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November 22, 2013

Council President Darrell L. Clarke  
City Hall, Room 494  
Philadelphia, PA 19107-3290

Dear Council President Clarke,

Commercial Alert is a project of Public Citizen, a consumer protection organization based in Washington, D.C., with more than 300,000 members and supporters, and 1,500 in Philadelphia alone. We aim to keep commercial culture within its proper sphere, and to prevent it from exploiting children and subverting higher values of family, community, environmental integrity and democracy.

We understand that you recently introduced Bill No. 130694 to the Philadelphia City Council which would allow Philadelphia school districts to sell commercial advertising on school district property. We write to urge you to reconsider your sponsorship of this Bill. We understand that the financial pressures Philadelphia schools currently face make you eager to identify non-traditional sources of funding. We know your primary concern is to avoid shortchanging students as a result of budget cuts. However, subjecting children and the community to even greater amounts of advertising is the wrong response. It will raise little revenue while undermining the educational and child development mission of Philadelphia schools. Educational institutions should promote civic virtue and the public good, not commercial values.

Childhood and adolescence are crucial periods for young pupils to develop their identities. Corporations exploit these developmental challenges, and convey through sophisticated marketing strategies that children should build their identities and judge their peers based on what they have, rather than on who they are. Children are already surrounded by near-constant advertising that promotes consumerism and commercial values. But the ubiquity of advertising is not a reason for allowing school advertising – it is a reason why children need a sanctuary from a world where everything seems to be for sale. Education should empower students to think critically and independently. Students should be encouraged to form their own beliefs, to question established ideas, and to develop intellectual curiosity. Marketing and advertising contravene these goals. Advertising in schools conveys market rather than civic values and impedes the ability of the education system to function as an open space where ideas are freely exchanged and the next generation of public-minded, conscientious students can grow.

Bill No. 130694 includes few provisions regarding the advertising that will be permitted on school property. While the bill does not permit alcohol or tobacco advertisements on school property, it leaves open the possibility for other advertising that is inappropriate or harmful to children, including junk foods and sexualized or violent media. Corporations that sell harmful products to children will be among those most interested in targeting them by pursuing advertising opportunities. By permitting advertising on school property, the school system is endorsing the products and services advertised.

Even if the state or individual districts were to adopt guidelines for “appropriate” advertising, such guidelines will likely fail to provide sufficient protection. In states across the country that permit school advertising, guidelines have not prevented companies selling fast food, soda, and other unhealthy products from purchasing ads that target students. Furthermore, any restrictions school districts or the State attempt to place regarding what types of advertising it will permit open them up to potentially costly First Amendment challenges.

Weighted against the real harms of school commercialism, the financial benefits of such schemes are minuscule. School advertising programs rarely bring in significant funds, and the small revenues often barely offset the administrative cost and burden of putting them in place. Our recent report, *School Commercialism: High Costs, Low Revenues*, shows that in some of the largest districts in the country, school advertising schemes generate less than 0.05 percent of the districts’ annual budgets. Given the relatively insignificant revenues that advertising is likely to bring to the state’s school, the risks are certainly not worth it for Philadelphia’s families.

We urge you withdraw Bill No. 130694 from the Philadelphia City Council. We encourage you to consider the points mentioned in the attached materials in preparation for the Committee on Rules of the Philadelphia City Council public hearing on December 3, 2013 at which the bill will be discussed. Do not hesitate to contact Eva Seidelman at (202) 588-7751 or [eseidelman@citizen.org](mailto:eseidelman@citizen.org) for more information or to set up a meeting. We look forward to your response, and would be pleased to discuss these matters with you further.

Sincerely,



Robert Weissman  
President  
Public Citizen



Eva Seidelman  
Researcher  
Public Citizen’s Commercial Alert

On behalf of: Youth United for Change  
Center for a New American Dream  
Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood

Cc: Councilmember Mark Squilla  
Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson  
Councilmember Jannie Blackwell  
Councilmember Curtis Jones, Jr.  
Councilmember Bobby Henon  
Councilmember Maria D. Quiñones-Sánchez  
Councilmember Cindy Bass  
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