

VI. CASE STUDIES

The following are two case studies highlighting positive outcomes for school districts that created policy to restrict advertising in schools.

Creating Commercial-Free Schools

Location: San Francisco, California

Demographics:

- More than 57,100 students enrolled in grades K-12
- 41% of students qualify for free lunches and 13% for reduced-price meals
- Student ethnicity: 32 percent Chinese; 22 percent Latino; 14 percent African American; 11 percent Other Non White; 9 percent White; 6 percent Filipino; 1 percent Japanese; 1 percent Korean; 1 percent American Indian.

Background:

The San Francisco Unified School District Board of Education just said no to promoting commercial products when it passed a “Commercial-Free Schools Act” on June 22, 1999. (See Policies and Tools for a copy of this policy). Coauthored by two board members, the policy set strict limits on in-school advertising.

“Our responsibility is to uphold the educational mission for our students,” said Board of Education Commissioner Jill Wynns. “By promoting commercial products, we give up on that mission.”

Two incidents led to the creation of this policy. The first event involved a group of students who wanted to create a better school environment. A class assignment required students to find ways they could improve their school and community. A group of students developed a six-page resolution calling for a ban on foods produced by companies that are tobacco company subsidiaries like Nabisco, which is owned by R.J. Reynolds. The district had already banned tobacco paraphernalia on clothing that promoted tobacco products. Students presented their resolution to the school board and it was unanimously passed.

The second event, labeled by Wynns as an “outrageous situation,” involved a well-known clothing store. Old Navy approached the district with an offer of donated school buses branded with their logo. The buses and drivers would be provided to the schools on a first-come first-served basis. However, there was one condition: Old Navy requested that students wear Old Navy T-shirts on fieldtrips.

“Marketers don’t see anything wrong with children being used as rolling advertisements,” said Commissioner Wynns. “Where is their responsibility? To the public or their bottom line?”

Challenges and Solutions

The “Commercial-Free Schools Act” was a difficult policy to pass. The former superintendent and other administrators were concerned about the financial repercussions the policy could create. Teachers also were concerned because they were often solicited by companies that offered instructional materials and branded items such as mouse pads for their classrooms. Many of these concerns were addressed by the fact that the policy placed a greater emphasis on in-school marketing, particularly as pouring contracts across the country were being scrutinized. A paradigm shift began to take shape, making it more feasible to gain added support.

“We have an added responsibility to our children, not to Coca-Cola,” said Commissioner Wynns.

Results

The “Commercial-Free Schools Act” was supported by community members, parents, teachers and students. The policy requires that all corporate sponsorships are subject to approval by the Board of Education. It also prohibits the district from purchasing curriculum materials that contain identifiable brand names, or using identifiable brand names in their instruction unless they are found to be necessary to the lesson being taught. Additionally, the policy forbids the district from entering into a district-wide exclusive contract with a soda or snack food company, and it prohibits the district from selling products from a tobacco subsidiary.

“Our students are not forced to wear a logo in order to participate in any activity,” said Commissioner Wynns.

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Restricting Commercial Advertising in Schools

Location: Seattle, Washington

Demographics:

- More than 46,200 students enrolled in grades K-12
- 40% of students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches
- Student ethnicity: 41 percent White; 22 percent African American; 12 percent Chicano/Latino; 6 percent Chinese; 6 percent Other Asian; 5 percent Vietnamese; 4 percent Filipino; 2 percent American Indian; 2 percent Japanese.

Background

After years of grassroots organizing by community advocates, the Seattle School Board approved a policy to significantly restrict commercial advertising on or within district-operated property on a 6-1 vote in November 2001. The policy was weakened at the last minute by an amendment from a school board member to change the policy language from prohibiting commercialism to significantly restricting commercialism.

Despite the last minute change, passage of this policy was a victory for advocates who sought the reversal of a previous policy the district had passed five years earlier that actually sought corporate advertising and sponsorships to underwrite educational costs.

"Gatekeepers need to be alert and pay attention to their institution's mission," said Brita Butler-Wall, Executive Director of the Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools, who has been elected to the Seattle School Board. "Advertising to children while they are required by law to attend school is unethical, immoral and exploitative. It is one-sided and is contradictory to the goals of education."

Challenges and Solutions

In 1996, the Seattle School Board passed the "Advertising and Corporate Sponsorship Policy," which actively solicited corporate advertising and sponsorship. At that time, the school district faced a \$35 million budget shortfall. The school board hoped to generate 10 percent of the funds they needed through passage of that policy. The decision to allow more commercial presence in schools was made without any input from the public. As a result, outraged citizens held two public forums that led to the formation of the Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools, a non-profit organization with over 1000 members focused on getting advertisements out of Seattle public schools.

After reading the Surgeon General's report on obesity three years later, the Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools held a strategic planning session that focused on unhealthy foods in schools. "It was our 'wedge issue' and it worked," said Butler-Wall.

The Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools used a variety of strategies to bring about awareness of commercialism in schools. Such strategies included sending emails to school board members and administrators; distributing fliers; and collecting endorsements from community leaders, parents, teachers, citizens, and students who opposed commercialism in schools. Members of the coalition encouraged the community to participate in public demonstrations against the policy that encouraged corporate sponsorships and publicly speak out against that policy at school board

meetings. Coalition members even picketed a Back to School rally because a company sponsored the professional stadium where the rally was held and handed out free logo items to students.

“Our district essentially was out of control,” said Butler-Wall. “Without a policy, marketers...had a way into the schools and had the opportunity to plaster their ads on the walls.”

Results

Coalition members did not stop their work after the district adopted the policy that significantly restricted commercialism in schools. The coalition actively monitored the district to ensure the policy and the district’s accompanying procedures were implemented. Board-adopted procedures for this policy prohibited all but generic facades on all vending machines; required the removal of Channel One from all Seattle schools; and prohibited logos for advertising purposes and advertising on any district property, including playfields.

Fifteen months after the policy was adopted, the Citizens’ Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools conducted a follow-up review and reported back to the school board that many of the schools were not in compliance with the policy.

The coalition also made a mock citizens’ arrest of the Coca-Cola corporation after finding them illegally advertising on school vending machines. Citizen ‘deputies’ with plastic ‘badges’ issued a ‘warrant’ for policy violations and presented posters that schools could use to cover advertising facades since such advertising on school vending machines was prohibited. The citizens’ arrest drew media coverage. Shortly after the media coverage, schools began to comply with the policy.

“It was a seven-year gig altogether,” said Butler-Wall, who, once elected to the School Board, pushed for passage of a strong policy banning junk food and soda contracts. “It takes years for culture to change, but there is a difference now. You can walk through the hallways and see student art instead of ads.”

Today, the Citizens’ Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools is a broad statewide coalition of education, labor, youth and community groups with over 2,400 supporters, including many local elected officials and community leaders. The coalition is currently working in 12 other communities to develop district policies that restrict commercialism in schools. The coalition has also been active in developing statewide legislation requiring all school districts to develop policies regarding food marketing and sales in schools.

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For additional case studies of strategies that have made it easier for youth to eat healthy food and/or be physically active while at school, visit California Project LEAN’s **Bright Ideas** at www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org.

