

TOBACCO INDUSTRY EFFORTS TO INFILTRATE OUR SCHOOLS

AN OPEN LETTER TO EDUCATORS

To Principals, School Administrators, Teachers, and Other Educators:

The major cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies have been offering funding, materials, and other assistance to schools, which they claim is meant to support school anti-smoking efforts. We believe that schools should reject these offers of funding or assistance from the tobacco companies. These offers are not designed to help schools protect students from tobacco-caused harms or addiction. They are carefully planned public relations efforts by the tobacco companies aimed at protecting and promoting the companies' enormous sales and profits while minimizing reasonable efforts to prevent and reduce tobacco use.

The cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies aggressively market products that each year kill at least 400,000 people in the United States while turning another million kids into new regular smokers. These companies rely on kids to replace their adult customers who die or quit, and they have a long history of marketing their deadly products to kids. Accordingly, schools should be completely off limits to tobacco companies. They cannot be trusted.

Internal tobacco-company documents, revealed through various anti-smoking lawsuits, show that the tobacco companies are not providing funding and materials to schools out of a sincere desire to reduce youth smoking but to improve their image, cultivate local allies, reduce the demand for more effective government-supported anti-smoking measures, and indirectly market their names and products to kids. For example, the 5-Year Plan for 1992-1996 of Philip Morris (the maker of Marlboro, the brand smoked by more kids than all other brands combined) includes the following priority action: *"Seek ways to use the contributions program to advance the company's communications, public affairs, and government relations agenda."* A 1991 Tobacco Institute memo about the industry's anti-youth-smoking efforts stated that *"As we discussed, the ultimate means for determining the success of this program will be: 1) A reduction in legislation introduced and passed restricting or banning our sales and marketing activities; 2) Passage of legislation favorable to the industry; 3) Greater support from business, parent, and teacher groups."* No mention is made of preventing kids from smoking.

We realize that the funding and other materials offered by the tobacco companies can appear too useful to pass up, especially for schools that are chronically short of resources. But by accepting any funding or other assistance from the tobacco companies, schools are playing right into the companies' hands by letting them use the schools' good reputations to enhance their own rightfully tarnished reputations. Accepting tobacco industry support for anti-smoking programs also sends a troublesome mixed message to students.

Too often, we hear of schools taking cigarette-company money because they say "it is the only way we can offer any anti-youth-smoking programs," yet the schools have not done anything to seek alternative funding from government sources, charitable foundations, community organizations, or non-tobacco businesses. Nor have they investigated the possibility of developing partnerships with tobacco-free public-health or youth-focused organizations in their communities that could offer tobacco-free school-based anti-smoking initiatives. In many cases, the schools were not even seeking funding for such programs at all until the tobacco companies showed up with their offer.

It is also clear that many of these schools could do much more than they are currently doing to prevent and reduce smoking among their students without requiring any new funding from the tobacco companies or anyone else. Most notably, firmly enforced school policies that forbid smoking or other tobacco use on school grounds and at school events can significantly reduce student smoking without costing a cent. Yet many schools fail to enforce the no-smoking policies they have, have weak no-smoking policies, or have no clearly stated and understood anti-smoking policies at all. By creating and enforcing strong policies, school send a critical message to the students and set an important example.

It is also worth noting that the effectiveness of "anti-youth-smoking" materials provided to schools by the tobacco companies has been called into question. Some, like the "anti-smoking" book covers distributed by Philip Morris have been attacked as being a way to get the tobacco companies' names in front of kids and for having pro-smoking imagery. Other tobacco-company materials characterize smoking as an adult behavior, which can actually encourage teen use, or fail to mention tobacco-caused harms or addiction. For example, the "Sly's Unwise Surprise" book, distributed by Brown & Williamson provides no reasons not to smoke besides asserting that the first puffs cause coughing.

Two of the major cigarette companies have also tried to get schools to accept funding for Life Skills Training, a respected school-based program that has been shown to reduce tobacco use – especially when coupled with strong school anti-smoking policies and when implemented as one part of a much broader tobacco prevention initiative that extends beyond the schools. When funded by a big cigarette company, however, Life Skills can lose much of its credibility and effectiveness with students. In fact, tobacco-industry funding of this program has become so troubling that one of the only two vendors that sell Life Skills, the Channing L. Bete Company, will no longer sell it to school systems that use money from tobacco companies.

As a partnership of numerous organizations dedicated to preventing and reducing tobacco use, especially among children, we are painfully aware that the tobacco companies continue to be the major obstacle to any constructive efforts to prevent and reduce youth smoking – despite all their ads touting their so-called anti-youth-smoking efforts and charitable acts. Smoking is a pediatric disease, with the vast majority of all smokers starting their deadly habit while in their teens. The major carrier of this pediatric disease are the tobacco companies, and they are always looking at new ways to promote their products and protect their profits. We urge you to do all you can to make sure the tobacco companies are not able to use any of our nation's schools as their pawns in this deadly game.

For more information about this the tobacco companies' efforts to infiltrate our schools, and how schools can combat youth smoking without tobacco-industry assistance, please go to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids website at www.tobaccofreekids.org/reports/schools.

We urge you to adopt a formal policy of not accepting tobacco industry funding, to implement strong school policies against smoking, and to implement effective prevention programs that are part of comprehensive anti-smoking initiatives. Please do not hesitate to contact us for assistance in making your school truly tobacco-free.

Sincerely,

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids