



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

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Susan Linn, EdD
Director

December 10, 2008

Josh Golin
Associate Director

Dr. Jerry Weast, Superintendent
Office of the Superintendent of Schools
Carver Educational Services Center
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 122
Rockville, MD 20850

CCFC
STEERING COMMITTEE:

Enola Aird, JD

Dear Dr. Weast,

Kathy Bowman, EdS

I am writing to you on behalf of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, a national advocacy group that counters harmful marketing to children. I am writing to express my concern about your school district's agreement with BusRadio. This service makes listening to child-targeted ads compulsory for any student who rides the bus. For this reason, many leading advocates for children – including the National PTA – have taken a stand against BusRadio¹.

Nancy Carlsson-Paige, EdD

Allen Kanner, PhD

Tim Kasser, PhD

Joe Kelly

In my experience, parents who learn the facts about BusRadio do not want this service for their children. In a number of instances – including in Louisville, the Pajaro Valley Unified School District in California, and a number of school districts in Massachusetts – parents have actively organized to stop BusRadio from coming to their town. Unfortunately, parents often do not find about BusRadio until after a contract has been signed. Since that appears to be the case in Montgomery, I encourage you to hold an open and thorough inquiry into whether BusRadio is appropriate for the children of Montgomery County.

Velma LaPoint, PhD

Diane Levin, PhD

Karen Lewis

Alex Molnar, PhD

Alvin F. Poussaint, MD

Michele Simon, JD, MPH

Here are some of the reasons parents in Montgomery County might be concerned about BusRadio:

What BusRadio tells its advertisers.

BusRadio was created for one reason. Not to offer an age-appropriate alternative to commercial radio or to make school buses safer, but to deliver students to advertisers. BusRadio used to maintain a website for prospective advertisers. On that website, it boasted that it would “take targeted student marketing to the next level” and provide companies with a “captive audience” who, unlike listeners to commercial radio, are unable to change the station during ads. BusRadio also boasted that it would be able to target students better than traditional advertisers.²



Products advertised on a school bus will come with the implicit message that the school endorses the product. But the products advertised may run counter to the lessons schools want to teach their students.

BusRadio refuses to disclose who advertises on its bus broadcasts, a disturbing stance for a company that wants privileged access to public school children. By examining promotional materials for advertisers, we have been able to determine that the following have aired on BusRadio:

- BusRadio promoted Bratz DVDs during its elementary school broadcasts. The Bratz dolls were singled out by the American Psychological Association for contributing to the sexualization of young girls. Many parents we have spoken to do not allow Bratz in their homes and were very upset to find out the dolls were being promoted through a school venue.
- Another elementary school advertiser, Answers.com, tells students to do their home work by looking up their answers on the Internet. The ad even includes one student making fun of another student who is carrying around books.
- BusRadio has run advertisements for Cingular cell phones on its elementary school broadcasts. The ads mock a girl's mother because she is concerned about her daughter's cell phone bills. Parents immersed in the "cell phone battle" may not want their children hearing Cingular ads as a part of the school day.
- On its website for advertisers, BusRadio noted that it "gave The WB Network the flexibility to run commercials for their shows the day they were to air. To take full advantage of the BusRadio network, The WB ran more ads during student's ride home after school so they could reinforce the message to watch that night." Should the last message in a school day be one that encourages students to watch TV? ³

BusRadio is not really age-appropriate.

One of BusRadio's main selling points is that it is more age-appropriate than commercial radio stations. But time and time again, they have demonstrated that their idea of age-appropriate is different than most parents. That's no accident. They need to play "edgy" music to keep the kids listening -- otherwise, they can't sell those kids to advertisers. I encourage you to visit <http://www.obligation.org/busradiohome.php> to see some of the songs and artists that have been featured on BusRadio.

Last spring, Seminole County, Florida terminated their relationship with BusRadio when the company refused to stop playing songs from albums with parental warnings for explicit lyrics and content. ⁴

BusRadio is designed to drive kids to BusRadio.com, where kids are exposed to more inappropriate content and advertising.

Throughout its broadcasts, BusRadio encourages kids to visit its website, BusRadio.com. According to the Nashua Telegraph, the phrase "BusRadio" or references to its Web site were mentioned 30 times during a one-hour elementary school broadcast and 43 times during a high school and middle school broadcast. ⁵

BusRadio maintains only one website for its listeners so all children – whether they are six or sixteen – who go to BusRadio.com are exposed to the same content and ads. This fall, children of all ages who followed the advice of the BusRadio DJ's to visit BusRadio.com, were met with ads telling them to tune into *90210*, a TV show full of teen sex and alcohol use. ⁶ You can find more information about the content of BusRadio.com at <http://www.obligation.org/busradiohome.php>.

Children are already exposed to too much advertising.

Marketing is a factor in myriad problems facing children today – from childhood obesity, eating disorders and youth violence, to precociously irresponsible sexuality, family stress and the acquisition of materialistic values. Listening to advertising should not be a compulsory part of the school day. Recently, despite extensive lobbying from BusRadio, the South Carolina State Board of Education voted overwhelmingly to prohibit all advertising on school buses.⁷

I encourage you to reconsider Montgomery County's arrangement with BusRadio. In addition to the citations provided below, you'll find links to a number of articles about BusRadio at <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/actions/busradio.htm>. I would be happy to discuss this matter with you further.

Sincerely,

Josh Golin
Associate Director
Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

¹ <http://www.commercialalert.org/issues/education/busradio/childrens-advocates-ask-companies-not-to-advertise-on-busradio-and-channel-one>.

² After several newspapers reported how BusRadio was bragging about delivering students to advertisers, the company blocked access this website. But you can still read about it at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/03/AR2006060300150_pf.html

³ This is from BusRadio's website for advertisers that can no longer be accessed; I can provide you with the text that I copied from that website.

⁴ <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/news/showcould.htm>.

⁵ <http://commercialfreechildhood.org/news/2008/09/busradiooped.htm>.

⁶ <http://commercialfreechildhood.org/news/2008/09/toxic90210.htm>.

⁷ <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/news/2008/09/scbusads.htm>.

cc: Montgomery County Board of Education
Valerie Ervin, Montgomery County Council