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School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity, by Alex Molnar

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BOOK REVIEWS

School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity

Alex Molnar
 Routledge, 2005
 \$18.96, 177 pages

Reviewed by Krissy Thompson

In every school—both public and private—the battle to win over consumers wages on and continues to grow exponentially. When one correlates education with consumerism, it is usually in the domain of final product. What will the educated product of our school system provide to the world market? What kind of consumer will our educated product be in the marketplace? Will our system of education produce a smart, savvy buyer? We find, however, that consumerism is no longer an end product. The seed is sown and firmly planted in children. The marketplace is alive and well in our schools.

In *School Commercialism*, Alex Molnar explores the many facets where commercialism and consumerism thrive within public and private school systems. Whether selling in, selling to, or the selling of our schools, Molnar studies the effect this has on our students and school systems as a whole. The author examines the extent that marketing permeates the school environment and the results of commercialism on our students. Children in school provide an excellent demographic that has already been segregated into different markets: age, gender, and race. The position taken against school-wide commercialism is defended throughout each chapter. Molnar's evidence substantiates the concern regarding the growing dangers associated with current trends in school marketing, including health issues, sponsorships, charter schools, and corporate image marketing.

School commercialism is in essence basic economics, supply and demand: "Virtually every corporate marketing program tied to the public school system is linked by a common thread: the schools need for resources beyond those available through conventional funding mechanisms" (p. 121). With every free supplemental instructional packet comes a multitude of trial products. Manufacturers provide these in hopes of winning over a loyal product consumer. Product loyalty is also sought through fundraising programs such as Campbell labels and General Mills Box Tops for Education. The societal

demands for academic achievement continue to rise. Some school budgets cannot respond efficiently and rely on these marketing maneuvers not as fundraisers, but as integral parts of the educational budget. Corporations sponsor everything from curriculum programs to scoreboards and most often with exclusive agreements. Thus, schools participating in such sponsorships leave these corporations with both a captive audience and future loyal consumer.

Today, teachers use fast-food certificates as a motivator for both behavior and academic success. These have long since replaced the gold star method. Molnar studies this effect given our society's growing concern over childhood obesity. School cafeterias have become a mini-marketplace where private vendors sell everything from fast food to bottled water, often with exclusive contracts. Again, the majority of food sold here is unhealthful, but the demand is exceedingly high.

In Chapter 6, we find that public school education has now become a commodity to buy and sell. Molnar examines the systematic corporate buy-out of low-functioning schools, which are reopened as charter schools. The third form—the selling of privatization—transforms public education into a segmented collection of private products and services sold for the profit of investors. The No Child Left Behind Act was instrumental in making charter schools a viable replacement or solution for low-performing schools. This opened the door so that for-profit corporations could enter the education field. Unfortunately, privatization continues to grow and change in scope. Corporations that once served a managerial purpose in schools are now encroaching into all aspects of education.

Overall, Molnar has provided excellent insight into the many areas that commercialism and marketing have invaded in our schools. American students are not exiting as simply good, democratic citizens, but as experienced marketplace consumers, many with established product loyalties. The author asks the readers to be aware of this and the growing influence and control these product manufacturers are gaining over our educational curriculum and school systems as a whole. With the mission to build moral and spiritual formation as well as academic success in their students, the Catholic school administrator should be especially cautious of this growing trend. School-wide marketing conveys a strong message that what you have is more important than who you are. This contradicts the very nature of Catholic school education.

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