

# Channel One Practices Raise Tough Questions

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The National Association of Secondary School Principals opposes it, the National PTA opposes it, the National Education Association opposes it, the American Association of School Administrators opposes it. "It" is Channel One.

Channel One is the controversial 12-minute television news program designed specifically

for teenagers (including two minutes of commercials) and created by advertising visionary Christopher Whittle. To deliver the program, Channel One trades free television and VCR equipment for each classroom, which the school can never own, for one hour a week of students' class time. It then sells this captive audience to advertisers like M&M, Nintendo and Warner Brothers. Channel One made \$30 million net profit last year.

In order to receive the free television equipment, school boards contractually agree to show the program at least 90 percent of all school days in at least 80 percent of all classrooms (usually in homeroom).

But the reviews to date have not been good. Last January, William Hoynes of Vassar College released a report critical of Channel One, concluding, "... it is dubious whether such news provides educational or civic benefits to either students or educators at schools that receive Channel One."

Likewise, before a Senate hearing in 1991, then-California School Superintendent Dr. Bill Honig stated, "Parents entrust their children to our public schools. Channel One is a commercial transaction that violates this trust. We have no right — legally or ethically — to sell access to our students by converting the educational purpose of school to a commercial one."

From school boards' perspective, there should be two primary concerns about exchanging students' time for free television:

The content of the non-news material aired during the broadcast and the promotion of the Channel One web page.

Many of the commercials are unique to Channel One. In fact, in September the *Wall Street Journal* reported school administrators are being enlisted for Channel One's marketing campaigns. "Get a 25 percent off pass from your principal," an Arizona Jeans ad told students.

But it's not just the turning of principals into hucksters that is alarming. It's also the content/quality of some of the things being promoted on Channel One that should worry school boards:

- "Stephen King's *The Shining*" had a TV-14 rating — the same as "NYPD-Blue." Yet, schoolchildren as young as 11 were compelled to watch a very graphic Channel One commercial that showed a deranged father menacing his son with a mallet.

- A Reebok ad told kids to watch "New York Undercover" to see its newest commercial. Yet, the Center for Media and Public Affairs called "Undercover" the most violent prime time series on network television.

- A youthful Channel One anchor reported on the results of a drug survey. "More and more parents are becoming tolerant of the drug culture, and, in fact, many of them were once part of it," he said while a graphic filled the screen saying 46 percent of parents say they expect their own teens to try illegal drugs.

These are just a few examples of what happens when a school board, with good intentions, gives up local control of an hour a week of curriculum to Hollywood. Even more alarming, though, are the risks that come with Channel One's advertising of its web page.

Daily, students are urged to visit the web site at [www.channelone.com](http://www.channelone.com). There they will find reviews of explicit-content compact discs and R-rated movies. Channel One even asks children to e-mail their own reviews of movies like "How to be a Player" and "Kiss the Girls."

Channel One also urges students to use their chat rooms. But, advertising chat rooms during school may encourage children to expose themselves to real life dan-

gers for which they are unprepared. In fact, testifying before Congress in April, FBI Director Louis Fteeh said pedophiles often seek out young children by either participating in or monitoring activities in teenage and pre-teen chat rooms.

Channel One never asked permission from school boards to develop and promote this companion Internet site.

Despite schools' arguments all this is worth it because of the free television equipment, Channel One makes no financial sense. In 1996, it cost an average of 6 cents per minute to maintain one student in an Alabama public school. Showing Channel One the minimum number of days eats up \$2,600 of school time each year for each 23-student classroom. A school can purchase the same size TV (with a built-in VCR that Channel One sets don't have) for under \$350. The question is not "How can we possibly afford to give up Channel One's TVs?" It should be "How can we possibly afford to keep them?"

With tougher exit exams coming, students need to maximize every moment of the school day. By turning off Channel One, and moving that 12 minutes to instructional time, a school could add an additional week's worth of school instruction (31 hours) without a student spending one additional second in class and without one extra penny of taxpayer money.

At the very least, one immediate step school boards should consider is removing pre-teens from the Channel One viewing audience. Although the contract says it can be shown down to sixth grade, it also states that it is "specifically designed for teenagers." Like a person who disregards a product's warning label, a board may be on its own defending a decision to expose sixth- and seventh-graders to the program, its commercials and its web page.

By pushing the envelope, Channel One has pushed board members into an awkward position of defending what is often indefensible. The best solution is to simply end the contract with Channel One. | |

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