know” in order to become efficient workers. Articles about the apparently deplorable state of public schools by the *Globe and Mail's* Margaret Wentz are invariably followed up with an approving letter insisting that the proof that our schools are failing is that kids don't arrive on the factory floor “ready to work”. Rather, they need to be shown how to operate

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heavy machinery or a cash register because high schools didn't include that in their curricular requirements.

This line of thought rests on the conflation of "education" and "job training", as if it's the role of the public school to not educate but to churn out job-ready workers. Ironically, Corporate Canada's record in job training investment is abysmal, particularly when compared to international competitors. But apparently it's easier to blame the public schools' odd fixation with education than actually adequately investing in on-the-job training in workplaces.

For the record, it's also ironic that public schools are routinely accused of being sheltered from economic and business practices — public schools are impacted *every day* by marketplace decisions, and they have the fundraising campaigns to compensate for inadequate public funding to prove that. Far from being sheltered from the rough-and-tumble world of the marketplace, schools are all-too-vulnerable to its demands (or, rather, the demands of those enthralled by it). It's not a coincidence that deep cuts to federal government transfer payments in the mid-90s (partially in response to deficit hysteria) led to cuts at the provincial level which precipitated a series of crises in education funding in elementary, secondary and post-secondary institutions.

The financial argument is, however, seductive. It allows perfectly reasonable, elected (sometimes) men (mostly) in suits to argue that *of course* schools are important. Of course public education is one of the cornerstones of our democratic society — but the balance sheet indicates that times are tight and we have to exercise restraint to come up with an education system we can afford. We have to determine what is necessary and what is an "extra". And who can argue with numbers? Numbers don't have political allegiances, do they? It's all about "compromise".

This mindset is part of what Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich (2004) describe as the interrelated trends of "the intrusion of market discourse into education at all levels" and "a growing tension between contrasting conceptions of education as a tradable commodity and as a social right."

Robertson (Jan. 2005) has been vocal about the need to be aware of the hidden "between-the-lines" curriculum for transmitting val-

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ues. Case in point — when we allow schools to become venues for commercial activity, we downgrade the educational experience by teaching kids — implicitly and explicitly — that competition and consumerism are just as, if not more important than, cooperation and citizenship. Certainly this is reinforced by the repeated mantra that schools need to adopt the language and practices of business in order to fulfil their responsibility and requirements in the “real world” of the global marketplace.

Who’s calling the shots in your school? A national snapshot of private money in public classrooms

Against this backdrop of theory, practice, anecdote and analysis, we came to the conclusion that what was needed was a quantitative study documenting the nature and extent of school commercialism in Canada. Consequently, over the course of several meetings, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Fédération des syndicats de l’enseignement undertook a national survey to collect data on a range of commercial activities in elementary and secondary public schools.

Over a period of several months, a survey was developed and sent out to all schools across the country. 3,105 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 23%. Data was entered, tabulated and analyzed and for the first time we have a national snapshot of the state of commercialism in public schools — and the range of activities in which schools are engaging in order to raise private money or accumulate resources. These activities include: school advertising, fundraising, user fees, partnerships and sponsorships, and corporate-sponsored educational materials.

To significant public and media attention, the survey results, along with additional analysis and context, were released in Toronto in mid-May. This is a summary of the main findings of the study, contained in the report *Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?*:

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Advertising in schools

- About a third of schools reported the presence of advertising in or on the school, with higher rates in secondary schools than in elementary schools.
- English schools reported a higher incidence of advertising (sold or present generally) than French schools. The lowest incidence of advertising was found in French schools in Quebec.

Partnerships and sponsorships

- 27% of schools had an exclusive marketing arrangement with soft drink giants Coke or Pepsi.
- 5% of Quebec schools reported an exclusive marketing arrangement with Coke or Pepsi while 40% of schools in the Prairie region reported such an arrangement.
- Exclusive marketing deals with Coke or Pepsi are much more common in secondary schools than in elementary schools — 60% of secondary schools compared with 19% of elementary schools.
- 10% of schools reported having an exclusive contract for food services, ranging from 6% of schools in B.C. and Quebec to 18% of schools in the Atlantic region.

Incentive programs

- Nationally, 30% of all schools reported having incentive programs. Such programs encourage students, teachers, parents and others in the school community to purchase or use a specific company's products or services; cash, school materials or equipment are awarded to schools in proportion to the value of store receipts, product labels or coupons collected by the schools.
- Quebec had the lowest involvement of any region in incentive programs, presumably as a result of the government ban on such activities.
- Considerably more elementary schools (36%) than secondary schools (10%) reported being involved in incentive programs.

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- Campbell's Labels for Education was the most commonly identified incentive program (reported by 21% of schools).

Corporate-sponsored educational materials

- Nationally, 54% of all schools reported using Scholastic educational materials (for example, Scholastic book order forms are distributed through schools which can earn bonus coupons based on the number of orders placed; coupons can be redeemed for classroom materials and books).
- The majority of elementary schools (64%) reported using Scholastic educational materials.
- Respondents were asked if their school subscribed to magazines designed for in-school mass distribution that market products or services to students and teachers. Nationally, 11% of all schools reported subscribing to *Kidsworld* magazine, while 3% subscribe to *What!* or *Protecting Our Planet*. Other magazines mentioned were *Verve* and *Fuel*.

User fees

- The majority of schools (79%) reported charging user fees for a variety of services and programs.
- School trips top the list of the most common items for which schools charge user fees. Secondary schools are more likely to charge user fees for sports teams and school programs than elementary schools.

Sale of services

- Nationally, 16% of schools reported that their school or board sold services to generate income (for example, by renting out school space or selling curriculum materials).
- Schools in Quebec are more likely to sell services to generate income than schools in the rest of Canada.
- 15% of elementary schools and 21% of secondary schools reported selling services to generate revenue.
- 14% of English schools and 23% of French schools reported selling services to generate revenue.

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- The rental of school space (gyms, classrooms, parking lots, closed schools, etc.) was the most common revenue-generating activity. A number of schools reported international student tuition fees as a form of revenue, including the establishment of schools abroad. The sale of curriculum materials, including electronic curriculum, was another common response. A handful of schools reported the presence of school district business companies.

Fundraising

- Fundraising activities are common in schools, with money being raised for school trips, library books, athletic programs and technology. 60% of elementary schools reported fundraising for library books.
- Nationally, 36% of schools reported that their school or board had a charitable tax number.

Monies raised through all activities

- Nationally, the average amount of money raised by all schools through fundraising and the other activities referenced in the survey including user fees, advertising revenue and partnerships/sponsorships is \$15,705.
- Schools reported raising sums of money ranging from a few hundred dollars to, in some cases, several hundred thousand dollars.
- Secondary schools on average raised larger sums than elementary schools; English schools on average raised somewhat larger sums than French schools.
- Nationally, it's estimated that schools raise over \$200 million annually.

Provincial contexts — what do the numbers tell us?

In addition to the data mined from the survey, we also wanted to provide some jurisdictional and legislative context to explain the similarities and differences between provinces and regions.

COMMERCIALISM IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: Who's Calling the Shots?

Publicly funded education, universally accessible and inclusive, is a societal responsibility that was instituted to provide equal opportunities for all children. Funding for this public good is an obligation of provincial governments that set the mandate for schools through public policy. Sources other than public funding can divert or compromise the ability of public schools to fulfil the expectations established for them.



The Canadian Teachers' Federation, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement undertook a national survey to collect data on a range of commercial activities in Canadian elementary and secondary public schools. Survey findings are contained in a new report called *Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who's Calling the Shots?*, available on the following websites:

www.ctf-fce.ca www.policyalternatives.ca www.fse.qc.net



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While the presence of private money in schools is quite consistent from province to province (although not from school to school, as the range of dollars raised indicates), provincial governments have a somewhat spotty record in addressing issues of commercialism and private funds in public classrooms.

Quebec, however, is the exception — at least in the area of commercialism. In an unprecedented (for Canada) act, the provincial government banned advertising to children under thirteen years of age (Quebec Consumer Protection Act). Furthermore, in 1997 the Education Act was amended to prohibit school boards from participating in incentive programs. Not surprisingly, the survey results show significantly less commercial penetration in schools in Quebec.

This stands in stark contrast to Nova Scotia, for example, which in fact amended its Education Act to actually *allow* certain kinds of commercial advertising in schools (excluding “undesirable” advertising). Other provinces, including Ontario, Alberta, B.C., Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories, have explicitly left decisions about school-corporate relationships up to individual school boards. And while provincial governments and school boards point to the “guidelines” they may or may not have developed, guidelines are in fact just that — guides. They can be followed (or not), and are open to wide interpretation. Take, for example, New Brunswick’s policy on “School/Community Partnerships and Sponsorships” which requires sponsor name recognition to be “discrete and proper” (clearly open to interpretation) and the suggestion that “classrooms shall be generally ‘ad free.’” That being said, it is somewhat heartening that New Brunswick has made an attempt to record some of its policies with regard to private money and commercial activities in schools, particularly given the general lack of policy direction in most other jurisdictions. This may be as a result of New Brunswick’s unique relationship between its Department of Education and its school districts.

Some provinces have taken a much more proactive approach to corporate involvement in education, and can even be seen as endorsing it. In the case of PEI, where the government holds the main provincial distribution mechanism, the government actually facili-

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School commercialism has clearly moved beyond bake sales and raffles, assuming many forms.

tated the distribution of one curriculum package sponsored by TD Bank to provincial schools. Over the past few years the government of B.C. has actively encouraged school boards to become more “entrepreneurial” and set up their own private corporations to engage in business practices outside of day-to-day education activities. At the time of writing, none of these initiatives have managed to turn a profit. What is not known is the amount of public funds that have been used to set up these private initiatives.

It is worth noting that while Quebec has made an effort to address the issue of a commercial presence in education, schools in Quebec sell services (renting school space; selling curriculum) at a much higher rate than schools in other provinces, suggesting that the issue of education underfunding is as prevalent in this province as in others.

The recent focus on healthy foods in school (in response to concerns about rising obesity rates, tooth decay, diabetes and other health concerns), has provided an opportunity to look at exclusive marketing of cola beverages and junk food to younger students. However, the direction at the policy level (particularly in provinces such as B.C. and Ontario) appears to focus more on providing less unhealthy foods rather than on commercialism — the targeting of schools and students through exclusive marketing deals. Although carbonated beverages may no longer be in the vending machines, bottled water is still an extremely lucrative part of the multi-billion dollar business conglomerates like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo enjoy every year.

The focus on health issues, while critically important, ignores the broader issues of exclusivity, the use of the school as a marketing medium, and the degree to which schools are still forced to rely on private funding sources (money collected from food and drink sales) to compensate for a lack of public money.

And that, as the survey results as well as comments received from respondents indicate, is really what appears to be driving this shift to private money in schools — inadequate public dollars. In most

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cases, fundraising for community schools is almost a regular ritual — for band trips, for sports teams, and for playground equipment.

In order to get a handle on the amounts of money flowing in and out of school districts, some provinces (including Ontario and Nova Scotia, with Manitoba on the way) have required, in compliance with general accounting practices, that fundraising be included as a line item in board budgets along with government grants. This move has generated significant concerns that raising private money is becoming institutionalized and entrenched in the public system, making it easier for the government to argue that public funding for education could be reduced or reallocated if private money (as indicated on the board's books) is available from other sources, such as annual fundraising drives.

Certainly the consistent and brutal cuts made to our social programs including education, over the past decade, have in some respects naturalized fundraising initiatives. Parents expect it and, as everyone knows, will wade waist-deep through snow drifts to collect enough money to ensure their kids don't go without. Teachers also routinely subsidize inadequate classroom spending with money out of their own pockets. And the cycle continues, with fundraising in the short term, and a continued lowering of our expectations of what we can expect from our governments and their commitment to our public institutions in the long term.

Conclusion: where do we go from here?

Despite this, there does appear to be a public recognition that underfunding of education is a major problem — and a growing public willingness to support education through the tax system. According to the OISE/UT survey of educational issues in Ontario, “support for government funding of all levels of public education, including K-12, post-secondary education, and adult education, is at historic highs and a clear majority now express willingness to pay more taxes for education.” (Livingstone & Hart, 2005, p. 2)

Over the course of collecting the data for the school commercialism survey, what became clear is the degree to which schools are relying on private funding sources — from corporations, but also

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from individuals. Indeed, many schools and boards have charitable numbers to attract donations and issue tax receipts. So, bizarrely, what we are seeing is public money, through tax receipts, not just facilitating but actually subsidizing the private funding of public education.

While school fundraising is hardly a new activity, the results of this first national survey indicate that school commercialism has clearly moved beyond bake sales and raffles, assuming many forms. The results also demonstrate that the goals of these new fundraising campaigns are no longer just for band trips but for books, or desks, or yes, even bathroom facilities. These are hardly “frills” or “extras” but rather what most of us would consider part of a basic education.

Access to quality public education is a fundamental right. It shouldn't be dictated by the ability of a school to raise money through private sources — whether those sources are parents, teachers, students, or corporations — or whittled down to reflect the skill of a community at going door-to-door or organizing charity casinos.

The point of the national study was not to discover who's winning the cola wars or which school raised the most money in its annual fundraiser — it was and is an attempt to determine the extent to which public education funding is being replaced or supplemented by private money. We wanted to see which aspects of education are most vulnerable to private funding, and understand how the results of this shift from public to private are playing out in Canadian schools.

There are a number of concerns with reliance on funding that has no guarantee of equity, accountability, stability or longevity — in other words, funding that is not public. Because private funding initiatives reflect the wealth of communities, some schools do better than others in a system where inadequate public funding is replaced by private donations and commercial activities. This is tragic because a fully-funded, well-rounded public education system is best positioned to provide a basis for helping to overcome — not reinforce — social and economic inequality. Private funding, inherently unequal, only reinforces existing inequities between schools.

And what suffers irreparably is the integrity and equity of the public system and the education of those students already most vulnerable to economic hardship.

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The full report, Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?, is available to download from the sponsoring organization websites:

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Erika Shaker, Director of the CCPA Education Project and Co-editor of Our Schools/Our Selves, and Bernie Froese-Germain, CTF Researcher and member of the Our Schools/Our Selves Editorial Board, were on the research team for Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?



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