School Commercialism and the Fate of Public Schooling: What’s “Good” for America?


Reviewed by
Trevor Norris

In 1952 General Motors president Charles Erwin Wilson famously pronounced, “What’s good for the country is good for General Motors, and what’s good for General Motors is good for the country.” This outright equation of commercial institutions with national identity, of corporate good with the American good, is the central dynamic explored in both Alex Molnar’s School Commercialism: From Democratic Ideal to Market Commodity (2005) and Kenneth J. Saltman’s The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education (2005). However, two major changes have occurred since Wilson’s assertion a half-century ago: Many corporations have grown to unprecedented size, the largest overshadowing the economies of most nations (Lodge & Wilson, 2006); and, as these books demonstrate, the trend has spread from car making to education.

The Deluge

Molnar and Saltman have done a great service to educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners by illuminating the challenge that corporate profit-making presents to contemporary education. Well-crafted and compelling, their books arrive at a time when education is not only under siege, but all too often submerged by the deluge of commercial values. Although public education was once a relatively protected public good, Molnar and Saltman argue that it is being swept up by globalizing forces, transformed into a commercial enterprise, and reoriented toward a thoroughly integrated relationship with commercial interests. Some historians of education, such as Lawrence Cremin (1961), have argued that economic forces have long influenced education (see, for example, his discussion of the influence of the National Association of Manufacturers on education in 1896; pp. 37–38). However, Molnar and Saltman demonstrate that the subjugation of school to market forces has attained unprecedented proportions, and that the capacity of education to perform its democratic responsibility is thereby increasingly threatened.

The books are well paired: Saltman’s work is an intensive examination of a specific manifestation of school commercialism, which Molnar describes at a larger level; the former presents the detailed evidence to support the general principles outlined by the latter. The two thinkers share a similar political perspective, as they describe the growing threats to American democracy from commercial forces, including the decline of the public realm and the transformation of students and citizens into consumers. Thus a complementary picture emerges, indicating not only the variety of problems facing contemporary schooling but also their far-reaching social, political, and cultural implications.


School Commercialism as Miseducative

Alex Molnar is a professor of education policy at Arizona State University, where he directs the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU). The CERU releases annual reports on school commercialism, for-profit education management organizations (EMOs), and market-oriented school reforms, going back more than 10 years. In 1996 Molnar wrote Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America’s Schools, one of the first book-length discussions of the subject. In School Commercialism, he argues that contemporary American culture and schooling both have become increasingly dominated by the ever-present symbols of commodities and deepening values of consumption.

Molnar brings to bear more than 30 years of analysis of school commercialism, balancing a theoretical inquiry into its central characteristics, a consideration of its key critics, and substantial policy analysis. He describes how schoolchildren are daily exposed to thousands of advertising images and how the educational environment is itself now drawn into this trend as desperate schools turn to corporate advertisers for revenue. He shows that this trend can be observed in the daily life of any student. The ascent of commercialism to a place of political dominance is increasingly apparent in the field of education. He argues that as youth and schools receive more attention from advertisers, school space is being increasingly colonized by the images and logos of commercial discourse.
Early in the book, Molnar discusses the eight categories used to monitor changes in schoolhouse commercialism: sponsorship of programs and activities; agreements giving corporations exclusive rights to sell in schools; incentive programs, such as free pizza for meeting reading goals; appropriation of space, such as advertising in hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms; sponsored educational materials (SEMs) or corporate-sponsored curricula such as the McDonald’s nutritional curriculum; electronic marketing, such as Channel One (explored in detail by Saltman); privatization and EMOS (also explored by Saltman); and fundraising practices by corporations, which may, for example, “encourage parents and neighbors to purchase the companies’ products so that the labels can be redeemed for rewards” for the schools (p. 26). All categories show marked increases in recent years, and the remainder of the book explores the nature and implications of this trend.

Molnar describes school commercialism as follows:

Today, across the nation and around the world, the ideal of the public school as a pillar of democracy is being transformed by a wave of commercialism. Commercialism is an expression of advanced capitalist culture and a profound threat to democratic civic institutions. Its impact on schools is, at its most basic, to transform the guiding ideal of public schools as centers of learning serving the public good to centers of profit benefiting private interests. Once held to be a public good that could be measured by their contribution to the community’s well-being, schools have come to be seen as markets for vendors, venues for advertising and marketing and commodities to be bought and sold. They are evaluated largely in terms of how effective they are perceived at preparing workers for corporate employers, and their mission has been transformed conceptually into a “service” that can be delivered by private businesses responding to the profit motive. (p. 16)

Molnar traces the origins of commercialism through the birth of the ad industry to neoliberalism and privatization and discusses the governing bodies and legal documents that influence it. We see that the trends in the United States are part of a larger, worldwide shift toward school commercialism. Molnar describes a “World Education Market,” which “assumes learning and the educative process to be simply one more bundle of commodities, ripe for globalization and profit maximizers” (p. 131). The globalization is led by educational corporations such as Eduventures, whose website announces that, as “a worldwide authority on the education market, [Eduventures serves] a blue-chip client base of executives and senior managers at hundreds of leading educational organizations and technology companies.” Thus schooling is construed as a business like any other, one worth $2 trillion annually.

Molnar is somewhat critical of educators’ reactions to these trends: “With notable exceptions, educators’ reactions range from tacit acceptance to outright embrace” (p. 121). However, while he criticizes teachers, he doesn’t explain what teachers could be doing in their schools and classrooms to address commercialism and corporate relationships. Once teachers become aware of the trend, how can they take action? As Molnar notes, recent successes in limiting corporate influence have been achieved through interventions from parent groups, school boards, or the medical profession (pp. 64–65). Perhaps this is because teachers either are explicitly (and sometimes legally) prohibited from addressing commercialism or are simply overwhelmed by other demands. The book concludes too quickly, with only passing reference to ways of addressing commercialism in education—a great topic for future research.

Edison: A New Form of Allegiance

Early in his book, Molnar makes distinctions between marketing to schools, in schools, and of schools (p. 7). In fact, the three activities seem to follow a logical sequence: Rather than merely sell to, or in, schools, why not run them? The last option is the focus of Kenneth Saltman’s The Edison Schools: Corporate Schooling and the Assault on Public Education.

Whereas Molnar has been working on commercialism for more than 30 years, Saltman (DePaul University) is comparatively new on the scene. In the last few years,
However, he has quickly published several books addressing the corporatization, militarization, and privatization of American culture and education, including Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools—A Threat to Democracy (2000); Strange Love: Or How We Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Market (2002); and Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools (2003). Since the release of The Edison Schools, he has completed a study focusing on the role that American educational corporations are playing in Iraq through funding provided by USAID.

Saltman brings insightful analysis to our understanding of troubling developments such as advertising in classrooms and surveillance cameras in hallways—imperatives that are characterized as indicative of larger changes in American schooling and society.

Saltman's book is unique in its focus on one particular manifestation of corporate influence. In The Edison Schools, he chronicles in meticulous detail the dramatic rise and fall of America's first EMO, the largest and most ambitious attempt to launch a publicly traded, nationwide, for-profit manager of public schools. Whereas private schools collect tuition from parents, "EMO's seek contracts with school districts or states to run public schools for profit. These companies aim to use tax money to run public schools and extract profits for investors from the money that would otherwise go to pay for smaller class sizes, more books and other supplies, and higher teacher salaries" (p. 2).

Saltman opens the book with an evocative description of the Edison schools, derived from his own firsthand observations, which exemplify the transformation of national reverence into corporate adulation and the replacement of citizens with educational "consumers." Students line up in front of the American flag before classes start, but Saltman notes that "it is not the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America that the students are repeating. Instead, the students repeat a pledge to themselves and to the Edison Schools Corporation" (p. 2). Saltman's chronicle is made even more compelling by his focus on the central figure behind Edison: Chris Whittle. The Edison schools' corporate donors range from Time-Warner to The Gap, to IBM and Apple, all seeking access to public schools and their students to better create— or "brand"—future consumers. Thus corporations that target youth no longer need to do so through advertising alone. As investors, they can gain direct access to school administrators.

Saltman offers several reasons that corporations are interested in schooling. First and most obvious, the schools present a direct opportunity for immediate profit. Second, schools are vast sorting sites, where students are not only held captive but also organized by age and often by income, race, and language. Third, and perhaps most important, schools are sites where cultural values are taught and ideological messages internalized. The book as a whole is a sustained exploration of the consequences of allowing corporations to prioritize commercial values over democratic practices and blur the line between public realms and commercial spheres. Corporations are "remaking the culture of schooling on the corporate model" (p. 10).

In the privatization of our public schools, it is the values of the marketplace and the business world that take over: All too often, efficiency and measurement, cost and competition, come at the expense of quality, inclusion, and equity. For example, the market model is said to empower parents because it allows more "choice." But, in fact, it often empowers some schools more than others; and it empowers schools more than individual consumers, because some privatized schools can choose which students they want to admit. Saltman describes problems in the Edison schools, including charges of racism and cases of exclusion of students who could negatively affect test results.

In addition, as a business, the Edison schools have been less than successful. Saltman writes: "The company did not file tax returns in many states that require them. Whittle faced more than $10 million in unpaid taxes and penalties" (p. 43). The remedy has been numerous government bailouts and even offers of Edison shares to teachers, including the Florida and California Public Teachers Pension Plan (p. 59), absurdly making the retirees of public schools dependent on the relative success of private schools. Fortunately, intensive lobbying prevented such a conflation of public schools with private profit.

In The Edison Schools, Saltman demonstrates the problematic implications of the
prevalence of the free market model. When education becomes a business venture, it also becomes a high-stakes gamble, subject to all the risks inherent in economic fluctuations, global economic instabilities, and a highly volatile stock market. Our children are thus placed in the hands of unpredictable, imper-sonal, and essentially unaccountable eco-
omic interests, exposed to the perils of the marketplace. The paradox is that we are expected to celebrate economic freedom, yet embrace increasing corporate clout.

The Canadian Context
The same forces that Molnar and Saltman describe in the United States are also beginning to affect its northern neighbor, a process that has been compellingly described in Heather-Jane Robertson’s aptly titled No More Teachers, No More Books: The Commercialization of Canada’s Schools (1998). The so-called porous border allows for tremendous influence by American commercial forces on Canadian educational systems. For example, Whittle’s Channel One expanded into Canada in the 1990s and renamed itself “Youth News Network.” Only a tremendous groundswell allows for public schooling as the foundation for engaged and effective citizenship. Their work constitutes an essential new contribution to the analysis of the growing commercialization of education. For this reason, both books would be useful in graduate or undergraduate courses such as social foundations, cultural studies, curriculum theory, philosophy of education, and educational administration.

A culture that places high value on the acquisition of material goods will be correspondingly limited in its sense of the collective good. Molnar and Saltman ask what pedagogical practices might ensure that politics transforms shared fears into collective engagement. As events reveal that “what’s good for General Motors” means laying off thousands, we should be warned of what equating the corporate good with the national good might mean for schools and our children. However, in education the stakes are even higher than loss of profit. The loss of individual potential is at stake, as student engagement. As events reveal that “what’s good for General Motors” means laying off thousands, we should be warned of what equating the corporate good with the national good might mean for schools and our children. However, in education the stakes are even higher than loss of profit. The loss of individual potential is at stake, as students become increasingly acquisitive and decreasingly inquisitive. We should remember John Dewey’s admonition: “Acquiring is always secondary, and instrumental to the act of inquiring” (1916/1944, p. 57).

REFERENCES


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