



Saskatchewan



Notes

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How many chocolate almonds does it take to buy an education? Commercialism in Saskatchewan's public schools

Overview

While fundraising is hardly a new activity (ask yourself how many chocolate almonds you've bought to support your community school), the results of a new national survey undertaken by The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, The Canadian Teachers' Federation, and the Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement indicates that school commercialism has clearly moved beyond bake sales and raffles, assuming many forms.

The underfunding of public education has forced schools and school communities to compensate in a variety of ways: door-to-door fundraising campaigns, advertising revenue, exclusive marketing contracts, and seeking either donations or handouts from the private sector. Awareness of these activities has been largely anecdotal, up to now.

The twin issues of commercialism and privatization of K-12 education are a growing concern for Canadian educators and education organizations focused on the need to ensure access to a publicly-funded inclusive education system with neither commercial nor corporate influence.

Among the factors facilitating school commercialism are financial struggles caused by the underfunding of education coupled with rising costs for services and materials and increasing public and government

expectations, leaving schools vulnerable to commercial influence.

Many people in Saskatchewan will be surprised to learn that in many of the categories that were studied, commercialism in our public schools is *higher* than the national average.

Fundraising activities to support extra-curricular and special activities for students can sometimes be justified. But fundraising to support instruction and other essential programs and services in schools should never be necessary.

Methodology

A meeting of the partner organizations was held in March 2004 to discuss a school commercialism survey proposal drafted jointly by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Canadian Teachers Federation. Subsequent to this meeting; a survey was designed and refined over the spring and summer of 2004 with the assistance of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) researchers. BCTF then conducted a pilot test of the survey in August 2004, the results of which were used to further refine the survey instrument. Member organizations had an opportunity to comment on a draft of the survey that was sent to General Secretaries in early September 2004.

Distribution of the questionnaire to schools (one per school) with an accompanying cover memo was facilitated through teacher organizations which sent the material to their school staff representatives and, occasionally, to principals. Every CTF member organization agreed to participate. An estimated 14,500 schools received the questionnaire. The return date, mid to late November 2004, was in some cases extended to early January 2005. The national response rate was 23%. 75.4% of responses came from elementary schools, 17.0% from secondary schools. In Saskatchewan, the response rate was 34.7% (262 of 755 schools participated).

As the surveys arrived at the CTF office they were organized by province (and by teacher organization within the province in the case of Ontario, New Brunswick and Quebec), numbered and coded by staff, and forwarded to the CCPA for the data entry. Meanwhile, some organizations arranged for data entry locally. The process of data entry was carried out over the winter and spring of 2005.

Key findings

- About a third of schools reported the presence of advertising either in or on the school, with higher rates in secondary schools than in elementary schools. (39% in Saskatchewan; 32% nationally. See Table 1).
- 38% of Saskatchewan schools had an exclusive marketing arrangement with either Coke or Pepsi – a full 10% higher than the national average.
- The majority of schools reported charging user fees for a variety of services and programs.
- Fundraising activities are common in schools, with money being raised for school trips, library books, athletic programs and technology.
- Schools raised – through fundraising and other activities including user fees, advertising revenue and partnerships/sponsorships – amounts of

money ranging from a few hundred dollars to, in some cases, several hundred thousand dollars.

Table 1

Advertisement Space Present in Schools

	AB	SK	MB	Canada
Hallways, cafeteria	18.2%	18.7%	18.2%	14.9%
Uniforms	2.9%	3.8%	2.9%	3.2%
Buses	3.6%	1.5%	0.7%	1.3%
Supplies	9.5%	8.0%	15.3%	11.1%
Website	1.5%	1.5%	1.5%	1.2%
Other	15.3%	16.0%	13.1%	11.6%
Anywhere	35.8%	38.9%	38.0%	32.3%

Table 2

User fees are collected for ...

	AB	SK	MB	Canada
Supplies	56.9%	39.3%	32.1%	33.6%
Programs	50.4%	42.7%	29.2%	29.0%
Trips	77.4%	69.1%	65.7%	66.9%
Teams	40.9%	32.8%	28.5%	24.2%
Clubs	27.7%	21.4%	10.2%	12.4%
Other	8.8%	8.8%	10.2%	13.3%

Table 3

Fundraising activities take place to support ...

	AB	SK	MB	Canada
Academic	16.1%	21.4%	25.5%	23.7%
Athletic	52.6%	57.6%	46.7%	44.3%
Clubs	29.6%	39.7%	27.7%	25.6%
Library books	52.6%	39.3%	38.7%	49.4%
Text books	8.0%	3.1%	5.1%	9.5%
Supplies	11.7%	8.0%	17.5%	18.2%
Trips	75.2%	79.8%	74.5%	73.3%
Technology	47.4%	25.2%	29.2%	35.2%
Other	18.2%	17.2%	23.4%	19.4%

What's wrong with private money in public schools?

The classroom is an environment like no other, a fact not lost on corporate marketers. They openly describe it as an ideal environment in which to reach

this increasingly influential consumer group – our children and youth. When marketing targets students either on school property or during the school day, the publicly funded education system ends up giving an implicit endorsement of commercial products, organizations, values and messages.

In fact, the school is such a powerful environment that some companies have found it to be the most effective place in which to conduct market research on children. Kidsay, an American company that has worked with a long list of companies to target kids internationally – including Canadian kids – explains their choice of location: “Trend Tracker knowledge is gathered on kids’ own turf, in the one place where they spend the most time congregating, socializing, influencing each other, and learning about the world: schools. . . . On-site research, conducted in partnership with principals and teachers – the most informed objective observers of kid behavior – yields an accuracy and depth of knowledge nobody else can offer.”

Publicly-funded education, universally accessible and inclusive, is a societal responsibility instituted to provide equal opportunities for all children. Funding for this public good is an obligation of governments that set the mandate for schools through public policy. Non-public funding sources can compromise the ability of public schools to fulfill the goals set for them.

Teachers compensate for a lack of public funding for education in informal ways. According to the 2005 CTF National Teachers’ Poll, 92% of full-time educators contribute some of their own money for classroom materials and class-related activities for their students (mainly food or drinks, school supplies, books), money which will not be reimbursed. Teachers spent an average of \$344 each in the 2004/2005 school year – this works out to just over \$90 million nationally (CTF, 2005a).

Furthermore, educators (and parents) across Canada have raised a number of questions about:

Inequity: When schools and communities have varying degrees of capacity to fundraise and attract outside funding, what is the impact on equity?

Which students in which communities have access to programs enhanced by private funding, and which do not?

Competition for funding: As schools compete with each other for external funding (from corporations and individuals), how does education suffer? Do the time and other resources that teachers spend on fundraising detract from the quality of education schools can provide? Relying on private donors may create competition among programs and schools, as different institutions go after the same sources of funds.

Targeted funding: Relying on private sources, through either fundraising or corporate donations, allows those private sources, rather than schools and school boards, to make decisions on programs deemed more “worthy” of support. To what extent does an over-reliance on private funding erode the decision-making authority of elected school boards? Are there strings attached to private funding – and with what effects? Who ensures that curriculum and classroom materials provided by private sources are unbiased, complete and accurate? As schools are increasingly dependent on private funding sources, what happens in times of economic instability or dwindling corporate largesse, or when parents are unable to fundraise to the same extent?

Conditional funding: Some private donors may attach strings—an advertising requirement, or the inclusion of certain students and the exclusion of others, or the use of specific curriculum—to their funding for public education.

Selective funding: An increasing number of items such as playground equipment, field trips, and even some classroom and learning resources are being defined as “frills,” outside of government funding.

Unstable funding: Many private sources of funding do not make commitments to provide the resources over any extended period, particularly in times of economic instability.

Lack of educational quality control: Who ensures that the curriculum/classroom materials being

provided to schools by corporate sources are unbiased, complete, and accurate?

The study also demonstrates 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 - hardly “frills” or “extras”, but rather what most of us would consider part of a basic education.

A wide variety of private fundraising initiatives in Canada’s public schools could threaten equitable, high quality, publicly accountable education for students across the country. This finding is from ***Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?***, a report detailing and analyzing the results from a national survey of commercialism in Canada’s public schools.

The report – the first of its kind – documents the nature and extent of commercial activities in elementary and secondary schools and the degree to which public funding is being either replaced or supplemented by private funding sources, including school fundraising, advertising, partnerships and sponsorships, corporate-sponsored educational materials and user fees. Provincial/regional, language and grade level analysis ensures this is the most comprehensive and current picture of commercial activities taking place in our public schools.

What’s the alternative?

Some provincial governments – and governments in other jurisdictions – have taken steps to ban soft drinks and junk food in schools as part of their approach to addressing concerns about the health of children and youth. Others have banned advertising to children altogether (in Quebec, corporations cannot advertise to children aged 13 and under). But these measures are only part of a larger picture when it comes to the role of our public institutions, particularly schools.

Commercialism in our education system runs the risk of treating students as mere consumers. How is that development consistent with what most students, parents and teachers know is essential: to focus on

children and youth as whole persons with many diverse interests, gifts, and needs?

Public education – high quality, equitable, publicly funded and accountable, and universally accessible – is the cornerstone of our democratic society. This important report - ***Commercialism in Canadian Schools: Who’s Calling the Shots?*** - allows us to take stock of how and where schools are relying on private funding sources which do not come with a guarantee of stability, accountability or equity – and therefore stand to erode the very qualities we cherish in our education system.

Commercialism in Canadian schools: Who’s calling the shots? is available, along with more detailed provincial and territorial data at www.policyalternatives.ca The Research Team for this project included: Bernie Froese-Germain – Canadian Teachers’ Federation, Colleen Hawkey – B.C. Teachers’ Federation, Alec Larose – Fédération des syndicats de l’enseignement, Patricia McAdie – Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario and Erika Shaker – Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Sources

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Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative -Saskatchewan
 #105-2505, 11th Avenue, Regina, SK S4P 0K6
 Ph: 306-924-CCPA (924-3372)
 Email: ccpasask@sasktel.net
 Website: www.policyalternatives.ca