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Kay Hyatt

College of Education & Human Development, University of Maine

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Study Examines Commercialization of Schools

ORONO, Maine -- Squeezed between tight budgets, funding mandates and swelling demands for programs and services, the nation's public schools are turning more and more to corporate partnerships, striking deals that provide revenue boosts or needed equipment for classrooms and sports teams in exchange for a captive audience of young consumers.

Children have money to spend - a lot of it - as well as the ability to influence parental purchases, according to a University of Maine study examining the commercialization of public schools and the associated risks. Spending power estimates of school-age children range from \$24 billion to \$72 billion per year. Advertising directed at the lucrative age 5-18 market, particularly on school property, raises concerns about taking advantage of children while developing funds that can increase the quality of their educational experience.

The study by the Center for Research and Evaluation at UMaine's College of Education and Human Development describes various categories of commercial activities in schools, lays out the pros and cons of such partnerships and suggests critical questions for policymakers, administrators and parents to ask about commercial proposals. It also suggests that schools establish their own criteria and policies for considering corporate sponsorships and other types of commercial assistance.

Commercialization of schools is a growing educational policy issue, according to Center director Walter McIntire. Education policymakers and administrators are often ill equipped to evaluate commercial proposals, he notes, and when looking at private funding, they need to look beyond the implied altruism.

While there are many positive and successful examples of school/business relationships, McIntire cautions it is important to remember that corporations also must be concerned with the bottom line. "Before schools sign a contract, they need to be aware of the ramifications," he says.

In an overview of the various types of commercial activities in public schools, the study discusses: sponsorship of programs and activities (the most common form); underwriting of programs, with a promise of publicity in return; exclusive agreements that generally demand multi-year commitments to purchase products or services; incentive programs, such as rewarding students with products for reaching a particular goal; appropriation of space, most generally advertising products on school walls and buses; sponsored education materials, featuring a company's logo or products;

and electronic marketing, the fastest-growing segment of commercialism in 1998-99, which usually takes the form of banner advertisement on computer screens.

The report also includes consumer guidelines for evaluating school-business partnerships published by organizations such as the National Parent-Teacher Association.

Free copies of the 24-page study, “The Commercialization of Public Schools: Risks Associated with Corporate Presence in Education,” are available from the Center for Research and Evaluation by calling (207) 581-2761.

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Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761

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