

Investing In Our Youth

The good news is, we don't have to wait for the debut of Chris Whittle's for-profit Edison Project to get a glimpse of 21st century American education. Hundreds of prototypes for tomorrow's "market-driven" schools are already conveniently in place, and future National Merit Scholars are already enjoying their first taste of corporate-school partnership—complete with free samples, if also strings attached. Who says serious learning can't also be scumdidlyumtious? Just ask the middle school students all across the nation who've recently studied volcanic activity with the aid of Gushers[®], General Mills' new candy that spurts liquid from its center. "Compare those sugary spurts with real erupting geothermic phenomena," a handy teacher's guide suggests.

The same company also sponsors the helpful "Grow-Up!" program. To assist elementary students' understanding of the link between nutrition and growth, generous supplies of tasty Fruit Roll-Ups[®] are provided (protein per serving: less than one gram; vitamins per serving: less than two percent of U.S. RDA).

Along with the sugary snacks come an unlimited supply of free teaching materials: texts, teacher's guides, homework sheets, and ready-made quizzes. Here, at last, is a sensible model for American school reform: industry experts passing on their own special brand of knowledge.

"Clear-cutting removes all trees...to create new habitats for wildlife," eager young environmentalists



With corporate support, today's **gratis** educational material is not only alive with **iambic** pentameter, but also comes in a palette of Nickelodeon-esque colors and **pregnant** metaphor.

learn from Proctor & Gamble's in-class "Decision Earth" program. "P&G uses this economically and environmentally sound method because it most closely mimics nature's own processes. Clear-cutting also opens the floor to sunshine, thus stimulating growth and providing food for animals."

Similarly, elementary school materi-

als sponsored by the Georgia-Pacific lumber company explain in language kids can understand how modern-day lumberjacks ("foresters") don't *kill* forests, but *save* them.

"When no one harvests," G-P teaches, "trees grow old and are more likely to be killed by disease, rot, and the elements. Very old trees will not support many different kinds of wildlife because the forest floor is too shaded to grow the ground plants animals need." When G-P plants new trees, the text continues, they don't just replant trees. They plant "supertrees."

The business community is out to prove that free-market schools will not only be efficient, but also educationally hip. G-P's "Tree Trunk Activities Kit," designed for science class, also includes the following inspirational kiddie-verse:

must serve the needs of the communicator first. But it also must have *perceived value* in the classroom." [Emphasis added.]

Smut and its peddlers have always been around, though, and always will. It's the corporations' eagerness to penetrate the last great commercial-free zone, the classroom, that has enabled these niche marketing ogres to thrive. Now that the floodgates have opened, companies find the opportunity simply irresistible. Imagine—your target market not only reads your ads, they get tested on them.

"They are going to be part of this [school] system, whether they like it or not, for the next 12 to 16 years," explains Don Baird, president and CEO of School Properties USA. "When you have a captive audience, the message you give them can be [heard] for the next 10 years in a positive environment. It's not a 10-second thing."

P&G, the company that invented the soap opera as a vehicle to sell their wares, has (not surprisingly) already distinguished itself in this new field. Their box-o'-curricula is a teachers' lounge grab bag, with a little something for everyone: the Civil War; The Great Depression; World War II ("Attention tends to focus on...great deeds and battles.... Add depth to your discussions...by helping students discover the lesser-known role of the business community," i.e., the U.S. army engaging P&G as a secret munitions manufacturer); and more modern, practical topics such as "Facts about dishwasher surfaces."

FROM P&G'S "HOW TO CLEAN" TEACHER'S HANDBOOK: *Choose the Right Product to Save Time and Money*

Ask the students to do the following:

► Describe a laundering and a cleaning job they regularly do. What kind of products do they use...how do they decide what product to use?

► List four specific cleaning jobs and the type of product you would use to remove the soil or stain.

Why can't M&M/Mars teach nutrition? Why *shouldn't* a coalition of manufacturers be able to have the definitive word on waste issues, even if their "Waste: A Hidden Resource" pamphlet dodges all incineration issues? Why *shouldn't* Orville Redenbacher be added to the list of history's all-time great inventors, along with Gregor Mendel (father of genetics), Louis Pasteur, and George Washington Carver? (Redenbacher is, according to his own "Kernels of Knowledge" booklet, a pioneer in cross-breeding popcorn). It is, after all, these American success stories that drive our consumer culture and have the most at stake in the future of Generations X, Y, and Z.

"The kids we're reaching are consumers in training," explains Joseph Fenton, director of cooperative marketing at Donnelley Marketing. "You want to reach consumers at their most formative point." Lifetime's invasive kiddie-demographics elaborate on this point in excruciating detail: "Research shows that children begin to make brand decisions at age four.... Teens buy for self-image. They adopt brands as personal trademarks and choose products that carry a built-in sense of style. They care intensely...how a product will affect their social life. Word-of-mouth is a powerful force in all their purchasing decisions."

We have seen the future, and it wears a happy face. In the 21st century school, little consumers discover the virtues of pizza, coal, and polystyrene. Homework is not only easy and fun, it also tastes terrific. The environment is important, but there's no reason to fret; *recycling works, everything is under control*. And students get to experience the first pangs of market competition in a safe environment: while the American Soft Drink Association's curriculum assures kids not to worry so much about sugar and salt—and advises that soft drinks should be considered a part of a balanced diet—Nutrasweet's curriculum argues that the sugar they're getting in snack foods and soda is a real problem.

Who to believe? Break out the samples.

And now a word from our sponsors...

"Imagine millions of students discussing your product in class. Imagine their teachers presenting your organization's point of view. Imagine your corporate message reaching their parents through literature the students take home. At Lifetime Learning Systems, we don't just imagine. We create the award-winning educational programs that make these marketing strategies work. A Lifetime Learning Systems teaching kit is a marketing tool that opens minds."

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—David Shenk