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Commercialism in Education Research Unit

*****NEWS RELEASE*****

**from the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU)
and the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL)
at Arizona State University**

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**SCHOOLHOUSE COMMERCIALISM CONTINUES UNABATED
MOST CATEGORIES RISE IN 2003-2004 STUDY OF THE PRACTICE**

TEMPE, Ariz. – Despite mounting criticism, a wide array of commercial interests continue to influence public education, a new report from the Education Policy Studies Laboratory’s Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University finds.

Media references to five out of eight categories of schoolhouse commercialism increased in the period of July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004, reports the study.

The study found two principal new trends within the larger practice of schoolhouse commercialism. One is that resistance to some forms of commercialism is

growing. The other is that, in the area of education privatization, the development of so-called virtual charter schools is increasing rapidly.

Schoolhouse commercialism—through advertising, sponsorship of curriculum and programs, marketing of consumer products, for-profit privatization, and fundraising tied to commercial entities—is driven in large part by continued financial struggles of public school systems to meet the demands of educating children in the face of tighter resources.

“The reasons that schools are willing to engage in what is ultimately a barter for access to their students by going to corporations have not varied much over the years,” the report states. “Funding shortages continue to strain school systems.” Across the country, school districts are slashing budgets, enlarging class sizes, and cutting teachers and programs to make ends meet. Increasingly, many look to commercial partnerships as a source of extra cash.

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) monitors commercialism through media references, conducting searches on relevant terms in the media databases Education Index and Google News and the news, marketing, and business databases of Lexis-Nexis, and counting the number of citations each search produces.

For the period from July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004, media references to schoolhouse commercialism rose in five of eight categories. The categories are: Sponsorship of Programs and Activities; Exclusive Agreements; Incentive Programs; Appropriation of Space; Sponsored Educational Materials; Electronic Marketing; Privatization; and Fundraising.

Individual school districts, cities, and states passed regulations and laws limiting or banning the sale of junk food, soft drinks, or both on school grounds, citing the danger of increased childhood obesity. At the same time, food industry lobbyists and in some cases school district officials—fearful of lost revenues—resisted such controls.

Separately, as part of a larger trend that saw the maturing of the for-profit public education industry, represented by Education Management Organizations managing public schools or public charter schools under contract, virtual charter schools grew substantially, often enabled by state legislation. The leading firm involved in the industry is K12 Inc., founded and headed by William Bennett, a former US Education Secretary.

The 2003-2004 study found an overall increase in schoolhouse commercialism references of 9%, to 5,742 references in 2003-2004, compared from 5264 references in 2002-2003. By category:

- References to Sponsorship of School Programs and Activities rose 9%;
- References to Exclusive Agreements rose 122%;

- References to Incentive Programs, which provide some sort of reward in the form of a commercial product or service in return for students who achieve an ostensibly academic goal, such as perfect attendance or increased reading, were essentially flat;
- References to Appropriation of Space—the use of school property to promote individual corporations through mechanisms such as naming rights or general advertising—rose by 87%;
- References to Sponsored Educational Materials—curriculum materials produced largely by an outside corporate entity for use in public schools—fell 7%;
- References to Electronic Marketing-using broadcast, Internet, or related media in schools in order to target students as consumers-rose 24%;
- References to Privatization—the private management of public schools, or public charter schools—dipped 30%;
- References to Fundraising showed a 21% increase.

The study also found widespread references to schoolhouse commercialism issues in the international press, but extremely limited coverage of the topic in the US education press, with only 1% of all references being recorded in education publications.

“Uncovering and scrutinizing the influence of corporations in public schools forces us, ultimately, to grapple with the question of what our schools are for,” the study concludes. “The American ideal of public education has historically been conceived as a means for preparing the next generation to participate fully in a free and democratic society—a role that requires responsible questioning of the status quo and of established power structures. The more corporate special interests are allowed to influence what schools teach—and, by extension, limit what they cannot teach—the more students are seen no longer as active citizens-to-be but rather passive consumers-to-be-sold, the farther our educational system moves from that ideal.”

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) conducts research, disseminates information, and helps facilitate a dialogue between the education community, policy makers, and the public at large about commercial activities in schools. CERU is the only national academic research center dedicated to schoolhouse commercialism.

Visit the CERU website at <http://schoolcommercialism.org/>

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University offers high quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), the Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA), the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), and the Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU). The EPSL is directed by Professor Alex Molnar.

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