

# Today's Class Brought to You By...

by Allen D. Kanner

**R**EVLON, THE COSMETICS COMPANY, IS BEING taught in public schools these days. The corporation provides teachers with a free curriculum that instructs students on “good and bad hair days” and asks them to list the three hair products they would absolutely need if stranded on a desert island. Meanwhile, in science class, students can conduct a Campbell Soup “Prego Thickness Experiment” comparing the thickness of Prego versus Ragu spaghetti sauces. They can also learn from the American Coal Foundation that the planet may be helped rather than harmed by increased carbon dioxide, while materials sent by Chevron challenge the existence of global warming. A first grade curriculum uses logo recognition—K-Mart, Pizza Hut, Jell-O, and Target—to teach reading while McDonald’s, not to be outdone, asks first graders to design a McDonald’s restaurant and instructs them on how to apply to the company for a job.

These are examples of Structural Educational Materials (SEMs), free curricula produced by major corporations and directly distributed to the nation’s teachers, typically through the mail or at educational conferences. Companies spend from \$25,000 to more than one million dollars per SEM. The materials, which include colorful texts, entertaining videotapes, and detailed lesson plans, are a means for corporations to promote their products and market messages to a captive audience that can’t change the channel or click to a new website. An additional bonus is the implicit endorsement of the school.

The usual explanation for the success of SEMs is that desperate teachers in underfunded schools use them as a last resort. Certainly this is true, and SEMs are most prevalent in poorer school districts. But funding is not the whole story, for American schools have grappled with financial difficulties before without opening their doors to corporate plundering.

Here is why things are different today: In the 1980s, market researchers discovered that children have far more discretionary income, and influence on parental spending, than previously imagined. The result was the rapid commercialization of childhood. In 1983, American companies spent \$100 million advertising to children; in 2005 the figure was \$16.8 billion. In this context, schools emerged on the marketing radar screen as a golden opportunity to reach millions of children while avoiding a key obstacle: their parents. It suddenly became expedient for corporations to participate in the education of American youth.

And participate they did. There is now advertising on school buses and school bus radio programs, on gym floors and clothes, over PA systems, inside school buildings and classrooms, and on school computer screens. Math textbooks present problems using Nike, Gatorade, and Topps trading cards as examples. Pizza Hut’s BookIt contest gives

free pizzas to kids who read a certain number of books. Tens of millions of children have entered the contest. Exclusive contracts with Coke or Pepsi exclude the presence of other soda companies from campus. Channel 1, a twelve-minute puff news program with two minutes of advertising, is viewed by 40 percent of U.S. teens. One company, The Field Trip Factory, has organized more than 20,000 off-campus excursions to destinations such as Domino's Pizza and Toys 'R' Us. In an educational environment rife with sales pitches such as these, the introduction of SEMs does not appear particularly radical or worrisome.

The use of SEMs is also bolstered by the current national shortage of teachers. The lack of qualified teachers comes mostly from baby boomer retirements and high turnover among new teachers, who are often asked to step into difficult classroom situations to teach subjects for which they are inadequately trained. This shortage is particularly acute among math and science teachers and in poor school districts, a perfect setup for SEMs. Further, many young teachers themselves were educated in schools undergoing commercialization, perhaps making them more tolerant of SEMs than their older peers.

Aiding the commercialization of schools significantly, SEMs also contribute to an ongoing attempt by the business world and conservative politicians to privatize public education. This project includes school voucher programs, charter and for-profit schools, and private testing services, all of which increase the corporate presence in K-12 education. If privatization succeeds, sponsored educational materials could become the norm.

There are several ways to stop SEMs. One approach is to ban advertising in schools, thereby eliminating SEMs. Another is to require SEMs, like textbooks, to be screened for scientific accuracy and completeness, as well as educational relevance. Fully funding schools would also work. In fact, protecting schools from commercialization is now a pressing reason to ensure that public education is well financed.

Good teaching involves passing on society's deepest knowledge and highest values. SEMs pervert knowledge and undermine values. It's time they be expelled from school. ■



*Allen D. Kanner, Ph.D., is a co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood ([www.commercialfreechildhood.org](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org)), co-editor of Psychology and Consumer Culture and Ecopsychology, and a Berkeley child, family, and adult psychologist.*