In February 2009 the Toronto District School Board changed its policy to allow increased corporate sponsorship of various school activities. While this might seem to be a relatively minor change in policy, it is in fact a sea-change in relations between schools and commercial interests, with long term implications for the kind of education that will be experienced by kids, teachers and parents.

The first trial balloon following this decision came in April, when Future Shop offered to donate $100,000 worth of equipment to two schools in exchange for painting the classrooms the grey and red colours of Future Shop. But this is only a first indicator of the shape increasing corporate involvement in public schools will take in the wake of the economic crisis, and a first opportunity for corporations to get a sense of how the public will respond before upping the stakes with more “partnerships”.

At first it might seem that anyone critical of this relationship must be ungrateful or even indifferent to the pressing needs of underfunded schools and the real challenges faced by struggling families. After all, is Future Shop not simply being a good corporate citizen, especially since this program is being set up in poor neighbourhoods? One might ask “why are you complaining
about a win-win situation”, or say “beggars can’t be choosy”. But when it comes to our children’s education we need to be choosy — and no governments should leave schools to be beggars.

This rhetoric distracts from the central issue: why are our schools underfunded at all? Most discussions about this simply take for granted that there are such profound pockets of poverty across regions, and that there is an increasingly wide gap between the public schools in poor neighbourhoods and the type of public education available in others. But, as in this Future Shop case study, these poor schools are simply being used as a means to an end, as part of a strategy for companies to get their foot in the door before moving onto more lucrative markets where students and their families have more money to spend.

After all, if school advertising is so benign, then why would companies want in? There are several very good economic reasons why corporations like Future Shop want access to schools (while these points apply directly to Future Shop they also hold for other school-business partnerships, and public-private partnerships more generally):

• **First**, to make direct profit through branding opportunities, for example when companies like Future Shop make a profit by selling things to students or developing brand loyalty for future sales.
• **Second**, in order to gain access to a particular demographic because schools are great at sorting markets, for example on the basis of age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc.
• **Third**, schools are competition-free marketing zones in which advertisers can get around the ‘clutter’ caused by the prevalence of marketing outside schools. Ironically because there is no advertising in schools there is less competition for corporations.
• **Fourth**, and perhaps most relevant to this case, this is a way to get around parental protections against advertising — and then to get kids to advertise to their parents on behalf of those same advertisers. Thus, kids become unpaid corporate representatives within their own family, known within the marketing industry as the Nag Factor or Pester Power.
• **Fifth**, and perhaps most troubling, companies can capitalize on the social legitimacy accorded to schools even as their funding is cut, so that corporate involvement can be construed as benevolent.

However, there are also several very good reasons — not all of them economic — why we need to think twice about allowing corporations to become involved in education. Here are a few, using the TDSB case study as an example:

• First, the language used in this case itself is highly misleading. Contrary to how the TDSB is attempting to portray this relationship, it is not a “partnership” because partnerships imply a fair and equal relationship. This instead is more of a dysfunctional relationship because one group is wealthy and seeking private gain while the other is desperate and needy. This is not done out of any sense of public responsibility or with any intention to contribute to the common good. We don’t call it a partnership when someone gives spare change to a homeless person — especially if that person will help promote a product in return.

• It is also not benevolent because any donation can in fact be used as a tax write-off, further draining the public resources needed to support our schools in the first place. Often these important details are difficult to confirm as they are closely guarded by the company that is involved.

• While Future Shop attempts to emphasize that it is helping out poor students and poor schools, commercialism doesn’t promote equity between or even within schools. Instead, it creates a two-tiered system where some schools get money and others don’t, and some subjects get sponsorship and others don’t, based on the interest of certain corporations. A new implicit and explicit hierarchy emerges between those winning corporate favors and those left out. Ironically, their alleged concern about equity in fact promotes even greater inequity.

• These funding and resource decisions are made by corporations based on their own gains rather than demo-
cratically elected — and accountable — school officials. Schools belong to taxpayers and citizens, and should be funded by our democratically elected and accountable government. Instead, public obligations become voluntary marketing opportunities. Will only those programs, schools and courses likely to provide maximum Return On Investment be funded?

- This results in a major transfer of power from democratically elected officials to unelected and unaccountable self-interested corporations. It allows for a new role for corporations in our society and in our schools. How do these corporations know what’s best for students and schools?

- Commercial sponsorship aims to profit by using the school system’s structural ability to organize a youth demographic into manageable markets, because schools are far better at organizing a particular market than television or other strategies. They organize a population by age, demographic, income, ethnicity, language, etc. There are fewer uncommercialized spaces left, and for this reason schools are increasingly sought after by commercial interests.

- Schools are unique places, one of the only institutions left in society that can help endow legitimacy and a positive image on a corporation. Corporate sponsorship of education in effect turns the school into a PR mechanism for the corporations with whom the school is associated.

- Ironically, the TDSB, in looking for a solution to their economic challenges, is turning to the same economic organizations that caused our current economic crisis in the first place! In doing so they are advancing the same policies of privatization and deregulation that got us into this mess. We already are beginning to see all around us the true cost of transferring power, legitimacy and authority to corporations.

- This business relationship may have problematic implications for the type of curriculum and amount of freedom that teachers and administrators will have. For example, there may be problems if a teacher in the
school were to have students look into the environmental effects of computers — or this company in particular. Corporations often attach “non-disclosure clauses” to contracts with schools that explicitly prevent criticisms of their products. But even if not explicit, few would be willing to raise issues that may be educationally valuable yet may cast corporations in a bad light.

• This type of relationship creates dependency, as once money comes in then programs, policies, and priorities shift to accommodate this influx of private cash and goods. It is often very hard to end these arrangements, so what is construed as a trial period or temporary solution can gradually become permanent. As schools become increasingly dependent this allows an even greater transfer of power to private donors. What happens if Future Shop goes bankrupt or eventually changes their policy? As schools shift to accommodate this new paradigm they might find themselves increasingly powerless.

• There are a whole host of new problems and expenses that surface with private “donations”. For example, who will maintain and upgrade these computers, pay for the added security, etc? Often a whole new level of bureaucracy and administration is required — as well as new labour on the part of teachers, students and administrators—in order to attract donors. This is time, money and effort that could be better spent in a way that is more directed to student learning and less about profit.

• Once the process of commercialization is started in one area or with one corporation, a precedent is set, and other corporations begin to push even harder for access to schools — often using the rhetoric of fairness and equity.

• This relationship closes down debate regarding some of the most pressing educational questions today. For example: there is a wide debate regarding the merits of computers in schools rather than other pedagogical approaches — are technological solutions really the best way to address educational problems? Furthermore, addressing poverty and social inequity requires more
than providing physical commodities. Often non-corporate solutions like small class sizes have a much greater effect on student learning and future success. In fact, why are some schools so much poorer than others? Instead of engaging these questions in a substantive way, such relationships with the corporate sector offer short-term “solutions” that privilege the corporation’s self-interest. In the process such pressing questions are easily overlooked and forgotten, accepted as normal or “just the way things are”.

- Lastly, education should be for the promotion of democracy and the education of the next generation of citizens rather than the creation of a new market of consumers.

To conclude, schooling is not made any fairer, cheaper, or more effective through donations or the promotion of consumerism already so prevalent in society today. To those who say “what’s the big deal”, obviously Future Shop thinks it is! And to those who would say “but schools need the money” and “we should be thankful for corporate kindness,” these points help provide a few good reasons why there is more than meets the eye to the inequities between schools and students that are too-often taken for granted. Sponsorship is an illusory solution.

Few would argue that advertising is not increasingly pervasive. Perhaps instead of more sponsorship we need a place to learn to be critical about advertising without having education interfered with by the private interests of sponsors.

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