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Seeking Money, Texas Schools Turn to Advertisements

By MORGAN SMITH

The rooftop of a suburban high school is not a location that companies usually consider prime advertising real estate. But in Humble Independent School District, it may be. The district's high school lies directly in a flight path for Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston.

Although the rooftop plan has yet to come to fruition, Humble I.S.D. has already sold the naming rights to nearly every piece of its football stadium, including the entryway, the press box and the turf. Its school buses carry advertisements for the Houston Astros and local hospitals, among others.

The school district is pioneering a practice that an increasing number of districts across the state are adopting: selling advertisements on pieces of school property to help make up for some of the money lost through state budget cuts.

Advertising revenue can benefit school districts that primarily have two sources of income — what they receive from local taxpayers and what they get from the state and federal governments.

But with school leaders under pressure to find creative financing sources and few state-level guidelines about what is appropriate, some researchers who study the impact of ads in schools question whether schools fully grasp the consequences of commercialism creeping into public schools.

The proliferation of companies like Steep Creek Media, which acts as a middleman between districts and would-be advertisers, has made it simpler for schools to get into advertising. Steep Creek offers an attractive proposition for schools — and business is booming, according to its owner and founder, Cynthia Calvert, who represents 35 districts and has had to turn down handfuls of clients.

In exchange for what usually amounts to a cut of 40 percent of the profits, the company lures potential advertisers with a diverse menu of placements: on buses, textbook covers, in-school television monitors, scoreboards and Web sites.

Districts have the ultimate say over what ads they accept, but Steep Creek handles all the work in between, including graphic design.

Easier access to advertisers may not always translate to a more thoughtful process for schools, however.

“There doesn't seem to be a real handle on the part of the school districts for what they are getting into,” said Faith Boninger, a researcher with the National Education

Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who studies how advertising in schools affects students.

Ms. Boninger said many districts entered into advertising agreements with an attitude of “let’s do it, we need the money” without understanding the psychological and educational costs to students.

Having advertisements in schools is not consistent with the teaching of critical thinking, Ms. Boninger said. And what is being sold — fast food, for instance — can run counter to subjects being taught, like nutrition. She added that the polarized gender stereotypes and materialist perspectives that may come with exposure to advertisements had been shown to harm students’ self-esteem.

“It’s a nice thing for a company to get into schools because they are really getting this market young and vulnerable,” she said.

Ms. Calvert said she does not buy the argument that ads in schools affect the psychological development of students. “All people from babies to seniors are exposed to advertising all day long,” she said.

“None of those dollars are helping the school district, so why not have managed advertising that’s approved by the school that does?”

Texas schools’ success with advertising has varied, but the districts may not be getting as much cash out of the advertising as they might hope.

A report from Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy group, examined the advertising programs in the country’s 25 largest school districts, including Houston, Dallas and Cypress-Fairbanks in Texas. The group found that the revenue raised from advertising in those three districts in 2012 made up a fraction of 1 percent of the overall budgets.

Plano I.S.D., based in a Dallas suburb, was one of the first districts to pursue school bus advertising. A spokeswoman said it had discontinued the program because it did not generate enough revenue and the district felt that managing the program, including approving the content of the ads and their upkeep, was too difficult.

In Central Texas, Hutto I.S.D. introduced a school bus advertising program through Alpha Media of Dallas last spring to offset some of the impending cuts in state financing. It produced some extra money, a spokeswoman said, but after an initial surge of interest the ads dropped off and the program has not been as successful as the district would have liked.

That has not been the case of nearby Eanes I.S.D., which started its school bus ad program around the same time. A year in, the district is on track to raise about

\$40,000 — just under half of what it wanted to earn in four years, said Timothy Wysong, the transportation director.

He said that after initial concerns about “bombarding kids with advertising,” he had not received any complaints from the public.

Because of where the ads are placed on the bus, he said, many students do not pay attention to them, and when students do notice, they like them.

“They might refer to themselves as the Chick-fil-A bus, for example,” he said. “It’s a little identity for them.”

In Humble, where Ms. Calvert’s company is based, she estimated that the total advertising sales since 2007 for the district had exceeded \$1 million. Among the businesses currently on the district’s homepage are a siding and windows company, the local Y.M.C.A. and a day care center. For \$100,000, a GMC-Buick dealership has bought the naming rights to the entryway of the high school stadium.

A Mazda dealership paid \$350,000 to have its name on the turf there. Waste Management, a recycling and landfill company, bought the press box naming rights for \$45,000 over a three-year period.

So far, none of the schools Ms. Calvert represents have put advertising on textbook covers or the inside of school buses. But she said it might only be a matter of time before the first one ventures into that territory.

And there is always the high school’s rooftop.

“I keep saying, whoever buys the roof of Humble High School, they’ll be on CNN — they would get so much out of it,” Ms. Calvert said.

“So yeah, we’re even marketing the rooftop.”

msmith@texastribune.org