



Patterns in Newspaper Coverage
of School Commercialization

A FrameWorks Research Report

prepared for the Frameworks Institute
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INTRODUCTION

This analysis, conducted by the FrameWorks Institute for Kansas Action for Children, examines the ways in which the topic of school commercialization is presented to readers, directly and indirectly, in the state's newspapers. The effects of the news media on people's understanding of issues has been well documented, and goes beyond the question of whether people are "informed" about particular facts. The collective effect of the media is to create or reinforce a set of default understandings that act as a lens through which readers see the world. Viewed through this lens, some facts about the world make more sense and are easier to see, while others become harder to see over time because they conflict with familiar assumptions or do not fit familiar understandings.

The central question guiding the analysis in this report concerns the likely impacts the coverage has on readers: In what ways would consumers of these articles come away better educated about the problem of commercialization in general and commercialization in schools in particular, and in what ways might the coverage actually reinforce some of their counterproductive default understandings? Is the coverage promoting a more productive mental lens through which to view the issues, or a less productive one?

As advocates struggle with the difficult job of raising Kansans' consciousness regarding school commercialization and related issues, they will be more effective to the extent they bear in mind the ways in which current news coverage is helping and hurting their cause. This knowledge should help them plan ways of *improving* the coverage, by introducing ideas of their own through interviews, press releases, news events, and other opportunities.

METHOD

For purposes of this analysis, FrameWorks retained Cultural Logic to review over 40 newspaper articles that appeared between January 2005 and December 2006 in newspapers from various parts of the state and region, from Dodge City and Colby to Kansas City and from Salina to Wichita to Lawrence. AP Newswire articles that appeared in Kansas newspapers were included. The articles were identified by searching archives for reporting that touched on the topic of schools and that included terms such as "commercialization," "funding," "fundraising," "sponsorships," "vending machines," "obesity," "materialism," "advertising," and "business." The sample was designed to include articles that treated the role of corporations in school districts as a problem as well as those that reported on the topic uncritically.

Although the research included a thorough sampling, this analysis is not a quantitative look at the *number* of various types of articles published, but a qualitative examination of how topics related to school commercialization are commonly treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers' thinking. The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, the metaphors used to talk about school-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed across the materials.

The analysis also touches on the relationship between the stories told in newspapers and

the stories people already have in their heads, as established by elicitations and ethnographic research undertaken concurrently.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section, we enumerate some of the important findings that emerge from the media review. The coverage is characterized by a number of clear and familiar frames – narratives that can strongly guide thinking, in most cases *away from the perspectives that advocates would hope readers would adopt*. These shared understandings tend to obscure other important aspects of the issue, or to be of limited effectiveness even when they do suggest problems with school commercialization.

- The creative search for funding: Schools are involved in an ongoing effort to imagine new ways of meeting their own funding needs, and finding corporate funding counts as praiseworthy success. (Obscures the question of why public investment falls short of education needs)
- Companies as good citizens: The language of the coverage frames companies as *assisting, donating, rewarding, adopting* schools, etc. Despite whatever we may know to the contrary, this frame has strong cognitive and emotional appeal, so it is likely to be a powerful default. We want to believe others in our community are generous and decent, and the idea of *gifts* or *help* also have the cognitive appeal of simplicity. (Obscures the very different narrative of *business logic*.)
- Finding money for “extras”: In this familiar story, schools only go to businesses for help with “gravy,” at the *edges* of the school-funding problem (e.g. an ecological center). (Obscures the reality of schools’ increasing reliance on corporate money.)
- Schools as Businesses: Like every other institution in American society, schools are prone to being framed as *businesses* and are then measured by business standards – they should be good at promoting themselves, at thinking entrepreneurially, at weighing costs and benefits, etc. From this perspective, funding really is a problem they should take responsibility for themselves. (Obscures awareness of the critical distinction between *public* and *private*, in terms of both mission and methods; doesn’t allow for *principled* reasons why corporate funding should be disallowed.)
- Are schools promoting obesity?: This question plays out in one subset of the coverage. Unfortunately, though it is of course healthy that the question is being discussed, there are limits to the helpfulness of the coverage – partly because the point is often “trumped” by implications that the question comes down to *individual choice*, on the part of students, parents, schools. This powerful default can effectively derail productive thinking about appropriate limits on what should be allowed. (Note the problematic pattern that advocates’ position on this issue tends strongly to be expressed in negative terms: *limit, ban, disallow*.)

This coverage is also of limited significance because of its relatively narrow focus: Other instances of school commercialization don’t relate to the hot-button threat of *obesity*, and aren’t as easily characterized as *hypocritical* (schools teach health while promoting junk food).

- Advertising in schools is *vaguely jarring*: The prevailing implication, when questions are raised about commercialization, is that *everyone knows there's something unsettling about the juxtaposition of schools and advertising* – but without further specification or explanation, this problem remains at the level of something like esthetic preferences. (Obscures awareness of actual harms that may be caused – from schools becoming vulnerable due to reliance on corporate funding to developmental impacts on kids.)

Following discussion of these daunting challenges, the report offers a number of suggestions about how to introduce more productive understandings into public discourse about the issue of school commercialization in Kansas.

KEY PATTERNS

We devote the bulk of the paper to a discussion of the primary (and largely unproductive) patterns that characterize coverage relevant to the issue of school commercialization.

The creative search for funding

The articles overall reflect a concern that Kansas schools are short on money, and that schools' performance depends on dealing with this problem. Journalists treat school funding as a serious problem that the legislature and the courts are grappling with.

Passage of a school funding bill was a major breakthrough, but also may have set up a possible special session this summer if the Kansas Supreme Court disapproves of the plan. The court has ordered increased funding. Alan Rupe, an attorney for the plaintiff school districts that successfully sued for more funding, said he would challenge the measure, which falls far short of a court-recommended study on the actual costs of education. "It's not enough," Rupe said.

"Legislature OK's School Finance," *Bonner Springs Chieftain*, 5/11/06.

The financial needs of schools and teachers require creative solutions.

An important theme in the coverage is the search for creative funding solutions. The article below discusses teachers' creative efforts to bridge the funding gap that makes supplies hard to come by:

Students aren't the only ones who need supplies for the first day of school. Teachers need them, too. To get them, some are getting creative, shopping at garage sales and on eBay, signing up at Web sites to solicit donations and hoping that churches or civic organizations will adopt their classrooms. Micah Sechrest, a first-year teacher at Gammon Elementary School, has spent \$300 since June on overhead markers, paper, pens and decorations for her first-grade classroom. "I walked into a bare classroom," she said. "Any teacher can teach without decorations, but it's harder because it won't be warm and inviting."

"Teachers Appeal Online for Supplies," *The Wichita Eagle*, 8/6/06.

In this context, a relatively drastic change like the introduction of legal gambling is treated as just another reasonable candidate for funding.

Under pressure from the Kansas Supreme Court to increase school funding, methods to pay for education plans, some as high as \$660 million over the next three years, came up often during the debate. “By 2008, we’re going to be engulfed in hundreds of millions of dollars of red ink,” said Sen. John Vratil, R-Leawood. “If gambling is not the way to solve the problem, then tell me what your way is.”

“Gambling Fails as Source for School Funds,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, 3/17/06

“Landing” corporate funding as Success

Given that funding is established as a serious problem, and creativity is required to bridge the gap, corporate funding is one obvious source of resources. The language and tone of the coverage frames schools’ efforts as *progress and success* and the articles rarely mention that this way of funding school programs is in any way controversial.

Gary Musselman, executive director of the Kansas State High School Activities Assn., said he would expect more districts to pursue advertising programs in the years ahead, as financial pressures mount. The Topeka school district already has made inroads in such sponsorships; the district’s new pool got its name — the Capitol Federal Natatorium — after the Topeka-based financial company donated money to help defray costs for construction and upkeep.

“A New Game Plan,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, 10/16/05.

Nearly everyone has heard that schools can get free stuff by redeeming Campbell's Soup labels . . . 350 labels is good for a mesh bag for storing balls; 11,300 can get a microscope that projects an image to a TV . . . Within a six to 10 weeks, St. Mary's Elementary School will take delivery of two . . . vans, at a combined price of 3 million soup labels.

“Mmmmm Good!,” *Salina Journal*, 9/14/06.

What’s missing: Underlying reasons for school need

Within the logic of this storyline – the Creative Search for Funding – there is no real room for a discussion of *why* such efforts are needed. Very little connection is drawn in the coverage between corporate “donations” and presence in schools on the one hand, and government spending on the other.

In fact, some coverage implies that corporate funding is an alternative to *fee-based services* rather than to full public funding (e.g., “Will schools sell out?” *Lawrence Journal-World*, 6/28/03).

Readers are largely left to imagine (or not) why public schools don’t have the public

money they need for programs.

Companies as Good Citizens

Another important theme in the coverage is the generosity and responsible stance of businesses. Businesses are seen as active members of the community, supporting activities and programs for school-age children. Corporations are “assisting,” “donating,” “rewarding,” “adopting.”

- “[Kansas University] Officials are looking to attract ... more revenue [at the KS Relays event] by bringing in some outside *assistance*” (“Local Company Signs on to Market Kansas Relays”, *Lawrence Journal-World*, 1/6/06)
- “financial company *donated* money [to Topeka school district] to *help* defray costs ... As dollars become more scarce ... schools are constantly ... looking for *help*” (“New Game Plan”, *Lawrence Journal-World*, 10/16/05).
- ““We [Wal-Mart] wanted to *reward* communities where we live.”” (“United Way, Chamber Honor Four Companies for *Service*”, *Lawrence Journal-World*, 4/24/04).
- “[teacher] put her classroom up for *adoption*” (“Teachers Appeal Online for Supplies”, *The Wichita Eagle*, 8/6/06).

Note that the last article cited presents teachers as soliciting donations from “churches or civic organizations” but goes on to discuss corporate solicitations as well. Companies are grouped with other concerned and public-spirited organizations in the community.

This frame is naturally appealing, since we *want* to believe that the others (including businesses) in our community are decent and responsible.

It also has the appeal of simplicity. “Gifts” and “help” are a clear and uncomplicated way of understanding business sponsorships.

Reinforced by advertisements and announcements

Naturally, the articles written by journalists share space in the newspaper with cause-oriented advertisements and press releases that also frame businesses as responsible and generous community members.

The public is invited to Village Square Mall [where] Village Square Mall Merchants and Pepsi Cola are holding their first annual month-long food drive for the United Way Agencies.

“Food Drive Sponsored by Pepsi and Village Square Mall Merchants,” *Dodge City Daily Globe*, 11/30/06.

Help a child or adult keep warm this winter by donating coats you're no longer wearing to the Coats for Kids Program. Dodge City Community College is working with the Credit Union of Dodge City and Jamie's Cleaners to encourage donations of coats and other outerwear this winter.

"Coats for Kids," *Dodge City Daily Globe*, 11/1/06.

What's missing: Discussion of marketing benefits

While it is undoubtedly true that some or all Kansas business leaders are genuinely concerned about the state's schools, and that altruism plays some role in corporate activities, it is just as certain that corporations have additional motives for their participation. Yet the coverage largely ignores the question of what corporations have to gain in this situation. Their activities are not typically discussed as "advertising", "marketing," "capitalizing on," or "getting good PR."

In the article excerpted below, it takes a careful reading to understand that volunteers and schoolchildren from the local elementary school are enlisted in a program that promotes the business of a grocery store:

Coupons for Education (is) a school program based on collecting, clipping, sorting and hanging the discount notices on products at the Hen House at 6238 N. Chatham Ave, Kansas City. The program functions like a reliable factory, with dozens of volunteers chugging along each week . . . Grade levels take turns doing the work each month. That work comes to fruition when shoppers buy coupon-bearing products and agree to donate the savings to Southeast . . . "It is kind of labor-intensive, but it's working," said Stephanie Brizendine, Southeast's PTA president. "Amen to the people that got it started."

"Coupons Raise Money for Elementary School," *The Kansas City Star*, 1/18/06.

Finding money for "extras"

An important frame that helps to hide the importance of the school commercialization issue is that the role of corporations is often characterized as helping at the *edges* of the school-funding problem.

The monthly checks from Hen House have funded the gravy-on-top kinds of projects that don't fit into the school's budget: An ecological center allowed students to study indigenous plants; a science lab gave students microscopes and visual aides for hands-on experiments; and educational software let students play math and reading games with interactive twists. "These were things we may not have been able to get otherwise," Martin said. Southeast is the only Park Hill school with such a partnership, she said.

“Coupons Raise Money for Elementary School,” *The Kansas City Star*, 1/18/06.

This framing encourages people to view corporate interventions in the school district as a continuation of local traditions of business sponsorship that have long paid for things like band uniforms or field trips.

What’s missing: Realism about the increasing reliance on corporate money

In fact, of course, relying on these kinds of “partnerships” for resources like educational software and lab equipment represents a significant shrinking of the public responsibility for maintaining a functional school. This picture is obscured by the more familiar and comfortable idea that companies are helping with extras.

Schools as Businesses

Some of the coverage applies the frame and logic of businesses to schools themselves, arguing that schools need to “sell themselves,” to do a better job competing for resources, improve their images, and so forth:

- “[School districts] need to ... grow their business” (“Private School Learns Art of Marketing”, *The Wichita Eagle*, 10/14/06. – an article that also reports on public school districts’ *marketing campaigns*).
- “There is a huge, pent-up demand for a new *product*,” [a parent] said [in reference to a new, higher-quality neighborhood school focusing on science and math]. (“KC School District: KC schools hope ideas, efforts revamp image, education,” *The Kansas City Star*, 1/29/06).
- “[Schools’] agreeing to sign on as an *advertising sponsor* [at other schools’ sports events] through Star Signs ... simply made sense. ‘It’s an *investment*.’” (“New Game Plan”, *The Lawrence Journal-World*, 10/16/05).

More subtly, when the cons of accepting sponsorship of various kinds *are* considered, schools’ decision-making is presented in *cost-benefit* terms (as opposed to black and white questions of principle, for instance). Articles refer to the “costs” and “trade-offs” of accepting corporate sponsorship.

“[The] benefits of ... Channel One ... have some real *costs* that should create an ethical dilemma for schools” ... “It’s one of the *tradeoffs* ... in order to have that [TV] equipment available.”

“School TV Memorable for Ads, Not News”, *Lawrence*

As one university staff member puts it, marketing a school (in this case her university) through traditional advertising methods is an “awesome opportunity” (“New Game Plan”, *The Lawrence Journal-World, 10/16/05*).

What’s missing: Real discussion of the public-private distinction

Of course, schools are not businesses – they don’t and shouldn’t operate by the same logic as commercial entities do. But the Schools as Businesses frame obscures the important differences between the public and private spheres, and the Business frame is so familiar and so positively regarded, for the most part, that the framing makes it difficult to even question the idea that schools *shouldn’t* think or act like companies.

Are schools promoting obesity?

The area where coverage was most likely to be critical was around the topic of junk food and children’s health, particularly as it relates to obesity.

Here there were articles that treated some marketers and some marketing as harmful to children, and a few articles that called into question the trade off between the benefits of allowing junk food in the schools and the costs to children’s present and future health.

“High-calorie drinks are often cited as one reason for the rise [in childhood obesity].”

“So Long, Sugary Drinks”, *Lawrence World-Journal, 2/4/06*.

“[The director of KAC] urged legislators to enact laws ... and awards that involve food.”

“Report: Sugary Snacks Should be Suspended”, *Lawrence Journal-World, 1/23/06*.

(This article summarizes a report by KAC.)

“It’s very concerning when childhood obesity is a major ... problem, that preschool programs are still being sponsored by fast food restaurants”

“Study: Toddlers Can’t Escape Ads for High-Fat Foods”,
Lawrence Journal-World, 10/2/06.

Note that, like a number of the other critical articles, the article cited above is from the Associated Press.

Other material addressed the more general connection between advertising and health, including AP's piece, "Study: Toddlers Can't Escape Ads for High-Fat Foods", printed in the *Lawrence Journal-World* (10/2/06). But this study on the effects of fast-food advertising on toddlers apparently is not accompanied by any discussion connecting it to the Kansas school vending machine issue or the childhood obesity issue. As written, this article contributes little to the sense of why commercialism in schools may be a problem. The same applies to other nutrition-related pieces, such as AP's "Caffeine-Stoked Energy Drinks Wire a Generation, Prompt Concerns", posted on *Kansas.com* (10/30/06).

Counter-frame: A matter of freedom and choice

In all, the coverage does not make a compelling case against the availability of junk foods in schools. A primary reason is that the seemingly commonsense argument that schools should not promote unhealthy eating is countered by the very powerful default frame of Individual Responsibility. The question of healthy vs. unhealthy foods is really a question of individual choice in this frame, and is up to parents or the kids themselves, for instance.

"[Gary Brunk] urged legislators to enact laws aimed at giving parents a say in the kinds of snacks sold ... [and] requiring vending companies to also offer bottled water & fruit juices ..."

"Report: Sugary Snacks Should be Suspended", *Lawrence Journal-World*, 6/23/06.

"But the biggest worry is how some teens use the drinks."

"Caffeine-Stoked Energy Drinks Wire a Generation, Prompt Concerns", AP, posted on *Kansas.com*, 10/30/06.

"Students must be taught to make healthy choices ... 'It isn't an abstinence-only thing. ... It's about moderation & making healthy choices'"

"So Long, Sugary Drinks", *Lawrence Journal-World*, 5/4/06.

"Kids will buy what they want."

"Companies Will Target Junk Food at Schools", *Lawrence Journal-World*, 10/7/06.

More generally, stories about the issue naturally frame it in terms of choice, including schools' choices.

“A committee is reviewing whether to add to the policies’ restrictions ...limiting the kinds of beverages to be sold on school property during school hours... [E]ffectiveness of the guidelines remains to be seen.”

“Report: Sugary Snacks Should be Suspended”, *Lawrence Journal-World*, 6/23/06.

Limited significance: Junk food as a special case

On the one hand, the problem of junk food vending machines presented an opportunity to bring into the public eye a clear-cut illustration of how marketers often do not have the best interests of their customers at heart, and how schools, as they become more reliant on revenue streams outside of public funding, enter into agreements that can hurt students.

On the other hand, even if the ambivalent coverage were to convince people that junk food ought to be banned from schools, it is unlikely this case would help make the broader points about the detrimental consequences of commercialization. The strong points in this case don’t extend easily to other forms of commercialization. For example:

- Other things being marketed (from iPods to Disneyland) can’t be linked to the hot-button issue of obesity, and more generally, aren’t obviously harmful in and of themselves.
- Other forms of marketing don’t entail the same sort of apparent hypocrisy as schools that teach healthy habits while endorsing junk food consumption.

In all, the junk food / obesity case study is disappointing from the point of view of its potential to advance the broader issue of school commercialization, and the even more general issue of the public’s duty to children.

Advertising in schools is *vaguely jarring*.

While there is some focused (if equivocal) discussion of the downsides of unhealthy foods in schools, the more general pattern is that school commercialization is not presented in terms of any potential harms to schoolchildren or others. The coverage often offers no real sense that there is any harm in greater corporate participation in schools.

Newman, director of student services and athletics for Shawnee Mission public schools, said that he would welcome any money generated through the deal. The district previously had frowned upon displaying commercial signs at its athletics venues . . . “It’s a sign of the times,” Newman said of the arrangement with Star Signs. “It’s an opportunity to generate revenue for our school district. As long as it’s done in a first-class manner, and that’s not obstructing anyone or offensive to anyone, I think it will be a great program.”

“A new game plan,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, 10/16/05

Typical of the coverage, the article offers no explanation as to why commercial advertising on school property was formerly “frowned upon,” and the implicit problems with it are reduced to impaired sightlines, obstructed motion through the facility, or the possibility of *offensive* content.

Similarly, the article, “Will schools sell out?” (*Lawrence Journal-World*, 6/28/03) gives a nod to the fact that corporate sponsorship might be considered objectionable, but doesn’t mention what the objections might be. Moreover, this article presents corporate funding as alternative to fee-based services (not as alternative to full public funding).

The prevailing implication is that *everyone knows there’s something unsettling about the juxtaposition of schools and advertising* – but without further specification or explanation, this problem remains at the level of something like esthetic preferences.

What’s missing: A mechanism of harm

Various potential drawbacks of school commercialization are left undiscussed in articles like the ones above, such as the vulnerability of schools that become addicted to such revenue streams, or the role of the school as endorser of particular products and services, and the effects of the intensifying commercial landscape that children face.

Again, readers would be largely left to wonder (or not) on their own about the objections to on-campus advertising.

Exceptions that prove the rule

Towards the chronological end of our sample, Kansas newspapers published a couple of articles on national research showing that the intensification of advertising messages aimed at kids is having deep and disquieting effects.

Inappropriate advertising contributes to many kids' ills - like obesity and anorexia, drinking booze and having sex too soon - and Congress should crack down on it, the American Academy of Pediatrics says. The influential doctors' group issued a new policy statement in response to what it calls a rising tide of advertising aimed at children.

“Policy calls for fewer ads aimed at children,” *Wichita Eagle*, 12/4/06

Child development experts say that physical and behavioral changes that would have been typical of teenagers decades ago are now common among “twens” – kids ages 8 to 12. . . Beyond the drugs, sex and rock n roll their boomer and Gen-X parents navigated, technology and consumerism have accelerated the pace of

life, giving kids easy access to influences that may or may not be parent-approved.

“Tweens are the new teens,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/27/06

On the other hand, even these articles did not make arguments that are helpful for reducing school commercialization, for two reasons.

First, the articles focus on the “exceptional” cases of advertising, where the *content is specifically inappropriate for kids*. This is not the kind of commercialization most likely to show up in schools, and banning it would not eliminate the larger problem.

Second, the default model of parental influence asserted itself in the reporting. The “Tweens” article quotes psychology professor and father Tom Plante:

[Kids] struggle to process the images of sex, violence and adult humor, even when their parents try to shield them. And sometimes, he says, parents end up encouraging the behavior by failing to set limits -- in essence, handing over power to their kids.

In short, the harms of advertising – according to the powerful default frames – are limited to a few exceptional areas of content, and are preventable by parents.

The more general issue of school commercialization, it would seem, is actually a non-issue.

SUGGESTED DIRECTIONS

If advocates are interested in reducing the overall level of commercial influence in Kansas schools (or American schools more generally), they clearly have their work cut out for them in terms of shifting the public dialog.

In this section, we review a number of ways in which that conversation might be made more productive, based largely on topics missing or underdeveloped in the news coverage on the issue.

What the presence of advertising *teaches*

What effects does the repetition of commercial messages have on children's developing understandings of the world? Of the relationship between school and business? Of the nature and effects of advertising?

More generally, there is clearly room for user-friendly explanations of how advertising affects children's developing minds. The research in this area has yet to be translated into clear and memorable ideas about the downsides for children of heavy exposure to advertising.

Previous research for the FrameWorks Institute has shown that Americans are inclined to discount the power of advertising to affect our thinking (e.g. about food). There is certainly room for additional research on how to talk about the important point that advertising is an effective tool of manipulation, and especially inappropriate for young minds which are presumed to be more impressionable.

Honest discussion of business motives

If people were encouraged to focus on how corporations see their activities – e.g. developing future customers, taking advantage of a “perfect” marketing setting and audience – and offered help in remembering and focusing on these ideas, their thinking might move along different lines.

Connecting research findings to local situations

Currently, much of the critical discussion found in the coverage appears in pieces produced by the AP or other distant sources. Relatively few connections are drawn in the news between national studies and local issues. This suggests, for example, that backgrounding reporters and editorial boards on the research literature might help to balance the currently uncontextualized coverage.

Emphasizing the public vs. private funding choice

To some extent, of course, it is obvious and implicit that corporate sponsorships are ways of making up for shortfalls in public investment. This topic could be explored in a more explicit and focused way.

Naturally, any argument about the importance of greater public funding will be stronger to the extent that the *harms* of corporate funding are made clearer.

Defining public schools as collaborations

One way of promoting the understanding that schools are *public* spaces would be to frame them as collective endeavors of families, government (at various levels), teachers, and the community. Community members have a stake and a role in shaping schools as a developmental environment.

Schools as Public space, as opposed to Private

There is no clear distinction drawn in the coverage between the *mission* of public institutions like schools as opposed to the mission of private, commercial entities. Previous research conducted for FrameWorks (on how Americans view the mission of government) has illustrated that this distinction is not a strong one in the minds of average Americans. Finding clear and simple ways of expressing this distinction would go a long way towards exposing the inappropriateness of particular kinds of business interventions in school space.

Finding *positive* ways of talking, instead of “limit” “ban”

Currently, the most natural language for advocates takes a “negative” stand, *against* various practices, rather than *in favor of* a particular vision. There is an inherent downside to this kind of linguistic stance, and advocates would be better served by an easily-conveyed *positive vision* of what they are trying to create or preserve.

CONCLUSION

Reporting on this topic consistently promotes and reinforces a set of strong cultural assumptions found among Kansans. While media coverage can't be solely responsible for creating these patterns, the coverage is nevertheless part of a cycle of public discourse that entrenches these patterns of thinking in the minds of Kansans.

- *Parents shape childhood.*

As previous FrameWorks research has suggested, there is a powerful assumption that child development happens largely within the confines of the “Family Bubble.” This default understanding is so strong that other influences are cognitively invisible, though people, of course, acknowledge other influences when prompted, or at moments of careful reflection.

- *Local institutions (including businesses) ought to support the schools.*

It is a generally accepted principle that businesses should be involved in supporting schools. This is seen as part of their civic duty. The understanding refers mainly to local businesses, but lines are not sharp, and the idea easily stretches to include businesses more generally.

- *Advertising is not harmful (except in a few circumstances)*

Kansans (probably like Americans more generally) regard advertising as more or less harmless, except in cases that are regarded as exceptional, such as when the ads “lie” or when they promote dangerous products.

Even more broadly, the coverage reflects – and reinforces – a cultural context dominated by an emphasis on freedom of choice, individual responsibility, and pro-business perspectives. From this cultural perspective, it is natural and perhaps even inevitable that kids, families, schools, school districts, towns *and businesses* are all, at their own levels, acting individually and in their own interest.

Clearly, there are powerful cultural and cognitive forces working against advocates on this issue.

It should be noted that the kinds of patterns discussed in the report don't necessarily reflect bad intentions or lack of skill. Instead, they largely reflect common patterns in American reasoning and discourse which journalists carry with them just like anyone else.

Of course there is probably another factor at play. It is beyond the scope of this report to speculate about the degree to which the coverage might itself be affected by commercial and financial considerations. Would criticism of popular business practices be good for circulation? For *advertising* sales? (And note the occasional presence of seemingly paid articles posing as news – e.g. “Sprint donates more than \$500,000 to Kansas City-area

schools and education programs”).

This question aside, the bottom line is that the intersection between schools, childhood and consumerism presents special challenges to journalists and other communicators, and it will take hard and skillful communications work – possibly exploring directions suggested in the previous section – to make real headway on the issue.

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Cultural Logic, headed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, adapts current cognitive and social science methodologies to research on public interest issues in order to uncover the cultural models that underlie opinion and behavior. Cultural Logic techniques include cognitive elicitations (semi-structured, one-on-one interviews), analysis of media and other public discourse, and ethnographic observation.

All FrameWorks Research Reports are edited by the Institute.