

Note: This piece appeared in the Oakland Tribune, Spring 1998

KEEP CORPORATIONS OUT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I was recently on assignment as a substitute teacher in one of Oakland's high schools and happened to witness an assembly that day which was extremely disturbing. The whole student body was gathered in the auditorium to honor the students with perfect attendance. The problem with the event was that it was sponsored by three corporate entities: KMEL, TCI, and The Box, a music channel. The assembly purported to encourage the predominantly black students to keep attending school; but I saw more self-promotion on the part of these companies than anything else. The auditorium was plastered with KMEL, TCI, and The BOX banners by way of advertising. A popular KMEL DJ came out screaming, "Do you all listen to KMEL...Do you all listen to KMEL? Put your hands together for KMEL, TCI and The BOX."

The whole media event was being staged and filmed by KMEL promotional department; and of course the camera was rolling every time the DJ got the kids to cheer for the radio station. Lip service was paid to the necessity of attending schools; the DJ continued to pump up the students with chants of "I Attend." He said things like, "Do you want to go to jail? Do you want to go to jail? If you don't want to go to jail then say, "I Attend." Then he would add another positive word for his employer, KMEL. I thought I was witnessing crowd manipulation techniques that were extremely demeaning to our young sisters and brothers' integrity and intelligence. The school, which has a public mandate to educate children in a neutral environment conducive to intellectual and critical exploration, had allowed certain private interests to have free ad time to indoctrinate these impressionable minds.

If this were the only example of such practices, perhaps I would not be so alarmed. But in fact it is becoming a widespread phenomenon that corporations *with agendas of their own*, are coming into our schools and using students for their own purposes. Take, for example, the fund raising schemes that are taking place throughout Oakland every day. The phenomenon is so pervasive that many teachers and parents

might not even see the harmful effects. Scrip is being sold for certain stores, like Lucky and Safeway; candy such as M& M's are peddled daily; magazine companies are using the students as a form of cheap labor, to sell their own products.

Do the schools and school organizations benefit in the short run? Perhaps, though not nearly enough. The real beneficiaries of most fundraising programs are the companies whose products continue to be advertised and sold. But I believe that these children have more important tasks at hand than selling products for Hershey, Costco, and Publisher's Clearinghouse. They have serious learning to do and deserve an atmosphere that encourages a belief in their own power to accomplish great things.

Our public schools should be a strong enough institution without having to pander to private interests. Collectively, we pay a lot of taxes: sales tax, property tax, gas tax, income tax etc. As a community, as a city, and as a nation, we have more than enough money to provide each and every child with the best education in the world—without having certain companies come in and dictate what should be bought, sold, and learned in them.

Unfortunately, there are quite a few voices out there saying that what the schools need are “partnership” programs with industry (to let kids get a sense of what “the real world is like”). The most notorious example of this is Oakland's “partnership” with Shell Oil. The school board conveniently overlooks the fact that Shell, while simultaneously funding OUSD, is also funding and directing a vicious military dictatorship in Nigeria, which recently murdered eight human rights activists. Shell's previous exploits also included its full support of racist Apartheid in South Africa. If this is an example of what the “real world” has to offer our students, then sorry, but no thank-you.

This is what public school is about: it's about enabling students to improve their knowledge, their creativity, and their problem solving skills. But it also teaches kids to bring these blessings back to their community; and to be a force in building a strong, just society. We forget that mission sometimes. Sometimes, in the face of overwhelming dropout rates and despair, the adults are willing to think in terms of short-term gain, rather than long-term social progress. “Whatever works” seems to have become the mantra of this new age. The school board has basically said, “How can we turn down two

million dollars, even if Shell *is* a racist, exploitative giant?” But we can and we must turn down such money. We should not forget that profit is the bottom line measure for the success of these impersonal, often callous, institutions.

Our society is at the brink of realizing that it has made a mistake in allowing the big corporations, the HMOs, to dominate the Health “Industry.” It is becoming increasingly clear that making a profit from healing (and, yes, dying) is alienating and unethical. Do we now want to turn education into the “school industry?” If we keep letting the money men into the doors of our schools, soon enough the choice won’t be ours anymore. Slowly, the public system will be completely eroded, government funding will disappear, and the students will be at the mercy of market forces. And since when have market forces ever cared about West Oakland, East Oakland, Inner City, USA, except of course when they can turn a buck there?

Our wonderful students certainly deserve an afternoon of rap music, dance, storytelling, and other types of cultural enrichments. And there are plenty of organizations and talented individuals in this city who are capable of producing beautiful and entertaining shows without having to brainwash or manipulate children. One terrific example of what Oakland’s kids can do on their own (*with the partnership of their parents and teachers!*) is the MLK Oratorical Festival. This yearly event provides a deeply moving model for both academic success and positive social engagement. If we want our youth to empower themselves, then we must allow them to think, to act, and to produce their own fund-raisers, their own assemblies. If we want two million extra dollars for our schools, then we need to **demand** that from our government—it is OUR government and it’s our money; and we want it back! And if we want children to have pride in their town and their schools then let’s build them up from within. Corporations out of OUSD!!!!