

SYRACUSE COMMERCIAL-FREE SCHOOLS PROJECT

Increasingly over the past 15 years, public school systems are partnering with big corporations, allowing vending machines, conspicuous advertising, and market research firms into schools in exchange for much-needed funds and resources. Examples include videos, text books and other instructional materials which advertise commercial products; brand-name junk foods in cafeterias; corporate-sponsored events; and computer equipment provided free of charge in exchange for monitoring children's browsing habits and collecting marketing data.

This project would seek to uncover and galvanize collective action against these practices locally.

Goals:

- To rid local public schools of harmful commercialism and corporate influence, replacing advertising-based materials with sound educational materials.
- To increase critical thinking skills among students and staff at local public schools.
- To increase resources to cash-strapped public schools, making them less vulnerable to exploitation by corporate sponsors.

Resources: Primarily, dedicated person hours, via a viable and effective committee

Timeline: on-going

Activities:

Research/education

- Researching commercialism in local schools. Volunteers interview school boards and teachers unions, visit schools. To what extent is this the case in Syracuse? In Onondaga County? What are the specific problems/examples?
- Parents/community study groups to read/discuss books like *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* or watch films like *The Corporation* which expose school-based marketing to children.

Outreach

- Attend school board or PTO meetings in each district to discuss our idea and see if interested parents are in attendance
- Hold community meetings in various neighborhoods (South, North Syracuse, etc) to discuss the project, get ideas, hear concerns.

Potential Actions

- In consultation with educators and activists working on this issue nationally, create an interactive module for elementary and/or high school students on media criticism (e.g. in elementary school, learning to decode messages in commercial advertising and in highschools, learning to recognize commercial or political bias in reporting). Get permission to do classroom visits and present our module.
- Campaign through PTO and school boards to rid vending machines and cafeterias of junk food.
- Campaign through PTO and school boards to rid schools of commercially-sponsored text books and other learning materials ("Billy wants to buy a \$100 pair of Nikes and he makes \$6/hour working at Taco Bell – how many hours will he have to work at Taco Bell to buy the Nikes?")
- Activities to increase resources to cash-strapped public schools, through support of school taxes, grants, private donations and community fund-raisers.

- Protests and demonstrations at local offices/outlets of multinational corporations that inject advertising into the schools. Campaigns to pressure no-strings-attached financial contributions by corporations in lieu of advertising-based donations of equipment or materials.

Primary SPC Categories:

- Economic Justice/Globalization
- Empowerment/Building Alternatives

Consistency with SPC Guidelines:

- I am not aware of groups already working on this issue locally
- Excellent potential to directly connect local concerns to national/global issues
- Could potentially increase participation among people from communities that aren't well represented within SPC, depending how it is approached.
- Potential to build stronger relationships with other organizations such as teachers unions, parents groups, neighborhood/community groups, and national organizations working on these issues.