



WHO CONTROLS THE MARKET?

By Rafael Heller | Sep 21, 2020 | Editor's Note

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), local, state, and federal spending on public elementary and secondary schools adds up to roughly \$740 billion per year, with 80% going toward salaries and pensions and another 2% wrapped up in fixed costs related to building maintenance, taxes, and the like. That leaves the not-insignificant sum of about \$133 billion per year to be spent on services (such as organizational consulting, achievement testing, and teacher development programs) and supplies (everything from textbooks, computers, and software to sports equipment, light bulbs, and heating oil).

Simply put, there's an awful lot of money to be made by marketing and selling goods and services to public schools — and the private sector has always been happy to oblige. Publishers, for instance, began marketing textbooks to schools as early as the 1830s. As one historian put it, describing the marriage of education and commerce in the 19th century, “The making of a scholar and the making of a dollar often went hand in hand” (Wertheim, 1972).

The relationship has been cozy ever since, though vendors’ business practices have at times sparked outrage and opposition. In 1929, for instance — and as [Alex Molnar](#) and [Faith Boninger](#) discuss in these pages — the National Education Association formed a committee to study and respond to the troubling rise of marketing (or propaganda, as they termed it) in the schools; in the 1950s, other professional associations cautioned educators about the use of “free” resources that included business logos and advertising. And on at least one occasion, [notes Jennifer Gaddis](#), opponents of education commerce actually helped shape federal policy. Thanks in part to the testimony of K-12 food service directors, who urged Congress to prevent the selling of junk food to students, the National School Lunch Act of 1946 prohibited private companies from running school cafeterias.

But while the presence of commercial vendors in education (and criticism of their practices) is nothing new, the last few decades have seen a remarkable expansion of the K-12 marketplace, one that appears to tilt the balance far more steeply in favor of private industry. Sales of computers, software, and other digital technologies have fueled some of that growth. However, as both [Patricia Burch](#) and [Anna Hogan](#) argue, the real impetus for change has come from policy makers, both in the U.S. and around the world, who have encouraged the private sector to take over all sorts of roles and responsibilities (related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, data management, and more) that the public schools had always performed on their own.

K-12 entrepreneurs and edtech visionaries have never lacked for optimism about their capacity to harness bold ideas and innovations to the benefit of the public schools. As [Teresa Preston recounts in her column](#), Kappan has published many articles over the years that brim with confidence in the promise of public-private partnerships and investments in new school models. However, the contributors to this month’s issue offer a more sober perspective on the changing landscape of education commerce: If vendors, contractors, and corporations wield so much influence over what goes on in classrooms and schools, they wonder, then who will protect the interests of students, educators, and the broader public?

References

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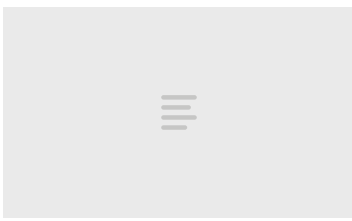
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