

Local teacher leads campaign to stop retail promotions in schools

A county Sligo principal has hit out at what he says is the deliberate targeting of schools by major retail companies solely intent on boosting profits through various voucher schemes.

by Paul Deering

Joseph Fogarty, principal of a 64 pupil national school, has called for "commercial free education" and has criticised supermarket giants Tesco and other companies such as Super Valu and McDonald's for their campaigns aimed at schools.

Mr. Fogarty, who is also chairperson of the Campaign for Commercial Free Education group, a gathering of teachers and parents who feel schools should not be places of commercial promotion and advertising, pointed out that parents have to spend thousands of euro through the various voucher promotions in order to receive 'free' items such as footballs which can be bought for as little as €18.

Exploited

The principal feels that companies like Tesco deliberately hone in on areas of education which are under funded such as P.E. and that parents and pupils alike are being exploited.

"More and more companies are getting involved every year at the start of the school term. This year there are four major campaigns which are specifically targeted at schools in order to advertise products," said Mr. Fogarty.

He said schools provided a captive audience and that teachers and pupils were in effect doing the promotion and sales work for the major retail companies.

"This is big business and it is carefully managed. They zone in on underfunded or poorly funded programmes. The P.E. grant to schools was cut in 2002 despite the fact that there are 300,000 overweight or obese children in the country," said Mr. Fogarty.

Referring to the Super Valu voucher scheme, Mr. Fogarty said schools accounted for €150 million worth of sales while the payout in school equipment was just over €1 million.

"That was a fantastic dividend for the company," he said.

He revealed that under the scheme it would have taken €3,950 worth of shopping to get a gaelic football which retails on line at just €18. A tennis racket required €3,090 worth of shopping while it could be bought on the internet for €25.

"This scheme and others like it is about getting teachers and pupils promoting Super Valu to parents and relatives over ten weeks generating huge sales and publicity while giving very little to schools. "It also discriminates against smaller and poorer schools who cannot afford the massive amounts needed to obtain even the smallest piece of equipment," he said.

Mr. Fogarty said Tesco had been running the Computers for Schools scheme since 1997 but in order to receive a 'free' Apple 17 inch iMac, €261,600 in spending by the school community was required. The computer can be bought on line for just €1,400.

"I'm calling for the pressure to be taken off parents and teachers and for it to be put back on to the politicians. The quality of education, including physical education, available to your child should not depend on where you shop or how much you spend," said Mr. Fogarty.

He described as nonsense the argument that the retail chains were merely rewarding their customers.

"If that's the case why don't they leave the collection boxes and vouchers in the shops and not send them to the schools. If they are really interested in the welfare of schools let them donate a fraction of their advertising budget instead.

"And, they could also help by removing the sweet and chocolate displays from beside the checkouts," Mr. Fogarty said.

The Campaign for Commercial Free Education can be contacted through their website at www.commercialfreeeducation.com.

