

## Corporate Curriculum

By Mark Maier (Rethinking Schools Summer 2002 16/4p.17 )

Every year, more than one million high school students, about half of all graduates, take an economics course - usually in their senior year. And, unfortunately, many of those students are learning from textbooks, classroom activities, and websites paid for by corporate donors whose ideological influence goes unrecognized. Many people - even economists and high school teachers - don't know how decisions about economics courses are made. But corporate foundations, particularly those with an extreme conservative bent, have paid very close attention to high-school economics. As a result, textbooks, classroom activities, websites, and new national standards depend increasingly on corporate donors whose ideological influence often goes unrecognized. With national economics testing due to begin in 2005, and corporate-driven course materials even more widely disseminated, economics courses are likely to swing even more toward a "free-market" ideology. When high school economics courses were first introduced in many states during the 1970s and 1980s, publishers filled the textbook void. But teachers, many of whom had no formal economics background, needed lesson plans. Corporations and nonprofit organizations, often working together, stepped in with a wide range of supplementary readings, classroom activities and, in recent years, websites.

### INFLUENTIAL ORGANIZATIONS

Junior Achievement, a privately funded nonprofit organization, claims to reach four million U.S. students every year with its "free enterprise message of hope and opportunity." Founded in 1919 as an after-school program in which students set up small businesses, Junior Achievement first entered the classroom in 1975. Since then, it has broadened its scope to include a kindergarten through 12th-grade economics curriculum with a high school economics course taught by business executives. UPS, ExxonMobil, Goldman Sachs, and New York Life Insurance are among the corporations that have provided large grants to Junior Achievement. Kraft Foods is the largest single provider of volunteer economics instructors for Junior Achievement, with more than 2,100 participating employees in 2001.

The Foundation for Teaching Economics (FTE), a nonprofit organization endorsed by Junior Achievement, has also offered classroom activities since 1975. The foundation is supported by two of the largest donors to right-wing causes, the Coors family and Richard Scaiffe (heir to the Mellon oil and banking fortune). It also uses an environmental curriculum funded by Coca-Cola and written by the Political Economy Research Center, a Montanabased research organization that has led opposition to the Endangered Species Act and the Superfund.

The group most influential in pre-college economics is the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE), the largest provider of curriculum materials for use in kindergarten through 12th grade. The council has also created a network of councils in all 50 states as well as more than 200 affiliated university centers for training primary and secondary school teachers. The council receives generous support from corporations such as State Farm Insurance, International Paper, NASDAQ, and UPS. The council's website is well stocked with lesson plans, current events articles, and a growing list of publications. These classroom materials actively engage students in cooperative group projects with clever titles such as "Great Economic Mysteries" and "Hey, Mom! What's for Breakfast?" On occasion, the conflict of interest between the subject matter and the funding source is obvious. For example, the Securities Industry Association, a trade group representing banks, brokers, and mutual fund companies, sponsors the NCEE's Stock Market Game curriculum. Teacher instructions and student activities give the mistaken impression of equal ownership of stocks across income groups, and downplay negative consequences such as stock market bubbles. (See "Teaching About Stocks - For Fun and Propaganda," Rethinking Schools, Spring 2002.)

Usually, however, corporate influence is subtler, noticeable in what is left out of the curriculum. For example, Bank of America pitched in over \$3 million for the NCEE's Financial Fitness for Life, attractive teaching materials coauthored by accomplished but decidedly conservative economics educator Mark Schug. The first lesson plan tempts students, "How to Really Be a Millionaire," based on the content of two bestsellers, *Getting Rich in America* and *The Millionaire Next Door*. The "millionaire" approach reinforces unrealistic expectations among many youth. A recent poll by Junior Achievement found that nearly one quarter of teens believe they will have \$1 million in assets by age 40, while 15 percent think they will earn more than \$1 million a year. Aside from being unlikely (the actual proportion of current million-dollar earners is about one in a thousand) the curriculum downplays the impact

of inheritance and the earnings of corporate executives, both important starting points for understanding the U.S. economy.

### STANDARDS TAKE OVER

In 1994, Congress mandated economics as one of nine core subjects for which national standards should be developed, and the U.S. Department of Education designated the NCEE to lead the effort. In 1997, with assistance from the Foundation for Teaching Economics, AT&T and others, the NCEE produced the Voluntary National Content Standards, a list of 20 standards and accompanying teaching strategies for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The economics standards were published with little fanfare, a remarkable non-event in comparison with other disciplines in which standards evoked furious debate. The economics standards were widely accepted by committees of the American Economic Association, teachers, and administrators. The economics standards reflect the free-market bias shared by most economists, tempered with a nod toward federal government intervention to prevent unemployment or inflation. Practically the only published criticism of this bias came from the journal *Feminist Economics*, where economists outside the mainstream of the American Economic Association pointed out that the standards' focus on free-market principles causes the curriculum to overlook issues of gender, race, class, the environment, and unequal development between rich and poor countries.

### TESTING ON THE WAY

Even though national standards are voluntary, their existence makes it easier to include economics in future nationwide testing. More than half of all states already include some economics content in their required social studies tests. Economics is also one of the fastest growing Advanced Placement (AP) test subjects (although only 1 percent of high school graduates have taken AP-level economics.) Even greater change will come in 2005 when the congressionally mandated National Assessment of Education Progress begins testing 12th graders in economics, giving extensive media attention to economics in the "The Nation's Report Card" already distributed for reading, writing, math, science, and history. The test content is under debate, in particular whether it should focus on the economics curriculum as reflected in the NCEE standards, or on practical consumer finance topics favored by some as more appropriate for pre-college students. Most likely, the NCEE standards - and their pro-market bias - will win out because they are already the basis for some state tests, and because the NCEE curriculum is used so widely. Information about the political impact of high-school economics courses is fragmentary, but in April 2001, the *Wall Street Journal* celebrated a Junior Achievement poll showing that more than 80 percent of teens believed taxes are "too high." (Less well publicized was 70 percent teen support for unions to "continue trying to promote laborers' rights and needs.")

Although national testing may push instructors toward the NCEE's ideologically driven standards, teachers can still challenge students to reflect critically on the choices they will face in the real world. Corporate-sponsored resources do provide a wide range of attractive, ready-to-go classroom handouts, so teachers strapped for course materials may want to use them as a starting point. For example, the onesided materials in *Financial Fitness for Life* might be used in combination with sources recommended by the PBS program, *Affluenza*, a television special that explores the high social and environmental costs of materialism and overconsumption. Also, teachers can ask their students to assess the authors' biases in, for example, materials from Junior Achievement and the Foundation for Teaching Economics. In addition to warning against credit scams, personal finance courses should examine pervasive consumerism and unnecessary advertising in the U.S. economy. Also, the curriculum should introduce students to empirical facts about income and wealth distribution, pointing out the role of race, sex, unionization, and executive compensation. Also, teachers can adopt alternatives to the "free market" curriculum. Unfortunately, only a few left-of-center organizations are producing curriculum materials for high-school economics courses, and of course none receives the kind of funding available to the pro-corporate groups. Nonetheless, teachers can obtain many thoughtful lesson ideas for little or no cost. United for a Fair Economy sells books and workshop kits; Rethinking Schools offers classroom activities, including some for lower grades; the Center for Economic Conversion provides a full curriculum on sustainable economics; and other materials are available from the Human Rights Resource Center.

The corporations and foundations that support course materials with a pro-corporate bias have deep pockets. And as a result, many high school economics courses already follow a conservative ideology. Without more careful attention from teachers, economists, and interested citizens, students are likely to receive increasingly one-sided indoctrination in the "free market" point of view.