

To the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Public Health, May 30, 2007

State Senator Susan C. Fargo
State House Room 504, Boston 02133
and
State Representative Peter J. Koutoujian
State House Room 130, Boston 02133

RE: HB 489, "An Act Relative to the Public Health Impact of Commercialism in Schools".

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I'm a parent of three public school-age children: one each in high school, middle school, and elementary school. I'm here as an engaged citizen and parent to give strong, enthusiastic support of HB 489, and, by association, HB 2168.

As a parent, I am very concerned about the state of education in Massachusetts, especially with respect to shrinking school budgets and the narrow focus of testing in our schools.

In Massachusetts, many children attend inadequately funded and over-crowded public schools. The current emphasis on mandated standardized tests without adequate funding cuts into time for realizing any of the frameworks - and the unfortunate result is many schools have cut quality educational programming.

Meanwhile, the federal government has mandated that public schools create school wellness policies, but, at the same time, many schools are failing to actively address and promote healthy and active choices during school hours.

So – if public schools are so financially strapped, what could be the harm of a little corporate sponsorship in the schools?

Well, for one thing, there is no such thing as "a little corporate sponsorship".

Seemingly benign programs, like "BoxTops for Education" and "Recycle for Staples" (currently being promoted in many Lexington schools) are offers perceived by busy families as "win-win" for schools and families. But, they are more accurately huge wins for the companies sponsoring these promotions because it establishes corporate name recognition early and often.

Huge amounts of money and effort are invested in making kids literate in the language of consumerism, which essentially apprentices them for a lifetime of consumption. But – just how do such promotions increase the school's educational integrity or the welfare of students?

Well, they don't.

I think it more accurate to say that such practices perpetuate a subtle and pernicious endorsement from schools without competition to the sponsoring corporation. Schools that accept corporate funding or promotions are at the mercy of corporate agendas, which have yet to prove they care one iota for the health, education, or welfare of the students they purport to serve.

With respect to commercialism and its relation to school wellness policies: what message do we send children if parents and schools address healthy choices at home and in the classroom, only to have kids walk down the hall where they are offered choices for snacks and drinks that are high in calories, fat, and sugar? Does it tell them that good nutrition is merely a futile, academic exercise with no real relevance for their lives? I think so. Do we want to brainwash children from an early age to buy products from specific companies? I think not.

Marketing and advertising of a commercial nature should be off limits from every public school, athletic field, sport or school uniform, vending machine or cafeteria. Corporations need to act more responsibly to support the integrity of school environments and the health and welfare of children.

One final point: if we are going to speak out against commercialism in schools, than we must also speak out for media literacy in the schools, as the two go hand in hand. We are assailed by media messaging twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Media literacy is the ability to sift through and analyze the messages that inform, entertain, and sell to us every day; it's the ability to bring critical thinking skills to bear on all media. In our world of commercialism, globalization, multi-tasking, and interactivity, media education isn't about having the right answers – it's about asking the right questions. And it is essential – now more than ever. The result is life-long empowerment of the learner and citizen.

Thank you,

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