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## **'Channel One' Plan To Improve Education: Is It Short-Changing Our Youngsters?**

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Almost daily we hear or read about yet another survey documenting the woeful ignorance of American children in a variety of subjects—mathematics, science, geography, current events, and history. In science particularly, the apparent illiteracy of U.S. students raises serious questions about our nation's ability to maintain its economic competitiveness and scientific preeminence in the future. These questions are compelling task forces and expert panels to develop and debate new strategies for educational reform.

Chris Whittle, chairman of Whittle Communications in Knoxville, Tenn., has joined this debate with a bold proposition to help overcome junior high and high school students' lack of awareness about current events. It's called Channel One, a project to beam a daily news and information program into America's classrooms by satellite. Channel One is now being tested in six schools across the country.

To help schools plug into Channel One, Whittle Communications provides about \$50,000 worth of satellite dishes and televisions to each school for free—provided the school makes the daily program re-

quired viewing in each classroom. And to help Whittle Communications cover these costs, the 12-minute news program carries two minutes of commercial advertisements per day.

These commercial advertisements trouble a growing number of critics, including Action for Children's Television, the American Federation of Teachers, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Education Association, and National Parent-Teachers Associations. These critics feel it is inappropriate to introduce paid advertisements into the schools, especially since the audience of young students is "captive."

I share these critics' concerns that advertisements televised in a classroom may be insidious. It's not that students can't switch channels, turn off the sound, or just leave the room as they are free to do at home—indeed, they can easily "tune out" commercials in class by talking, reading, daydreaming, or otherwise diverting their attention. Rather, I fear, Channel One commercials may be insidious because they may acquire a special importance by being part of the school environment and,

therefore, implicitly endorsed by the educational system.

I'm also concerned that the schools are not getting a fair deal financially. Whittle hopes to reach 8,000 schools by 1990, and says it will cost him \$80 million per year or about \$12 per student per year. This means he'll be reaching about 6.7 million teenagers every day. Teenagers are an attractive demographic group to advertisers, and Whittle will deliver one of the largest audiences of teenagers ever reached by television.

Whittle can make a genuine and substantial contribution to our resource-starved schools by offering them more than satellite dishes and television sets. He could share the profits from Channel One's advertising revenue with his partners—that is, the schools. The national television networks subsidize their affiliated local stations; and since each school in the national Channel One network is, in a sense, an affiliated local station, shouldn't each school benefit from a negotiated financial subsidy?

As a concerned citizen, Whittle

must surely be aware that some schools are more resource-starved than others. Disadvantaged students in rural and inner-city schools would obviously benefit most from Channel One's information and news programming. Their school districts, too, have the greatest need for funding, which could be met by a fair share of Whittle's profit. Advertisers may not put a high priority on reaching poor teenagers who are less likely to buy their products. But the Channel One network should strike a balance between privileged and disadvantaged students, between resource-hungry and resource-starved schools.

I'd like to see Whittle Communications share its profits with the schools it purports to benefit. And I'd like to see Channel One reach the disadvantaged students whom advertisers might rather ignore. By doing so, Whittle would demonstrate that his concern for "overburdened teachers and underfunded schools" is genuine. At the same time, perhaps, he might even overcome his critics' objections to commercial ads in our schools. ■