
Obligation, Inc.

**An Open Letter to Obligation, Inc. for Parents
and Educators in “Channel One Schools”**

April 15, 2004

David Bott

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An Open Letter to Obligation, Inc. for Parents and Educators in “Channel One Schools”

April 15, 2004
Obligation, Inc.
The Barbizon Building
3100 Lorna Road, Suite 311
Birmingham, AL 35216
Dear Obligation,

I have been a public school teacher in the state of Colorado for the past eleven years and have been put in the unfortunate and uncomfortable position of having to show Channel One News to my students for several of those years.

When I began teaching I had no idea (and certainly would never have believed) that my job description would include exposing my students to TV advertisements for junk food, video games, and vulgar movies that glorify drug use and sexual promiscuity. If I had been told that all of this would be occurring during school hours and in my classroom via an MTV style “news” program, complete with heavy metal and rap segues, I would have laughed at such an absurd proposal as no responsible school community would ever allow such an insulting intrusion into its classrooms. It turns out, however, that the joke is on me, and every other school community that has given over its classrooms for Channel One’s exclusive advertising access.

This letter is meant to help parents and educators understand that forcing students to watch Channel One establishes an unacceptable conflict of interest in the classroom, creating an environment that is not OK with many teachers. Making my students watch TV with commercials for unhealthy products that encourage lifestyle habits that are completely contrary to my school district’s own media policies and health curricula places me in an embarrassing position of hypocrisy before my students. My kids are certainly smart enough to cast a suspecting eye on an adult that in one breath tells them to “eat well, exercise, don’t be violent, etc.,” and with the next

says “ Ok, sit down, be quiet, and watch these TV commercials for pop, chips, candy and video games!” In the most fundamental sense, Channel One News is a demeaning distraction that undermines the integrity of my classroom and everything that school is supposed to be about.

But who am I to say? Obviously, with Channel One in a good number of secondary schools, there must be a lot of teachers and principals who like the program, yes? Not necessarily. It is more accurate to say that there are a lot of teachers who put up with Channel One. I know this from experience. In the school of my previous assignment, Channel One News was brought on board in the same way most schools end up saddled with it. Channel One painted a pretty picture of themselves to my principal, neglected to reveal to him the nature of the ads that would be run in his teachers’ classrooms, and enticed him with some TV’s and VCR’s in exchange for a promise (contract) to show the program all year for three years. The whole thing sounded so good to him that he forgot to ask teachers or parents what they thought! We all showed up in the fall to find that our entire school had been hard-wired for every classroom to show a TV news program for kids every day. The TV turned itself on automatically and we were all to sit and watch. Hmm, we wondered. When did this come about and how could it possibly work with our already stressed building schedule and shrinking academic blocks? No problem. We just designed a whole new building schedule to accommodate it! Did we add time to the day? Nope, we took time away from the things we were supposed to be doing with students to fit it in (many Channel One schools squeeze the time out of students’ lunches or classes to show the program).

As the year progressed, many teachers began to question the content of the program and were a little disturbed by the commercials. Some of us were appalled. At the time, I was a middle and high school coach and a science teacher with a health and sex education component to my curriculum. My students were used to associating me and their instruction from me with only positive messages that not only encouraged them to make healthy choices for their minds and bodies, but also gave them instructional road maps with which to achieve their goals. This entire culture of my classroom changed the day we began watching Channel One. Students were now sitting in my class watching TV with commercials for junk food and video games, while I sat in the back trying to figure out how I would compete with the messages of Channel One. I had become a de-facto endorser of the very aspects of unhealthy living that I thought I was supposed be helping children avoid!

As I began to dialogue with other teachers about Channel One, I learned that I was not alone in my discontent with it. In fact, everybody seemed to agree that the school was suffering because of it on many levels. However, when it came time to formally express this sentiment to our principal, I found no willing accomplices. Who wanted to tell him that his good intention of garnering some TV’s and VCR’s for the school was a big mistake?

For two years we watched TV every day. Parents didn’t know and teachers just put up with it. Then our principal announced that he would be moving to a new district. Before the third year of the Channel One contract even began, teachers came out of their “Channel One closets” and appealed to the new principal. He agreed immediately and whole-heartedly that the program’s news was mediocre, the commercials were totally inappropriate, and our time with students was way too valuable and limited to be wasting it watching TV. We called Channel One and told them to come and get their equipment and their contract. Our building schedule returned to normal, and the integrity of my classroom was restored.

I can’t pretend to know how many more schools and teachers out there might be struggling with Channel One as we did. My guess is that there are many. I taught for five more years without Channel One, then moved, and am now teaching in another “Channel One school.” This year my 12-year-old sixth graders and I have been watching ad after ad for Corn Pops, Mtn. Dew, McDonald’s, potato chips, PG 13 movie promos with gangster rapper Snoop Dogg cracking jokes about smoking pot, and SIMS video games that allow players to command characters to strip naked, go hot tubing and drink booze. We listen to the Channel One Newscasters tell us to “go to channelone.com” where students are free to read and reply to disturbing postings on the student

message boards that encourage self-mutilation, hate speech toward other teens, religion bashing, gay bashing, and pro drug messages. Sound unbelievable? Check it out for yourself. I have learned about all of it just sitting in my own classroom watching and listening to Channel One News. A Channel One advocate that I have worked with told me “ It’s no worse than anything they see at home...” I’ll let the reader evaluate that statement on your own. I don’t think I have the energy to do this all again. I am a teacher, a husband, and a father- not an activist.

Nevertheless, the educator in me knows that Channel One compromises way too many values of way too many teachers and parents to be left unchallenged.

Teachers who recognize Channel One as a waste of time and unethical practice cannot continue to sit on their hands! How will your principal ever know that you and your students watched half-naked women parade around on the TV for UPN’s “America’s Next Top Model” advertisements if you don’t say anything? Sooner or later the public is going to find out what we have been showing our kids on Channel One. How will we possibly defend ourselves? Who will be accountable? If you think Channel One will hang for it, you are mistaken. You cannot hold non-educators responsible for exercising poor judgment with students, but you can certainly hold the educators responsible for providing that opportunity. Why are we allowing ourselves to be placed in such a vulnerable position?

Parents should not assume that Channel One must be OK if it is in their child’s school.

However, parents shouldn’t assume that the school is neglectful, or untrustworthy, either. It is Channel One who misrepresents themselves to schools. Parents should simply demand that the best possible learning environment has been created and is protected for their child. If it is the opinion of parents that Snoop Dogg and video game ads detract from that environment, then the school has a responsibility to accommodate those parents. Parents have every right to question why their child is watching TV ads for unhealthy products in school.

Principals should not assume that their teachers are happy with Channel One. Teachers that do not feel the program is educationally sound should be exempt from forcing their students to watch it. Since Channel One’s contract disallows such an exemption, it leaves the principal and the teacher in a powerless struggle to determine and choose what’s best for students. Who would of thought there would come a day when a private company such as Channel One and its greedy advertisers would be determining what teachers can and cannot do with their students? What a shame.

Welcoming a company such as Channel One into our classrooms sets a foolish and dangerous precedent for what we deem as acceptable in our schools. Channel One is a completely different animal than the Pepsi sign on the scoreboard and should not be discussed or dismissed in the same context. Parents, teachers, principals, and school boards owe it to their students to take a much closer look at the consequences of being a “Channel One School.”

Sincerely,

David Bott