The following letter was sent to Alabama State Superintendent of Education Dr. Thomas R. Bice. Similar letters were sent to all 42 states where Channel One News has a significant presence.

Dr. Thomas R. Bice  
State Superintendent of Education  
Alabama State Department of Education  
50 North Ripley St.  
PO Box 302101  
Montgomery, AL 36104

July 30, 2012

Dear Dr. Bice,

We are writing to alert you to significant problems with the commercial in-school network Channel One News, which is broadcast to 5.5 million students across the country every school day. Currently, Channel One is shown in 332 middle and high schools in Alabama. We urge your office to conduct a thorough review of the costs and benefits of showing Channel One and to encourage local school districts to suspend the use of the network until such a review is complete.

Since its founding in 1989, Channel One News has been widely criticized both for its business model and its content. Channel One loans schools television equipment if they agree to show a daily 12-minute program that includes news, feature stories, and two minutes of commercials targeted specifically at students. No other company generates revenue by compelling a captive audience of students to watch television commercials during taxpayer-funded class time. For advertisers, the benefits are obvious. As Channel One’s founder, Joel Babbitt, once remarked, “The advertiser gets kids who cannot go to the bathroom, cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo.” But for students and educators, Channel One is a terrible deal.

The educational content is minimal. One analysis found that only 20% of Channel One’s coverage was about recent political, social, or cultural events; the other 80% was devoted to sports, weather, natural disasters, features and profiles, and self-promotion of Channel One.1 At the same time, research shows that the Channel One commercials are particularly effective. A study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that students were more likely to remember Channel One’s commercial than its news.2 And a study in the *Journal of*

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Communication found that children attending schools with Channel One were more materialistic than students from schools without it.\(^3\)

In 2006, a broad coalition of advocates for education and public health—including American Family Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Consumers Union, Eagle Forum, Global Exchange and the National PTA—signed a letter opposing Channel One. \(^4\) Unfortunately, however, as Channel One’s novelty has worn off, there has been less scrutiny of the network’s activities lately. Today, it is likely that many parents are not even aware that their children are watching television commercials targeted specifically to students each day in school. But despite its longevity, there are a number of new and pressing reasons to be worried about Channel One, including its current emphasis on integrating advertising directly into its broadcasts and promoting its own commercial website www.channelone.com. It is also troubling that, in the 2011-12 school year, the in-school network began targeting elementary school students for the first time as part of its new partnership with Promethean, a company that produces whiteboards.

Given these changes and longstanding concerns about Channel One, we believe it is time for a thorough evaluation of the educational benefits and costs of using the network in Alabama’s classrooms. We encourage your office to conduct such a review and include a focus on the following issues:

**Showing Channel One News is not an optimal use of taxpayer-funded class time.**

Schools are contractually obligated to show Channel One’s 12-minute broadcasts on at least 90% of school days.\(^5\) Students in schools that honor their contract will spend 32 hours per year watching Channel One, losing more than a full week of instructional time. One full day of instructional time is lost each year just to Channel One’s commercials. If students watch the show from 6th through 12th grades, they will spend more than seven weeks watching the broadcasts—and seven full days watching the commercials—by the time they graduate.

Channel One News executives tout the fact that the company does not charge for its broadcasts or for the loan of its equipment, but the broadcasts do cost taxpayers a considerable sum. In 1998, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found that Channel One News costs taxpayers $1.8 billion annually in the form of lost instructional time, with the commercials alone costing $300 million.\(^6\) On average, Channel One News cost each secondary school $158,000 annually while the equipment loaned to the schools had an annual rental value of only $4,000. Soaring education costs mean that this discrepancy is likely to be considerably higher today.

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Given increasing financial pressure on schools and the need for educators to maximize their time with students, it is clear that this time would be better spent on other activities. For instance, when Bartlett High School in Shelby County, Tennessee eliminated Channel One broadcasts, the school was able to increase the number of credits that students could earn each year.7

**Channel One’s increasingly commercialized broadcasts violate the terms of its contract with schools.**

Channel One News’ contract explicitly says that each daily 12-minute broadcast will include up to two minutes of commercial content. Increasingly, however, Channel One extends its commercial content beyond the contractually agreed upon two minutes by regularly integrating commercial content into its newscast in addition to its regular commercials.8

Channel One broadcasts frequently feature the star of a new movie or television show hosting a quiz. For example, on September 16, 2011, the quiz was hosted by the stars of the *The Secret Circle*—a television show about a coven of witches. They promoted their show before even getting to that day’s question, which was about the Salem witch trials.9 Before a quiz about Hawaii, actress AnnaSophia Robb promoted her film *Soul Surfer*, describing its plot while sitting in front of a poster for the film.10 Similarly, Jack Black plugged his film *Kung Fu Panda 2* by hosting a quiz about pandas.11

On May 23, 2012, Channel One’s entire 12-minute broadcast was devoted to promoting four television shows on the ABC Family network. The episode featured teams of students competing in a news quiz. Each team was named after an ABC Family show, paired with a star from that show, and positioned in front of a backdrop—and behind a podium—advertising that show.12 Meanwhile, members of the studio audience were instructed to wave pictures of the ABC Family actors whose shows were being advertised during the quiz.13

It is worth noting that all of the television shows and movies mentioned above were also advertised in traditional spots on Channel One broadcasts and on ChannelOne.com. It is clear that Channel One is being compensated by advertisers for these quiz segments, thereby violating its agreement with schools to limit commercial content to two minutes per episode.

**The websites promoted by Channel One are not appropriate for schoolchildren.**

Channel One News is owned by Alloy, Inc., which also owns a number of other websites for children and adolescents. Even though some of Alloy’s websites feature provocative content that many parents

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would find objectionable for children, Channel One promotes these websites to its captive student audience. For example, Channel One News has advertised the Alloy website teen.com to both middle and high school students. At teen.com, young visitors are encouraged to view “NSFW pics” (not safe for work) of “Glee bad girl Santana Lopez.”

Channel One News also uses its in-school broadcasts to drive traffic to its website, ChannelOne.com; the site is mentioned several times during each episode. At ChannelOne.com, other Alloy websites are regularly promoted. Recently, ChannelOne.com has been promoting Alloy’s gURL.com website, which consists almost entirely of highly sexualized content such as “Reader Hookup Confession: I Lost My Virginity to My Best Friend’s Boyfriend.”

ChannelOne.com’s controversial advertising extends beyond promoting Alloy websites. In June, Channel One began running banner ads for Internet and phone psychic readings that cost $7.49/minute. More recently, ChannelOne.com featured banner ads for the controversial website Spokeo.com. Visitors to Spokeo.com can type in a name and, for a small fee, find out a host of personal information about that person culled from online and offline sources – including age, personal pictures, home address, and phone number. In June, Spokeo was fined $800,000 by the Federal Trade Commission for the misuse and sale of personal data.

Advertisements like these suggest that Channel One is desperate for revenue and is willing to sell out its student audience to less than scrupulous advertisers. While it is true that the racy and disreputable websites promoted by Channel One News and ChannelOne.com are common on the web, Channel One is obligated to meet a higher standard. It is integrated into the school day. Everything advertised on Channel One and its website carries the implicit endorsement of the schools where it is shown.

**Channel One is not transparent about its operations and advertisers.**

Despite the fact that Channel One operates almost exclusively in taxpayer-funded schools, the company is not forthcoming about its activities. Channel One refuses, for instance, to make publicly available a list of schools where it is shown. Channel One now broadcasts an Internet version of its in-school programs, but the advertising is removed, making it extremely difficult for parents to monitor the commercials their children watch at school. Paul Folkemer, Channel One’s Senior Vice President of Education, has refused requests to make the advertisements available to parents online, claiming that doing so would violate the “online industry standard/format for video advertising.” However, nothing in these voluntary guidelines would prevent Channel One from allowing parents to view the commercials online.

19 Paul Folkemer, email to CCFC’s Associate Director Josh Golin, November 5, 2009. Available upon request.
We encourage your office to ask Channel One to provide you with a complete list of advertisers over the past three years and to provide access to the commercials themselves.

**Schools’ noncompliance with their Channel One contracts may place them at risk.**

Channel One’s Terms and Conditions of Network Participation state:

> The School agrees to receive the Channel One News programs from Channel One and to show the entire daily newscast to students enrolled in grades six and above. The School will show Channel One News at a time or times of its choosing, provided that (1) Channel One News must be shown on at least 90% of the days that school is in session and Channel One News is broadcast, (2) Channel One News must be shown when students are present and seated in a homeroom or classroom setting (i.e. not before school, after school or during lunch).

Given the problems we have described, it is not surprising that a number of schools have begun violating their contract in order to put class time to better use. An Internet search of school schedules finds that some schools are showing Channel One considerably less than the 90% of school days that the contract requires. Others are showing Channel One before the first tardy bell or during lunch, in clear violation of the Terms and Conditions.21

While we appreciate why schools would not want to use the required class time to show Channel One News, it is worrisome that so many have chosen to openly violate their contract. Schools expect contractors and suppliers to honor their contracts to completion. When schools unilaterally and openly breach contracts that are no longer convenient, it undermines support for public education. We ask that your office study whether schools in your state may be exposing themselves to unnecessary liability and, if so, encourage them to simply end their contract rather than violating its terms.

In sum, there are many reasons to be concerned about Channel One News. We urge your office to conduct a review of the costs and benefits of Channel One. The results of a state-level review would help local districts make better informed decisions about keeping or removing Channel One. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with you further.

Sincerely,

Susan Linn, Ed.D.  
Director, CCFC

Josh Golin  
Associate Director, CCFC

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21 A list of schools in violation of the Terms and Conditions is available upon request.