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ADVERTISING

Straight A's, With a Burger as a Prize

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

FAST-FOOD chains often post nutritional report cards about their product ingredients on restaurant walls. Now one is using children's report cards to help stimulate sales.

The [McDonald's](#) restaurants in Seminole County, Fla., and the Seminole County School Board have agreed to reward students for good grades and attendance during the 2007-8 school year with Happy Meals.

The program replaces one that for the last 10 school years had been sponsored by local Pizza Hut restaurants, according to the school district.

Students in kindergarten through fifth grade can now receive a Happy Meal from a local McDonald's restaurant as a "food prize," as it is described, for achievements like all A's and B's in academic subjects or two or fewer absences from school.

The "report card incentive," as the program is called, is a business partnership between the owners of the McDonald's restaurants in Seminole County and the school board, according to information published on the jackets in which the children receive their report cards.

The jackets are used throughout the school year. Teachers put report cards in them, and students take them home for their parents to sign to let the teachers know the report cards have been read.

The jackets also bear a cartoon of Ronald McDonald, the chain's brand mascot for children, and its Golden Arches logo.

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The jackets also feature photographs of Happy Meal menu items like Chicken McNuggets.

"Turning report cards into ads for McDonald's undermines parents' efforts to encourage healthy eating," said Susan Linn, director of an advocacy organization in Boston, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

"It's a terribly troubling trend," Ms. Linn said, because "it really, clearly links doing well in school with getting a Happy Meal."

The commercialization of educational culture, particularly in elementary schools, has long been a contentious issue. It has become more clamorous in the last decade as hard-pressed school districts seek to raise money for academic programs, sports and extracurricular activities without raising taxes.

Billboards advertising products and local merchants can be found on athletic fields outside schools and inside

schools on gymnasium walls and scoreboards.

In some districts, ads appear on the sides of school buses. And some districts play radio programs, with commercials, over the buses' public-address system.

The New York City Department of Education is considering a proposal to give all students free cellphones, which would use text messages — produced by an advertising agency, Droga5 — to promote achievement. The plan includes sponsorship opportunities for cellphone makers, service providers and other marketers.

In e-mail messages to reporters yesterday, Ms. Linn urged McDonald's to "immediately stop advertising on children's report cards" and attached an image of a report-card jacket sent home with Cathy Griffith, who attends fourth grade at Red Bug Elementary in Winter Springs, Fla.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Cathy's mother, Susan Pagan, said the jacket caught her eye when her daughter brought home her report card with "some very good grades."

"Ronald McDonald and the photo of the Happy Meal," Ms. Pagan said. "I was like, 'O.K. What's this all about?'"

"I thought this was appalling," Ms. Pagan said, because "you get a reward for good grades by eating — and eating fast food."

When Pizza Hut sponsored the program, Ms. Pagan said, "I don't remember it being so blatant."

And even if that sponsorship had continued for many years, she added, today's concerns about childhood obesity ought to call the program into question.

"I've worked in advertising and marketing for over 21 years," said Ms. Pagan, who runs Creative Angle Media, a company in Winter Park, Fla. "There's a tasteful and professional way for large corporations to sponsor such programs."

"This just seemed very inappropriate, very blatant and direct, into the hands of my daughter," she added.

When the local Pizza Huts sponsored the program, according to the school district, the Pizza Hut logo appeared in place of the McDonald's symbols. There were no photographs of the Pizza Hut food prize, which was a personal pan pizza. Pizza Hut is owned by Yum Brands.

During the 10 years of the Pizza Hut sponsorship, "we did not receive any complaints," said Regina Klaers, a spokeswoman for the Seminole County Public Schools in Sanford, Fla.

Ms. Pagan is the only parent to complain so far about the McDonald's sponsorship, Ms. Klaers said, adding that district administrators and members of the school board discussed her concerns this week.

Asked about the propriety of a school district's offering fast food as prizes for achievement, Ms. Klaers said the jackets described to students "some alternatives" to the standard Happy Meal menu items.

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There is a lengthy paragraph in the bottom right corner, in small type, explaining how the students can choose as

their side dishes either French fries or apple slices, which McDonald's calls Apple Dippers. Their beverage choices are listed as milk, apple juice or a soft drink.

Nationally, McDonald's does not sponsor any programs that reward schoolchildren with food, said Danya Proud, a spokeswoman for McDonald's USA in Oak Brook, Ill., part of the McDonald's Corporation.

The program in Seminole County is local, Ms. Proud said, and participation in such promotions is "a very local decision."

As for the healthfulness of the Happy Meal menu items, Ms. Proud said, the Chicken McNuggets, which can be chosen in place of a hamburger or cheeseburger, are made with white meat. She also reiterated the options to select apple slices instead of the French fries and to replace the soda with low-fat milk or apple juice.

"There's variety on our menus so parents can make the choice about the Happy Meal most appropriate for their child," Ms. Proud said.

At the Seminole County school district, Ms. Klaers said, the food prize program is re-evaluated each year. Next spring, when the district is making plans for the 2008-9 school year, "we are planning to revisit what is on the jackets," she added. In the meantime, Ms. Klaers said, the current jackets will remain in use.

The sponsorship covers about \$1,500 of the \$1,600 it costs each year to supply and print the jackets, Ms. Klaers said.

The district "partners with local businesses on lots of different levels" to defray costs, she added, but has a policy against selling the naming rights to schools to marketers.

In other words, Ms. Klaers said, do not expect a "McDonald's High" in Seminole County.

Bob Bertini, a spokesman for [Wendy's International](#) in Dublin, Ohio, the third-largest hamburger chain behind McDonald's and Burger King, said yesterday that his company had no national program to reward students with food items.

"It is possible that some of our franchisees and stores may be supporting their hometown school districts with attendance or good-student awards," Mr. Bertini said in an e-mail message, "but I have not heard of local markets where this is occurring."

At [Burger King Holdings](#) in Miami, a spokesman, Keva Silversmith, said yesterday that school-related promotions on a corporate level were devoted to college scholarship programs.

He said he was not immediately able to determine whether there were food-prize programs sponsored by owners of local restaurants because of the time required to check with field-marketing offices.