

Backing for McDonald's role in schools

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October 21, 2009

LEADING educators have endorsed fast-food giants such as McDonald's being more involved in schools — even if it means exposing students to brand advertising — because governments can no longer be solely relied on to boost the education system.

In an apparent departure from previous years when schools worried about the influence companies could have on students or the curriculum, experts yesterday called for big businesses to play an even greater role in a bid to lift results, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Speaking at a conference in Melbourne yesterday, a panel of education and policy leaders said it was entirely appropriate for schools to turn to business for investment and sponsorship, even if meant exposing students to corporate advertising, provided students ultimately benefited from their support.

One example highlighted was an online maths tuition program sponsored by McDonald's, which provides students with a range of numeracy exercises.

While some have criticised the program because it is branded with the company's logo, former Melbourne University dean Brian Caldwell said this kind of marketing was "a small price to pay" if it helped improve children's maths skills.

Institute of Public Affairs executive director John Roskam agreed. "I think we can all be a bit too sensitive about the couple of seconds that a golden arch or a can of fizzy drink is flashed in front of our kids," he said. "We have to understand there are trade-offs. If we do improve the numeracy standards of Australian kids, but the trade-off is they get five minutes of advertising a day, then I'll probably take that trade-off."

The call for more school partnerships with business comes as state and federal governments also encourage greater corporate sponsorship in education.

In Victoria, the plan forms part of the Brumby Government's "education blueprint" — a five-year strategy designed to tackle underperformance and make schools more accountable for their results.

Critics, however, view the policy as a move towards the increased privatisation of public schools, or a sign that the Government is abdicating some of its own funding responsibilities.

Some have also raised concerns that there are insufficient guidelines to help schools avoid inappropriate corporate sponsorship.

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