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University of Nevada, Reno

**Advertising and Teenagers: Understanding How High School Students Evaluate
Television Commercials**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and the Honors Program

by

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Abstract

Advertising to children has been a contentious subject for many years. Debates have raged over whether children possess the cognitive abilities to understand advertising's intent, whether or not children are exposed to too many advertisements, and whether advertisers should be allowed to market directly to children at all. These debates and questions grow even more heated when advertisers enter schools. Schools, the bastions of a democratic society, have been traditionally viewed as places where children are able to grow, learn, and explore the world, free from outside interference. The frequency and types of advertising in schools in the United States have been increasing tremendously since the 1980s. There are several reasons for this, including a demand for improved school performances and, at the same time, shrinking financial support for schools. Many schools are forced to partner with corporations and advertisers in order to bring in necessary revenue. The consequences of in-school advertising are hotly debated, but this comparative analysis of existing research suggests that the ads do have some impact on students, mainly in the area of purchase intentions. To what extent in-school advertising affects actual purchases is still unclear.

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Introduction

My thesis explores the research that details the effects of television commercials on high school students. In today's modern world, advertising is ubiquitous. Advertising invades everyone's lives, regardless of age. Advertisements on television, the Internet, in magazines and newspapers, on billboards, at bus stops, in movie theaters, even in public restrooms are impossible to escape. This rise of advertising and commercialism in society mirrors a rise of advertising and commercialism within American schools. The consumer culture present in the U.S. requires the large availability and variety of products and goods. Advertising and media are key in a consumer culture (Kenway, and Bullen 9).

Advertising is a "social narrative." It "tells fictional tales about social identities and relationships, and implies that the purchase of goods will fulfill the story's promise" (Kenway, and Bullen 31). In today's society, advertising informs consumers of what products are available, their benefits, and why those products will improve their lives. Advertising provides the link between production and consumption. Consumption has come to define many individuals in society. A person is judged by what products she owns and by how many she can amass. Consumption "plays an important role in identity development, in group formation, in distinctions, differentiations, and relationships" (Kenway, and Bullen 31).

Kids growing up in the world today come to embrace the values of consumerism and consumption. They are bombarded with messages everyday from all places. It is impossible to expect kids not to be affected by these messages. But what effect do these advertisements have on children when they are present in schools? How do students

understand and process in-school advertising, especially ads in the form of television commercials? My thesis will attempt to address what effect in-school advertisements, specifically television commercials have on adolescents, which include students in 6th through 12th grade. The effects I want to study are consumer behaviors, in particular, purchase intention and actual purchases. I chose to focus on adolescents and not younger children because there is a lack of information regarding the effects of advertising on adolescents. To answer this question, one must first understand the narrative of advertising to children in general and then understand how that narrative has been transferred into the classroom.

Adolescent Information

This project focuses on adolescent high school students. While there have been numerous studies and books written on the effects of advertising on children under the age of 12, little has been written on adolescents and advertising. In order to understand how advertising affects adolescents, it is necessary to examine the process in which they learn to be consumers. There is no question that the U.S. culture is consumption driven, and that it encourages even the youngest members to participate in the marketplace.

How then do the youngest consumers learn to want and need material goods? Consumerism is not an innate characteristic, but rather develops from societal observations and people or things called “socialization agents” (McNeal, *Children* 13). The main socialization agents in the formative years of childhood are parents. Parents establish what is important, expose their children to different environments and have the most influence in their lives. Thus, it makes sense that children will look to their parents

to help them understand the elements of the marketplace. Children's first interactions in the marketplace come with their parents, in the form of trips to the supermarket, mall, or other stores. Parents give children money and allow them to make some purchase decisions which shapes their consumer behaviors (McNeal, *Children* 15).

Peers, another major group that influences and shapes consumer behavior, encourage similar spending habits. Fitting into a group is easier when everyone owns the same products. Other socialization agents include teachers, businesses and products themselves. Teachers educate students about the marketplace through field trips or actual lessons. Businesses use advertising as the main way to influence children's consumer behavior. Products become socialization agents when children learn to distinguish between different brands based on packaging and logos (McNeal, *Children* 19, 21, 23). James U. McNeal, the leading expert in the field of advertising to children writes, "It seems clear, then, that children are turned into consumers at a very early age in our society through the desires and encouragement of parents, who also provide the youngsters with the necessary financial support" (McNeal, *Children* 29).

Since children do become consumers at a young age, McNeal argues they deserve a voice in society. Around age five, children start seeing the market as a place to satisfy their needs. At seven, they think shopping is "necessary and exciting," and by age nine, children see shopping as "necessary" (McNeal, *Children* 50). Children use their own shopping experiences to learn about the purpose of stores, prices and differences in products. McNeal writes,

The results of the information processing of advertised messages by children are, according to research, the formation of attitudes towards or

against products and sometimes their makers or sellers, interests in certain products and brands, intentions to buy certain items, desires to buy certain products (usually by brand) and preferences for brands of some products and for some stores (McNeal, *Children* 66).

Some critics of children becoming consumers, mainly educators and psychologists, have blamed advertising for the consumerization of childhood, but McNeal says that society and culture is at fault. Learning to gain satisfaction from purchasing something is a societal construct and is not directly caused by advertisers (McNeal, *Children* 92). Even if children do not completely understand advertising or the marketplace, they still have the right to be a consumer.

Thus, different groups of people including parents and peers, as well as society, contribute to children understanding that consumerism is a part of our culture. How then, do children become a viable segment for marketers to target? McNeal explains that, "For children to be considered consumers, at least from a marketer's standpoint, they must have wants, money to spend, and there must be enough of them to make marketing efforts worthwhile" (McNeal, *Kids* 4). Because parents, the main agents of socialization, give children allowance or extra money to spend, they become a legitimate market for advertisers to target (McNeal, *Bibliography* v). There are many factors that account for children's increased economic status, but a few key ones are: fewer children per parents, fewer parents per child, delays in having children, and households in which both parents work (McNeal, *Kids* 7). It is estimated that adolescents spend \$94 billion every year, and influence family purchases in excess of \$600 billion per year (McNeal, *Kids* 8). These

factors make children an attractive population segment for marketers and advertisers, and have contributed to the growth of advertising that is targeted at children.

However, many studies have shown that children do not start to understand the intent of advertising, specifically television commercials, until age eight. In order for children to objectively respond to advertising they must be able to differentiate between regular programming and ads, understand the purpose of the ad, and understand the ad's basic message in terms of what is being said or asked (McNeal, *Children* 76-77). If children are to be a market, there must be protections in place to guard against false and deceitful advertising. "Any advertiser who stoops to deceiving children stoops to the lowest level of deception because children are by psychological definition the easiest human beings to deceive..." (McNeal, *Children* 72). McNeal lays out the guidelines that marketers must follow. They include assuming that children are gullible, assuming children possess limited understanding of business operations, assuming children possess limited dexterity, assuming children have a limited mastery of language, and assuming children have critical and caring parents (McNeal, *Children* 186-188). The last guideline is telling in regards to McNeal's views of advertising to children. He assumes that parents will protect children from any offensive or distasteful ads. He also writes,

Children should be viewed as superspecial consumers deserving of superspecial treatment by the marketing system. This is necessary only for a short time, while the children are becoming fully qualified consumers, and it will guarantee happier and more effective customers for all marketers for all time (*Children* 190).

McNeal ends his argument contending that advertising is good for children because it helps develop their consumer socialization skills. It also gives them satisfaction from purchasing products and becoming part of the consumer culture.

From an advertiser's perspective, children become consumers at a young age because of societal norms and expectations. It is only natural then for them to become an important segment of the consumer market. Advertisers like McNeal stress that it is not them who teach children to consume and want material goods, but rather society that teaches them this quality. This puts the blame on society, not the advertisers.

History of Advertising to Children

Now that children are established as a consumer base, how have advertisers historically treated them? At the end of the 19th century, children were seen as “savers and future consumers,” not as spenders (McNeal, *Children* 4). The money children did have was not for major purchases. The first change came when department stores, in the early 1900s, began to carry children's goods, like toys and clothing (Kenway, and Bullen 40).

After World War II, society began to see children as more important and more self-reliant. McNeal writes that since the 1940s and 1950s, “... society has deemed that children are not only very important, but also that they deserve a position alongside adults as soon as the children want it” (McNeal, *Bibliography* v). Another major factor that contributed to the rise of children as consumers was the Baby Boom, which lasted from 1946 to 1964. During the Baby Boom, the under-five population increased by 60

percent in 10 years. Thus, children's spending became much more noticeable, simply because there were so many more of them (McNeal, *Children* 5).

As television spread across the nation in the early 1950s, children were still not seen as an important or viable market. All programs and advertisements were directed at adults. However, with the child population expanding enormously, television executives began "to explore the possibility of luring in young viewers with programs specifically targeting the youth audience" (Attick, *Consumption* 53). It is not surprising that the Disney Corporation is the pioneer in children's TV programming, specifically with "The Mickey Mouse Club," which premiered in 1955 (Attick, *Consumption* 53).

The first major criticisms of children's television shows came in the 1970s, the time when television really became a huge part of the American consciousness. Several groups like Action for Children's Television (ACT) and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) advocated regulating both TV programs and advertisements aimed at children. However, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) took the position that children's TV programming and ads would be self-regulated by the industry, not the government (Attick, *Consumption* 54).

In 1974, the National Advertising Review Council established the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU). CARU is a self-regulatory program designed to promote responsible children's advertising and is funded by members of the children's advertising industry ("Self-Regulatory Program for Children's Advertising"). Congress also enacted the Children's Television Act in 1990. This act aims to increase the amount of educational and informational television programming for kids. The law was created because, as an FCC press release states, "Congress... determined that market forces alone

had not produced an adequate amount of children's educational and informational programming on commercial television and that government action was needed to increase the availability of such programming (“Children’s Television Programming”). The Children’s Television Act limits the amount of advertising that can be in a program directed at children 12 years old and younger. On weekends, commercials are limited to 10.5 minutes per hour and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays (“Children's Educational Television FCC Consumer Facts”). The Act also stipulated that each TV station must include at least three hours of educational programming into its lineup each week. If a TV station violates the Act, the FCC requires them to pay a fine. All these measures are designed to limit the amount of advertising children see.

Many parents, children’s advocates, and people who are against any kind of advertising to children believe that advertising directed at children promotes consumerism. Attick writes, “... much of the content of television advertising to children and adolescents encourages young people to consume specific items or ideals if they wish to be considered normal” (Attick, *Consumption* 52). He claims the primary purpose of advertising to children is “to get young people to think of consumption as a worthwhile activity and possession of ‘things’ as an indication of one’s worth in society” (Attick, *Consumption* 52). Attick takes the opposing view of McNeal. He blames the advertisers for creating a culture of consumerism, not society, as McNeal does.

Attick argues that not only do advertisements aimed at children promote consumerism they also encourage disrespecting adults. Empowering young people is a major theme in youth advertising. Attick writes, “While the empowerment of young people is a positive concept, the advertisements cited here seek to empower children only

to serve the interests of the advertisers who are selling the latest fads and trends” (Attick, *Consumption* 61). The “empowerment” of youth leads teens to work harder in order to gain more money so they can be a part of the consumer culture. The perceived inability of children to understand ads can be especially detrimental. Attick writes,

As young people can be impressionable and subject to market-driven notions of norms, it is not difficult to imagine adolescents accepting the representative images of products advertised on television. Therefore, advertisers are at an advantage in that they can rely on the naiveté of youth to help sell products (Attick, *Consumption* 66).

Numerous studies have found that children under eight years old are “cognitively and psychologically defenseless against advertising (Bever, et al. 111, Rubin 412). They do not understand the notion of intent to sell and frequently accept advertising claims at face value” (“Children, Adolescents, and Advertising” 2563). Since children under eight do not understand the intent of advertising, how and why does in-school advertising exist?

Advertising Enters the Classroom

Advertising to children in schools has been around almost as long as advertising to children. The first example of in-school advertising came in the 1890s, when a paint company produced a primary color worksheet for students (*Public Education*). In-school advertising “encompasses the use of schools by corporations to sell products or services, promote their points of view, or address public relations or political problems” (Molnar, *School* 7). Problems associated with in-school advertising are not new either. In fact, in

the 1920s, the National Education Association created a committee to study the rise of “corporate propaganda” in schools (Attick, *BusRadio* 160).

The preoccupation with material goods and the want to acquire more has been termed “commercialism.” Alex Molnar, a leading proponent of banning all forms of advertising in schools, defines commercialism as, “the principles and practices of commerce or the excessive adherence to financial return as a measure of worth” (Molnar, *School* 3). Molnar’s foundation, the Center for the Study of Commercialism, defines it as, “Ubiquitous product marketing that leads to a preoccupation with individual consumption to the detriment of oneself and society” (Molnar, *School* 3). The idea of commercialism leading to a stronger desire to consume more goods ties in with Attick’s views that advertising aimed at children is designed solely to promote consumption. With society treating children as a viable economic market, there has been a noticeable increase of marketing and advertising in schools. The Center for the Study of Commercialism found that in the 1990s, school-business partnerships, which include both private businesses and multinational corporations, had increased by over 300 percent (Attick, *BusRadio* 159). The Center measured this increase by monitoring mentions of school-business partnerships in mass media. While advertising in schools has been present for many years, one event can explain the increase.

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan commissioned the Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, to examine the quality of education in the United States. The president and Bell were concerned about “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system” (*Nation*). Two years later, in 1983, the committee published its report entitled “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform.”

The report's preface unequivocally lays out the problem, stating, "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (*Nation*).

The committee cites what it sees as a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (*Nation*). The committee believes this tide will completely and utterly ruin the American education system, making it impossible for the U.S. to maintain its position as a world superpower. The country's world standing is at risk because of hard-working competitor countries like Japan. U.S. dominance is no longer assured because of natural resources and geographic isolation. Without drastic intervention, American children will be uneducated and unprepared to compete in the global economy. The report further claims, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (*Nation*). The worst part of the situation, according to the report, is that "we," as a country, brought these changes for the worse on ourselves and allowed mediocrity to happen.

A poor education system, the committee thinks, will lead to the destruction of American democracy. "A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom" (*Nation*). The evidence of the failing education system is evident in declining test scores and higher rates of illiteracy. People interviewed by the committee said they did not feel prepared for working in the marketplace or college when they graduated high school.

To fix the school system, the committee recommended creating a "learning

society” to promote continued education throughout one’s life (*Nation*). The available tools to help reform schools are “the voluntary efforts of individuals, businesses, and parent and civic groups to cooperate in strengthening educational programs” (*Nation*). The important section to take note of is that the committee mentions that businesses can help reform schools. The mention of businesses is critical when trying to determine the cause of the rise of commercialism and advertising in schools.

“A Nation at Risk” also recommends some other ways to fix the problems in schools. The committee recommends improving the content of what is learned in high schools, improving standards and expectations by raising them, increasing the time spent in school and on homework, improving the teachers by better preparing them, and increasing community involvement and also increasing funding for the schools. The committee concludes the reports with a final plea,

Help should come from students themselves; from parents, teachers and school boards; from colleges and universities; from local, state, and Federal officials; from teachers’ and administrators’ organizations; from industrial and labor councils; and from other groups with interest in and responsibility for educational reform (*Nation*).

It is important to note again that the committee mentions “other groups” that have an interest in schools. Based on the rise of school-business partnerships after the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” it can be seen that the report is essentially the direct cause for the rise of corporate involvement in schools. It provided the justification for corporate involvement because students were, according to the report, falling behind and making the U.S. less competitive in the global market (Molnar, *Business 2*). Foreign

countries, which were also business competitors, were better educating their students. Corporations, seeing a potential for financial loss, jumped into action. They started “preaching the gospel of school improvement as a matter of national economic survival... businesspeople took the lead in collaborating with politicians and educators to promote a grab bag of reforms” (Molnar, *Business* 2). Corporations proposed that if they did not intervene and help schools, the U.S. would lose its place as the world’s economic superpower. Business intervention in schools increased dramatically after the report came out, which correlated with the rise of advertising and marketing efforts in schools. These efforts, as Molnar believes, “were also often unashamedly characterized as legitimate contributions to curriculum content as helpful teaching aids, and as a good way of promoting school-business cooperation” (Molnar, *Business* 17).

The effects of “A Nation at Risk” are still being felt today. The report helped create the myriad of standardization and tests that exists in American schools today (Molnar, *School* 11). It provided the justification for corporate involvement in schools and increased the presence of advertising and marketing in schools.

Forms of In-School Advertising

It has been established that in-school advertising has skyrocketed since the publication of “A Nation at Risk,” but what does it look like? Advertising is traditionally thought of as a television commercial or a print ad in a magazine, but in-school advertising has taken on creative and new shapes.

Molnar defines eight categories of commercialism present in schools: sponsorship of programs and activities (which is the most traditional and common form of corporate

involvement), exclusive agreements (this is most often “pouring rights” for beverage companies), incentive programs, appropriation of space, sponsored educational materials, electronic marketing, privatization (like charter schools), and fund-raising (Molnar, *School* 21-26). Specific examples of the forms in-school advertising now takes include corporate-sponsored newscasts, fieldtrips and classroom materials, vending machines, gymnasiums, and ads on walls and whole buildings (Linn 75). Examples of these kinds of advertisements can be found in the appendix.

The specific types of in-school advertising are divided into two main categories: direct and indirect. Direct advertising “seeks to gain the student’s purchasing dollar through a diverse range of in-school ad venues” (Palmer, et al. 2). Examples of direct advertising would be an ad in a current event news broadcast like Channel One. Other examples of direct advertising include ads on school buses, scoreboards, book covers, radio programs, product coupons and free samples (Consumer’s Union).

Indirect advertising “seeks to convey a positive, favorable corporate image to students, which... may translate into purchasing preference and loyalty for the brands of that corporation” (Palmer, et al. 2). An example of an indirect ad would be a corporate-sponsored educational material, like a lesson plan handed to teachers for free by a company. Corporate-sponsored educational materials (SEMs) can be multimedia teaching kits, videos, software, books, posters, reproducible activity sheets, and workbooks. The SEMs are given to teachers for free, but often include bias or a slant toward the company that created it (Consumer’s Union). The SEMs are intended to produce a favorable perception for the company, both in the teachers’ and students’ minds. Companies that produce SEMs argue that they are providing free help for teachers whose time is already

so stretched they do not have time to make their own lesson plans. SEMs can be traced back to the 1890s, “when a paint company developed a handout on primary and secondary colors for schools to distribute in their art classes” (*Public Education*).

Another form of indirect in-school advertising is corporate-sponsored contests and incentive programs. These programs often involve giving students a prize, like a free pizza from Pizza Hut, in exchange for completing a task, such as reading 100 books. The contests “carry brand-names and logos into classrooms” (Consumer’s Union).

McDonalds’s, in a blatant attempt to advertise in schools, put ads for free Happy Meals on an elementary school’s report cards in Florida (Marco). The 2007 report cards promised a free meal to students with good grades. McDonald’s paid the cost of printing the report cards, which was about \$1,600, in exchange for the ad placement. After an enormous backlash and parent outrage, the ads were removed. This example was especially volatile, in part due to McDonald’s association with the rise of obesity in kids around the country.

In-school advertising, according to Molnar, serves three basic purposes. The first is to provide corporations with a venue in which to market products and services. Second, companies are given a podium to push corporate viewpoints. Lastly, in-school advertising “is the vehicle through which corporations can deliver a broader ideological message promoting consumption as the primary source of well-being and happiness” (Molnar, *School* 44). Despite the prevalence and pervasiveness of in-school advertising, the policies and laws governing commercial activities in schools vary greatly from state to state. There is no single standard in place to regulate commercial activities in schools (*Public Education*). A Government Accountability Office report from 2000 found that

high schools had a much higher amount of commercial activities than middle or elementary schools. They also found that product sales, typically soft drinks, were the most common commercial activity and also the most profitable (*Public Education*). The report concluded that it is usually the values and attitudes of school board members, school district officials and parents that determine the amount of commercial activity within schools. The reports states, “Because most of the decisions are made at local levels, varying preferences of local officials result in different levels of commercial activities across districts and across schools in the same districts” (*Public Education*). If parents or officials do not find a type of advertising controversial, it will most likely continue without protest.

As evidenced, the forms in-school advertising can take are numerous and varied. What then, is the reason for all these different types of advertising?

Reason for In-School Advertising

The rise of in-school advertising and commercialism can be traced back to one thing: money. Schools need money and advertisers can provide them with funds. As reported in “A Nation at Risk,” schools are performing below standards, but their budgets are also dwindling. This assumes there is a connection between increased funding and better student performance. While that may not be true, it is a widely held perception that more money will produce better students (Molnar, *Business 2*). Thus, this is the paradoxical situation many schools are facing across the country.

Other factors besides lack of funding that put pressure on school administrators and teachers to accept ads in schools and other promotional materials are the ever-

growing presence of commercialism in all aspects of society and the growing competition between corporations for the emergent “youth market” (Consumer’s Union). Educators have accepted school-business partnerships as a way for schools to make extra money, despite any negative consequences for students (Attick, *BusRadio* 160). Susan Linn, a children’s rights advocate argues that, “Instructional time, access to accurate information, and the chance to develop critical thinking skills may all be lost as corporations take an increasing role in public education” (Linn 93). If advertising in schools raises a host of ethical questions, why do companies continue the practice? Is it solely for the betterment of schools and students? Of course, there are differing viewpoints, but the general consensus among opponents of in-school advertising, mainly collegiate educators and psychologists, is that corporations take advantage of cash-strapped schools to indoctrinate students to their message and make themselves appear more philanthropic.

McNeal, a proponent of advertising to children, writes, “Schools need funds, teacher development and teaching equipment and aids... A firm can provide these things as part of its marketing communications efforts” (McNeal, *Kids* 172). McNeal takes the position that school-business partnerships are beneficial to schools and students, providing them with materials they would not otherwise have. The appeal of these partnerships often is technology, specifically new, expensive technology like televisions, monitors, VCRs, and cable access (Molnar, *Business* 22).

Another reason companies and advertisers want to be in schools comes down to money again. Populations in schools are growing; teenagers’ spending power is increasing, as well as their “economic clout” with their parents. Students also spend 20

percent of their time at school (Consumer's Union). In a purely business decision, any advertiser with a teenage-oriented product or service would be unwise to not advertise their products or services in schools. In school, advertisers have,

access to a vast, networked and age-aggregated market; a cost-effective and less competitive alternative to saturated markets and advertising channels; and opportunity to enhance corporate image – all in the context of helping local schools (Kenway, and Bullen 92).

Schools offer advertisers the best place to reach the extremely fragmented and segmented children's market, in a relatively competitor-free environment (Kenway, and Bullen 96). Schools have become one place where advertisers do not have to worry about students turning the channel, looking away, or seeing a competitor's ad. Students are already segmented based on age and geographic location. This segmentation increases the advertiser's ability to reach distinct groups of kids (Attick, *BusRadio* 160). Because of this, Molnar calls schools "one of advertising's last frontiers" (Molnar, *School* 33).

Lifetime Learning System, a company that specializes in placing in-school ads, says, "School is... the ideal time to influence attitudes, build long-term loyalties, test market, promote sampling and trial usage and – above all – to generate immediate sales" (Consumer's Union). Former president of Channel One, Joel Babbitt, said, "The advertiser gets kids who cannot go to the bathroom, cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo" (Linn 78). Linn, writing as an opponent of in-school advertising, believes there really is no downside for corporations to be advertising in schools, as they look like responsible

companies, and “get to place their brand in the faces of students who, because of mandatory schooling laws, can’t escape from it” (77).

McNeal, writing from the pro-advertising side, sees it differently. He argues, “Innovative, useful, adaptable consumer education programs give a firm many opportunities to present itself and its products in a favorable light to students who will be future consumers” (McNeal, *Kids* 173). He also says that school-based programs must be ones that truly help students and their schools. Other proponents of advertising in schools base their argument on the financial need of schools and “assumptions that administrators and teachers can counteract any adverse affects of commercialism in the school environment or in-classroom materials and programs” (Consumer’s Union).

Proponents contend the revenue or materials schools receive in return for advertising provide desperately needed funds. Additionally, commercialism is everywhere and because kids see ads all day long, all around, why should a few more ads in school affect them more than any other? Teachers, who have students’ best interests at heart, are capable of evaluating sponsored materials for blatant commercialism or bias, and can use them accordingly. SEMs can be used to teach media literacy, or educate students about propaganda and advertising (Palmer, et al. 4). Finally, businesses may have expertise or unique information on a subject that can benefit a student’s education (Consumer’s Union).

For every argument in support of advertising in schools, there are twice as many against it. Some of the main arguments against in-school advertising are that it gives control to people outside the education system. The teachers and administrators should be deciding what to teach students, not corporations. Also, in-school advertising

compromises the integrity of education; kids should not have to see ads in school when they are supposed to be learning. Ads in school and sponsored materials “carry the weight of an endorsement” (Consumer’s Union). This means that if students see an ad for a certain product in school, they automatically assume their teacher and principal approves of it, simply because it is in the school. Another problem with sponsored educational materials is that they often bypass review processes designed to protect students from biased or inaccurate information. Teachers do not have enough time to fact check everything present in a SEM, giving the company that produced it an unfair advantage. Ultimately, in-school advertising adds to the amount of commercialism directed at kids and promotes consumerism, which is unhealthy for students. The report “Captive Kids” detailed the presence of in-school advertising and came to the conclusion “saying kids aren’t affected by in-school advertising because it’s everywhere reflects a naiveté about the nature of advertising” (Consumer’s Union).

Both sides of the in-school advertising argument make good points, but what is the actual effect of advertising in schools? Are students affected by it? Do they even notice the ads?

Consequences of In-School Advertising

Several studies have examined the specific effects of in-school advertising on children, but before going into that, one must understand the general consequences of school commercialism. Many opponents of in-school advertising believe one of the more problematic aspects of it is that, “school-business partnerships are often understood by the general public as beneficial and indicative of the private sector’s support for the

community” (Attick 160). For the most part, the general public seems to be okay with advertising in schools, which angers critics of the practice.

As mentioned before, ads seen at school have the implied endorsement of teachers and administrators. An article detailing psychological effects of in-school advertising says, “The prestige and expertise of school personnel may very well become associated with commercial items that are provided or promoted on school grounds” (Palmer, et al. 2). The problem with this is that students may automatically assume products advertised at school are better than others, without actually trying them. The article also finds another potential problem with in-school advertising. The authors write, “... commercial pressures in schools may create desires for products that children do not need or cannot afford and/or that are psychologically or physically harmful to them” (Palmer, et al. 1). Additionally, commercialism in schools can lead to lower self-esteem, especially in poorer kids, whose parents may not be able to afford advertised products. Advertising can also increase materialistic attitudes “to a degree that is psychologically unhealthy” (Palmer, et al. 1-2). The psychologists believe the effects of commercialism may be stronger in a school setting, since students are a “captive audience” that has to pay attention. Requiring students to pay attention increases the number and frequency of ad impressions (Palmer, et al. 2).

A lasting effect of in-school advertising is that, according to Molnar, schools’ role in society is fundamentally changing. He contends that schools are no longer places to develop smart, democratic citizens. Instead, they are places where advertisers can sell and peddle their products to unsuspecting children (Molnar, *School* 16). The advertisers, he believes, try to promote perpetual dissatisfaction in people, showing them that they will

only be happy when they are consuming goods (Molnar, *School* 44). He writes, “The education marketplace is intended to provide inviting venues for advertising and public relations, and to offer up schools themselves as commodities to be bought and sold” (Molnar, *School* 134). He also maintains that school reforms,

...mark a radical attempt to destroy the social values built into public institutions such as schools, not an effort to improve the system. The destructive logic that drives them would put American society and culture in the service of the market rather than the other way around (Molnar, *Business* 172).

The underlying motive behind in-school advertising and school reform is to “fend off the traditional role of the public schools in helping to redistribute power and economic opportunity,” according to Molnar (Molnar, *Business* 172). Molnar’s argument is the most extreme of opponents of in-school advertising. Advertisers in schools are not trying to keep poor kids from achieving success; they are simply trying to sell a product and create a favorable impression of themselves in the minds of students. However, Linn sees the situation as much more dire. She writes,

Advertising to children in this country is pervasive, expanding, unchecked, and unregulated. It harms children and undermines parents. It needs to be stopped. Children are so assaulted by marketing that it has reached a point where parents can no longer cope with it alone. In the process of being unprotected in the marketplace, children themselves are commodities sold as audiences to corporations. Let’s stop marketing to children. It’s not just that our kids are consuming. They are being consumed (Linn 219).

Despite these hyperbolic claims by concerned activists, what is the actual affect of in-school advertising? One form of in-school advertising, the current events program, Channel One, has generated more controversy and research than any other.

Channel One

Channel One, which burst onto the scene in 1989, is one of the most controversial and bold attempts at advertising to children in schools. Channel One is the brainchild of Chris Whittle, a marketer from Tennessee. The current events program is 12 minutes long, with two minutes of commercials in the broadcast. Channel One is available to 6th through 12th grades. The show covers major stories happening in the U.S. and around the world, as well as subjects that interest adolescents, like new movie releases or celebrity stories. Molnar described the Channel One concept as very simple,

Produce a twelve-minute program with ten minutes of “current events” and two minutes of commercials aimed directly at teenagers in their classrooms, then put the show up on a satellite and provide schools that signed on with a satellite dish to pull it in, a control console to tape it, and wiring to send it singing into the color television monitors Whittle placed in each classroom (Molnar, *Business* 55).

Schools that subscribe to Channel One have to agree to show it to 85-90 percent of the school’s students for at least 90 percent of the school days. Schools sign a three-year contract with the company and receive approximately \$50,000 worth of TVs and monitors. Teachers are not allowed to fast-forward through or edit out the advertisements. They do not have the option to not show the program; however, schools decide when and

where to show Channel One. Some schools show it at lunchtime, others show it in the morning, in a homeroom class ("Channel One: About Us"). In 1990, a year after its introduction, Channel One was in 9,000 schools across the country (Molnar, *Business* 56).

Whittle claimed students needed Channel One because they were completely ignorant of current events, geography and other news. The idea of a corporation stepping into a school to help educate students has a direct link with "A Nation at Risk." Proponents of Channel One support it because it does expose students to current, relevant news that they might not see any place else and financially-strapped schools receive technology free of charge (*Public Education*). Schools that have Channel One usually say the technological benefits outweigh concerns over the two minutes of commercials (*Public Education*).

However, the project was met with fierce criticism wherever it went. Critics argued the two minutes of commercials were shown to a "captive audience," the products shown were given an implied endorsement, and that the schools were losing control of the education process (*Public Education*). Studies have shown that schools in poorer neighborhoods are more likely to have Channel One (Linn 82). The president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals said, "There's no need to test bad ideas in the classroom. We know selling junk food in the cafeteria is bad nutrition, and we know it's bad education to bring commercials into the classroom" (Molnar 57). Several states, including New York and California, succeeded in banning Channel One from their schools (Molnar 61). Whittle himself went bankrupt in the mid-1990s and was forced to sell his company. Yet Channel One is still around today, but is owned by

PriMedia Incorporated. As of 2006, the program was available in 12,000 schools, being shown to 40 percent of the country's teenagers. Advertisers pay roughly \$200,000 for every 30 second commercial shown on Channel One (*Children* 2565). The fact that advertisers pay so much to advertise on Channel One shows how valuable reaching students is to their companies.

Comparative Analysis of Current Literature

Channel One has generated numerous studies and books, all designed to measure the effects of the commercials in the broadcast on students. Because of the amount of research already conducted on Channel One, it is easy to compare and analyze the results of each. Ann De Vaney's anthology *Watching Channel One* was one of the first works to be published on the subject in 1994. One of the essays, "Investigating Channel One: A Case Study Report" by Rhonda S. Robinson, a college professor from Illinois, details the experiences of Chicago-area junior high school with Channel One. Robinson observed students in the school over the course of a semester. She found that "overwhelmingly, students interviewed alone or in groups, really liked having Channel One in their building. They like the music, the sports, the commercials, the teen hosts and the pop quiz" (Robinson 30). She also found that school issues, financial or student-related, had not been affected by Channel One; it simply became another part of the school day. Teachers and students both thought the program was a valuable addition to the school and had very few complaints about it (Robinson 41). One of the students interviewed by Robinson said, "No, we don't go out and buy candy bars because of the ad on Channel

One. We'd buy them anyway! But Channel One does give me ideas about the world and stuff" (Robinson 29).

The mostly positive response to Channel One in Robinson's study is similar to another school district's response to the program. In December of 2000, the Iowa City Community School District (ICCS) held a meeting to discuss whether or not to ban Channel One from their schools. A policy statement released after the meeting describes the school board's opinion on the matter. Channel One was shown in junior high schools in the district, and a school board member raised the question of whether allowing the program fit with their "commercialization" policies. The board found that,

The junior high principals are enthusiastic advocates for the product [Channel One]. They represent that students are equally enthusiastic in their participation... Board members have heard from additional teachers and students, who support the product ("Channel One: A Sense of the Board Statement").

The board laid out the argument for Channel One, stating that it provides students with a necessary and regular exposure to current events. They understand that Channel One was produced with adolescents in mind, making the programming interesting and engaging for them. It gives teachers the opportunity to build on programming and take advantage of "teachable moments." The board also mentions that students really like having Channel One in their classrooms and that the program is popular nationally with teachers and administrators. They address some of the concerns raised by Channel One, including the perceived negative effects of advertising and the fact that it introduces more commercialism into the classroom. Ultimately, the school board decided not to take any

action regarding Channel One, mainly because schools had signed contracts with the company and because schools liked having the program. The board stated, “If the board were to create a policy forbidding, or requiring, Channel One in our schools, it would only do so after a period of serious and thorough study and widespread community involvement” (“Channel One: A Sense of the Board Statement”).

However, the current events benefits of Channel One, one of the main arguments for keeping it in schools, have also been questioned. A study conducted by Nancy Nelson Knupfer and Peter Hayes, entitled “The Effects of the Channel One Broadcast on Students’ Knowledge of Current Events,” studied two groups of students for current events knowledge. One group watched Channel One and the other did not. They found that, “The Channel One program, as implemented, does not appear to be effective in increasing students’ knowledge about current events” (Knupfer, and Hayes 58). The authors also write, “Because there was no significant difference between the treatment and control groups, Channel One does not appear to be an aid or hindrance to learning, but simply ineffective in terms of its claims” (Knupfer, and Hayes 58). The claims Channel One makes are that it significantly improves students’ knowledge of current events, however this study shows that claim is neither correct nor incorrect.

Another study conducted by Knupfer, “Channel One: Reactions of Students, Teachers and Parents” explored the attitudes of various groups toward Channel One over the course of a school year. At the end of the school year, both parents’ and students’ belief that ads have too much influence increased, while teachers’ belief in it decreased (Knupfer 75). Parents, teachers and students said the ads on Channel One were the same as those on television; this thought increased over the school year (Knupfer 76). There

was little change in the thought that ads were “pretty truthful,” with approximately 30 percent of students believing it at the beginning of the year, and 25 percent believing it at the end of the year (Knupfer 77). At the start of the school year, 60 percent of students said the school should continue Channel One. This thought increased to 70 percent of students at the end of the year (Knupfer 83). Knupfer’s findings support the findings of the Iowa School Board and Robinson, in that students like and respond positively to Channel One.

Some of the other essays in *Watching Channel One* comment on the actual content of the program. John C. Belland writes that, after analyzing three weeks of Channel One broadcasts, “All of these (products advertised on Channel One)... fit well in the mainstream of popular American culture. Adolescents are probably already consumers of most of these products. (Belland 98). This supports the argument that ads on Channel One do not have much impact, simply because students see the same ads at home. In fact, in the next essay, Ann Marie Barry writes that in the initial phase of Channel One, advocates argued that teens “were already seeing almost one hundred different commercials on network television each day and watching an average of about fifteen thousand hours of television between the ages of six and eighteen – about two thousand more than they spend in school” (Barry 106). She argues that Channel One “conditions more and more young people to accept the intrusiveness of advertising as a natural part of everyday life and to absorb its materialistic values and ethical practices as inevitable” (Barry 132). This shows the main concern of Channel One critics – that the program encourages consumerism and teaches students to want material goods.

Roy F. Fox's influential book, *Harvesting Minds: How Television Commercials Control Kids*, attempts to answer the question of what happens to kids when they are held captive to TV commercials. In doing so, he focused his study on two high schools in rural Missouri that both showed Channel One. Fox, an education professor at the University of Missouri, talked to approximately 200 students in the schools (Fox 2). Ninety percent of the students were ninth-graders and came from required classes. The students were predominantly Caucasian (Fox 22). Fox hypothesizes that since other studies have shown that advertising does influence people, the students will definitely be affected by the commercials present on Channel One. His study took place in the unique environment created by Channel One, where kids cannot change the channel, get up and leave, or mute commercials. Fox writes these factors "alone affect how they respond to commercials" (Fox 25).

Fox's findings have significantly affected how educators and parents react to Channel One. He found that students did not react personally or on a deeper level with the commercials. The ways students interacted with the commercials did not lead them to further understand or analyze them. The students, however, did "know" the Channel One commercials very well. Fox found that the kids enjoyed watching their favorite commercials repeatedly and could replay them in their entirety, word-for-word (Fox 27). Fox describes this further,

One simple but major finding of this study – and one that should come as no surprise – is that most students could easily recall microscopic levels of detail about commercials. Students knew the direction in which a model swung her hair or how many rings another model wore (Fox 28).

The students knew extremely specific details of product packaging. Fox “gradually learned that many students do not view packaging... as mere containers or wrappings of products. Instead, many kids regard packaging as integral parts of the products themselves” (Fox 32).

Fox comes to the conclusion that students knew these products and their commercials so well because, due to Channel One, they saw the ads in a controlled environment over the course of an entire school year, every day, over and over (Fox 37). Related to this is the fact that the students Fox interviewed consistently said new commercials were needed. He connects this to operant conditioning theory in that people who are exposed to the same commercials over and over will inevitably want more (Fox 38). This need for more commercials is one of the negative aspects of Channel One that Fox identifies.

After interviewing the students and collecting surveys, Fox categorized the ways they responded to Channel One commercials into twelve groups. The first, “demonstrating,” was categorized by students talking excitedly about the commercials and being interested and engaged by the ads. This was the most common response to the commercials (Fox 40). “Assuming identities” was identified by students calling themselves a character’s name or using the same dialogue from a commercial. For example, one student started calling himself “Shaq” after seeing the basketball player in an ad (Fox 41). Kids often exhibited “associating” when they connected one commercial with another (Fox 42). “Mirroring” happened when kids repeated the exact phrases from the commercials or physically imitated the actions they saw (Fox 43). Students were also often “confused” by claims made in the commercials; however, they did not make any

attempts to better understand the claims (Fox 44). “Substituting” occurred when kids used the product name instead of the item name. For example, one girl said she was going to get some “Taco Bell” instead of getting some food (Fox 45). Students “fluctuated” in their opinions of commercials. They would go quickly from liking a commercial to hating it, from doubting a claim to strongly believing it (Fox 46). “Generalizing” happened when kids made conclusions about one commercial and then applied that conclusion to another one (Fox 47). Fox found that students regarded a one second logo flash as a commercial, which he termed “shrinking and embedding” (Fox 50). Students thought the ads’ point of view came from the commercial characters and had no concept of an external force controlling the commercial. He called this observation “seeing no authorship” (Fox 51). Kids often “contradicted” themselves when it came to talking about commercials. A student would say they did not watch the ads, but then would be able to talk about and recall specific details of them (Fox 53). The last way students responded to commercials was “blurring.” The students mistook commercials for regular programs and confused commercials with Public Service Announcements. They thought the length of the spot was the determiner for whether something was a commercial or program (Fox 55).

The students in Fox’s study “consistently judged commercials in positive, benign ways... students seldom criticized the ads” (Fox 61). Out of the 200 students interviewed, Fox only found six that analyzed the commercials in substantive, specific and insightful ways. These students distanced themselves from the commercials or products. They selected, inspected and compared elements of different commercials. They made connections that depended on multiple sources to help them understand what they were

seeing in the commercials. They made predictions about the commercials, identified the tone of commercials, and pointed to evidence to back up their predictions (Fox 63-67). The six students were able to critically analyze the commercials and make rational decisions about the claims in each. However, they were the exception in Fox's study, not the rule.

The rest of the students, who ineffectively analyzed the commercials, consistently made the same analytical mistakes. They overvalued both the visual and the audio, drew boxed-in conclusions, in that they thought the products were necessary for them to use all the time. They made either/or decisions. The most common instance of either/or decisions involved sneakers. Kids said they had to wear either Nikes or Reeboks. It did not occur to them that there are other brands of shoes to wear, partly because Nike and Reebok both advertise frequently on Channel One. They also only evaluated one commercial at a time and overvalued the newest commercials (Fox 69-79). Throughout the study, kids "wholeheartedly embraced commercials. They enthusiastically accepted and assumed the most positive motives about commercials" (Fox 79). Students never even thought that commercials were intended to elicit a response from them. They mostly viewed the commercials as entertainment, and as such, replayed the commercials in a variety of forms.

Fox describes many different instances of replay behaviors. He defines replay behaviors as "any type of actions initiated by kids that repeat or reconstruct a commercial – or parts of a commercial – in some way" (Fox 91). The types of replay behavior exhibited in Fox's study include: singing songs, jingles and catch-phrases, adopting jargon and brand names, playing with language, mimicking voices, interacting, matching

up commercials with other ads, playing backyard games, eating packaging, adopting a star's name, choosing clothes and objects, completing school assignments, entering contests, cheering at sports events, competing in sports, watching and talking about satirized ads, imitating actions, creating art projects, and even dreaming about commercials (Fox 93). The replays that the kids engaged in mimicked commercial messages exactly, thus giving advertisers essentially "free advertising" (Fox 124). Fox describes this phenomenon and its consequences in that, "Replays reinforce commercials and their products. They create an environment in which ad messages – in all their varied forms, shades, sounds, shapes, and echoes – become as common as the air we breathe" (Fox 125).

Fox comes to several conclusions after his study, the most important being that "commercials play a significant role in kids' lives." They socially interact with each other through commercial replay, see ads as entertainment, and replay commercials in numerous ways (Fox 147-148). He also writes that "kids accept, value and embrace television commercials." They are heavily exposed to commercials, assume commercials are positive, and generally think companies are trying to help them through ads (Fox 148). Next, "kids know TV commercials, products and packaging." They are able to memorize commercials and know the structures of them. Students simultaneously believe and disbelieve in commercials. Lastly, kids use "restrictive, non-reflective strategies to think about commercials" (Fox 149-151). Based on these commercials and his own observations, Fox recommends that electronic and print advertising be banned in schools. He also advocates children be taught more about media literacy in schools (Fox 161). He writes, "The fragile selfhood of children – especially children in school – belongs to them

and to their parents and families and teachers and friends and peers and communities – not to advertisers, marketers, and manufacturers” (Fox xix).

Another study conducted on the effects of Channel One was completed in 1994 by Jeffrey Brand and Bradley Greenberg. They conducted the study with the intent of testing the behavioral effects of Channel One on high school students. The authors investigated Channel One’s “viewers’ product evaluations, consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior and examined research questions about product-related interpersonal discussions and recall of advertising content” (Brand and Greenberg). To determine the behavioral impacts of Channel One, the authors tested viewers and non-viewers on: purchase intentions, actual purchases and discussion about products with peers and parents. They surveyed more than 800 students in four Michigan public high schools. Two of the schools had Channel One and the other two did not. The students surveyed came from tenth grade history and government classes. The classes were required, ensuring a representative sample of students from the schools.

The study found that Channel One viewers evaluated the products advertised on the program more highly than non-viewers, expressed more consumer-oriented attitudes, and were more likely to report purchase intentions. Viewers of Channel One were not more likely to purchase products advertised than non-viewers. Viewers were no more likely to talk to their parents or peers about Channel One advertised products than non-viewers. The study states that “Evidence was less clear to suggest that advertisements on Channel One produced specific consumer behaviors.” The authors also write,

These data provide initial evidence that advertising on Channel One impacts adolescents’ cognitions about advertised products, produces

positive affect toward products advertised, enhances their consumer orientations, and adds to their intentions to purchase the advertised products (Brand and Greenberg).

The study conducted by Brand and Greenberg suggests that Channel One advertising does impact student behaviors. However, the study does not show how much or to what extent Channel One influences students. Since both viewers and non-viewers reported the same actual purchase behavior, it may be that seeing Channel One ads only increased the want for products, not the actual purchase of such products.

Conclusion

Adolescents see more than 40,000 advertisements per year on television alone (“Children, Adolescents, and Advertising” 2563). More and more publications, TV shows, and Internet websites are directly targeted at children. The rise of commercialism in society mirrors the rise of commercialism in schools across the country. In-school advertising does have some impact on students, but there is no definitive proof that it actually causes more consumption. There is research that shows in-school advertising does increase purchase intentions, but no evidence to suggest in-school ads directly lead to purchases.

It is important to note that this study was limited in the amount of research available from advertisers. Most market research that advertisers conduct and collect is proprietary, and thus not available to the general public. Having research from an advertiser’s perspective would add more balance to this study, and also provide insight into the reasons of why advertisers have a large presence in schools.

However, it is also important to note that many students and teachers whose schools have Channel One value the program and enjoy having it in schools. It is the advocates who are against all forms of advertising to children that want Channel One banished from schools. This shows a disconnect between those who argue about advertising in schools and those who actually are in schools everyday. This is an area that needs to be investigated further in order to really understand how in-school advertising affects students.

It is inevitable that advertising and commercialism will only continue to increase in society. With that, it is reasonable that the frequency and instances of in-school advertising will also increase. With funding for U.S. schools dwindling and shrinking every year, administrators may be forced to enter into more partnerships with corporations and businesses. The way to protect children from being harmed from advertising is to educate them. Teaching media literacy in schools and educating students about the intents and purposes of advertising is the best way to ensure they understand what they are seeing, not only in schools, but at home, at the mall, and everywhere in between.

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Appendix

Examples of In-School Advertising

SEMINOLE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SCHOOL YEAR: 20__ - 20__

NAME: [REDACTED]

SCHOOL: RED BUG ELEMENTARY

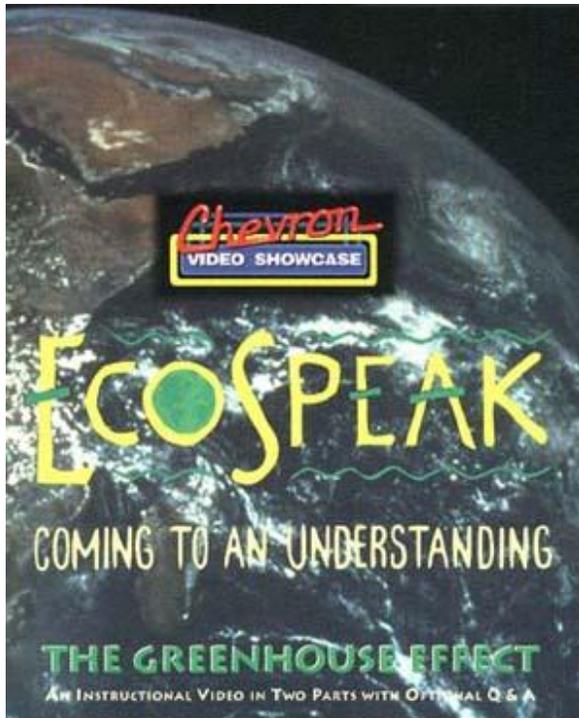
TEACHER: [REDACTED]

REPORT CARD

Check your grades!	Reward yourself with a Happy Meal® from McDonald's!						
<p>Check your grades in the current marking period and bring your report card INSIDE A.</p> <p>Seminole County MCDONALD'S® RESTAURANT</p> <p><i>Please present at the front counter to redeem your food prize.</i> The food prize selection will be a Happy Meal® (Hamburger, Cheeseburger, or Chicken McNuggets®; for any student who qualifies in any one of three ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">All A's & B's in Academics (Grades 2-5)Citizenship (no X's—K-5)Attendance (2 or less absences with no tardies—K-5) <p>Limit one Happy Meal® per student per marking period. Offer valid for 30 days from marking period. Report Card MUST be presented at time of ordering.</p>	<table border="1"><tr><td>A - 90-100</td><td>C - 70-79</td></tr><tr><td>B - 80-89</td><td>D - 60-69</td></tr><tr><td>F - 0-59</td><td></td></tr></table> <p>McDonald's® Restaurants in Seminole County are proud supporters of various academic programs throughout Seminole County, Florida.</p> 	A - 90-100	C - 70-79	B - 80-89	D - 60-69	F - 0-59	
A - 90-100	C - 70-79						
B - 80-89	D - 60-69						
F - 0-59							

This report card incentive is a joint business partnership with McDonald's and The School Board of Seminole County, Florida.

McDonald's ad on a Florida Elementary School report card. Students with good grades can bring in the report card for a free Happy Meal ("McDonald's Report Card").



Sponsored educational material produced by Chevron detailing the greenhouse effect. Lesson plans like this are given to teachers for free.