

# **A National Survey of the Types and Extent of the Marketing of Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value in Schools**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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**September 2006**

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EPSL-0609-211-CERU-EXEC  
<http://schoolcommercialism.org>

This research was made possible by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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## **Executive Summary**

This national survey of district public school officials finds that advertising in schools is pervasive, that it is dominated by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar, that schools make little money from their participation in advertising, and that most schools' programs would not be reduced if advertising were eliminated. School officials tend to favor increased regulation of advertising in schools, particularly when that advertising is for foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar. The survey's findings, generalizable to all district public schools in the United States, call into question the common view that schools need advertising money to support key programs.

Advertising targeted at children, particularly with regard to foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar, is increasing in general and in schools nationwide. According to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, the rate

of childhood obesity has more than doubled over the past three decades. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns of the health complications of obesity to which children may become susceptible: high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes mellitus, coronary plaque formation, and psychosocial problems. The Institute of Medicine's 2005 report on food marketing to children and youth found that advertising influences children's food purchase requests and their beliefs about food, and that there is a strong relationship between advertising and how overweight children are.

Research conducted to this point provides limited information about the nature and degree of advertising in schools. The Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University has found considerable evidence from secondary sources that advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar content is prevalent in schools. These analyses, however, indirectly measure commercial activities in schools by tracking commercialism-related citations in the press rather than by gathering data directly from schools. The research reported here is the first to directly assess the nature and extent of advertising in schools nationwide.

A stratified random sample of 391 school officials at U.S. district public primary, middle, and high schools reported the extent of each of the following types of advertising activities at their school:

- Sponsorship of school programs and activities, such as sports teams, clubs, or scholarships.
- Exclusive agreements, such as an agreement for a school to sell only Coke products on campus.

- Sponsorship of incentive programs, such as Pizza Hut’s “Book It” program, in which children receive free pizza when they read a certain number of books.
- Appropriation of space on school property, such as when a sports field or laboratory is named after the corporation that donated funds to build it; or when corporations advertise on scoreboards, vending machine fronts, or cups provided at school.
- Sponsorship of educational materials, such as the “What’s on Your Plate?” program sponsored by McDonald’s.
- Electronic marketing, such as the provision of software or televisions, as done by Channel One (which requires that in exchange for the televisions, students view television programming with commercials daily).
- Fundraising, such as General Mills’ “Box Tops for Education” program, in which schools receive funds in exchange for labels and box tops turned in by families.

School officials also reported the amount of money their schools earned from advertising in the 2003-2004 academic year, whether their schools would have to reduce programs if advertising were eliminated at their school, and their attitudes toward increasing regulation of advertising, particularly advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar.

The key findings are:

- It is estimated that in American district public schools, between 33.4 and 36.7 million of the 42.2 million students in attendance are exposed to corporate

advertising, and between 26.6 and 30.3 million of those students are exposed to corporate advertising that involves a corporation that sells foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.

- 82.6 percent of district public schools have advertising by corporations in schools (24 percent have three or more corporate advertising activities in their schools).
- 67.2 percent of district public schools have advertising by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.
- 43.0 percent of school officials report participating in fundraising programs run by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.
- Of the schools that participate in income-generating advertising activities, 73.4 percent did not receive any income in the 2003-2004 academic year through activities with corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar. An additional 12.6 percent of schools received \$2,500 or less and 0.4 percent of schools that participated in income-generating advertising activities received more than \$50,000 from corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar.
- 60.6 percent of school officials support increasing the regulation of advertising in schools, and 68.5 percent support increasing the regulation of

advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar in particular.