

MY TURN



Pat Ellis

ZapMe! may be in school near you

ZapMe! is working its way across the country and may be in a school near you. They've got their foot in the door and are already exploiting children in Alabama's classrooms.

ZapMe! Corp. will loan 15 computers to every school along with a "netscape" of 10,000 sites. What do they ask in return? They require that schools deliver their students an average of at least four hours every day, on each computer, so their advertisements will have an audience. One third of the computer screen will run constantly, changing banner ads to attract students' attention. With a click of the mouse, any banner ad will instantly transform into a full screen commercial. With the help of compulsory attendance laws, the power of the state is being used once again to allow advertisers shamefully easy access to Alabama's children.

ZapMe! has a "mall" on it's web site that entices youngsters with expensive and age-inappropriate products. From this site students can easily go to a list of soft-core pornographic movies. On the ZapBuys section, ZapMe! actively promotes the sale of movies, some profanity-filled. ZapMe! provides a link to Amazon.com that advertises video games and boasts they can be addictive.

Following is a "teaser" advertising the video game "DOOM":

"Let the obsession begin... nearly twice as many death-wielding demons and a powerful new weapon. The ever dictive and frighteningly realistic world DOOM is back. It's bloodier. And it's deadlier than ever."

As if that's not enough, ZapMe! offers students over 110 video games they can play during school time. According to ZapMe! only 18 are "educational." These games are "instant on" and make game playing in schools a piece of cake. Make no mistake, this company is out to sell, sell, sell, and loss of student educational time is not their concern.

The ZapMe! contract stipulates that schools must agree to send ZapMe! marketing material home with their students at least three times a year; thereby making students unpaid salespeople for out-of-state advertisers. They also urge children to sign up for Zap! email accounts and they plan on providing student chat rooms.

Last, but by no means least, according to an Associated Press article on Dec. 8, ZapMe! "spies on students on behalf of marketers." Students surfing the Internet with ZapMe! are being secretly monitored and their browsing habits are being sent to marketers. The data is broken down according to age, sex and ZIP code. Marketers then use the information to target their products directly to students.

The company admits they have no content guidelines in place for advertisers to abide by and that they are free to do "pretty much whatever they want". This blatant disregard for children highlights ZapMe's agenda — to get as many advertisers on board as possible. They're not concerned about parental backlash. Perhaps because they know that "informed" parental consent is not required by either the local, state or federal government.

Advertising in schools is about using psychological techniques to manipulate children. Schools should not be in the business of promoting products or the "popular" culture - either by implication or outright endorsement. Taxpayers and parents should insist that the state board of education take a leadership role in opposing commercial exploitation of Alabama's schoolchildren.

We are on the threshold of the year 2000 — as a state and as a nation — and we must give serious thought to what direction our schools are taking. Teaching is a noble profession; compromising it's integrity should not be an option.

Most Americans would agree that children are our most precious resource. Why do we sell them so cheaply? Why sell them at all?

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