

Dear Wharton Elementary, Wharton PTO, and the Houston Independent School District,

Our family received information on a fundraising effort for Wharton Elementary encouraging supporters of Wharton Elementary to “Eat Mor Chikin” by patronizing Chick-fil-A. This prompted a visit to the Wharton Elementary website where further “fundraising” programs for Chick-fil-A, Washington Mutual, and Target/Target Financial Services were promoted.

The purpose of this letter is to express concern at the use of our local public elementary schools as brand marketing programs, question the benefits from these programs, and suggest alternatives. A brief overview of these programs and corresponding issues are provided for your reference.

Chick-fil-A: Spirit Night

This type of “fundraiser” is a brand marketing program in which the consumption of food heavy in fat, salt, and sugar is promoted to young children through collateral and rebate programs. The advertising slogans and characters created by the Richards Group for the Chick-fil-A “Eat Mor Chikin” campaign are disseminated in communications, the school web site, and on school property to students, families, and the community.

It is a stretch to consider the vast majority of products offered by the Chick-fil-A fast food chain as a beneficial option for developing children. For example,

- A study released by the Center for Science in the Public Interest in August of 2008 found that nearly every single possible combination of the children’s meals offered by Chick-fil-A is too high in calories
- The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine filed a lawsuit in 2008 against Chick-fil-A and six other national fast food retailers to address carcinogens found in chicken samples tested by an independent laboratory

The support provided by this program to Wharton Elementary is not a lucrative proposition- a 10% rebate on purchases payable to Wharton Elementary. Thus, a \$20 purchase would provide \$2 to Wharton Elementary. An attempt to provide \$10 of support to Wharton Elementary through this program would require the purchase of approximately eleven sets of a popular Chick-fil-A combination: sandwich, large waffle fries, and large lemonade.

One meal combination constitutes nearly two thirds of the recommended Daily Value (DV) for calories, fat, and sodium. Following the “Three a Day” slogan recommendation would rapidly result in obesity, and the consumption of eleven meals is ridiculous.

	1 Meal	1 Meal % of DV	3 Meals	3 Meals % of DV	11 Meals	11 Meals % of DV
Calories	1,200	60%	3,600	180%	13,200	660%
Fat (g)	41	63%	123	189%	451	694%
Sodium	1,505	63%	4,515	188%	16,555	690%
Sugar (g)	92	N/A	276	N/A	1,012	N/A

Daily Value (DV) is based on a 2,000 caloric intake; Chick-fil-A nutrition data procured from company website

Washington Mutual (Chase): WaMoola for Schools

The Washington Mutual “WaMoola for Schools” program requires participants to procure and utilize a Washington Mutual debit card and generate transactions to benefit the school. As elaborated by the campaign slogan, the message to participants is that shopping is the ideal to support schools: “You Shop. Schools Win.”

An attempt to generate \$10 of support to Wharton Elementary is difficult for the participant as the return is not clearly communicated. While each purchase generates a point, the point to reward value is arbitrary. As explained in the program details on the Washington Mutual website, “the value of a point is as determined at [WAMU] Chase’s sole discretion. Any change made to the value of a point may be made retroactively and that the determination may be retroactive to the beginning of the year in which the change is made.”

It is worth noting that in 2008, Washington Mutual was seized by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), declared bankruptcy, and sold to Chase, who has since declined new enrollments to the program. Should a school be proud to be a Washington Mutual Top Ten School in Texas?

Target: Take Charge of Education Program

The Target “Take Charge of Education Program” is a marketing program peddling high interest rate credit cards that offer up to a 1% rebate to Wharton Elementary. At the current historically low prime interest rate, the annual percentage rate range is 11.24% to 27.24% (based upon credit worthiness). At the highest historical prime rate, the range would be 27.99% to 43.99%.

Given that the majority of the families attending Wharton Elementary are economically disadvantaged and the current focus on the devastating effects of consumer debt, encouraging the acquisition and use of a high interest rate credit card under the pretense of aiding schools is shameful.

For example, a \$10 target donation of \$10 to Wharton Elementary utilizing the 1% of purchases rebate promotion while making minimum payments of \$20 (2% of balance) per month is a very costly proposition for the average debt-ridden consumer:

	11.24% APR	23.99% APR	27.24% APR
Wharton Elementary Target Donation Amount	\$10	\$10	\$10
Required Consumer Purchase Amount for Donation	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000
# of Years for Consumer to Pay Account Balance	5.7	32.8	Interest exceeds payments & will NEVER be paid off at minimum payment
Total Amount of Interest Paid by Consumer	\$355	\$6,864	
Total Cost to Consumer for \$10 Wharton Donation	\$1,355	\$7,864	

The Issues Associated with the Commercialization of Our Schools

Each of these programs promotes the consumption of questionable products to students and families under the guise of supporting education. The message is that purchasing products is a viable means of support to public education rather than direct involvement. For example, our family has received many communications encouraging us to “Eat Mor Chikin” at Chick-fil-A, but we have never received any information on how to directly support Wharton Elementary, what types of resources could be donated, or how the funds would be used. The message is to purchase products- not become involved with our community school.

In turn, HISD, its schools, and supporting organizations are engaged to exploit their relationships with children for the sake of developing brand preferences- notably to unhealthy products and consumption lifestyles- at an early age. The school audience is a captive audience as children are generally required by law to attend school and families have no means to “opt-out” of marketing campaigns. Further, the sincere desire of families to help schools is an easy psychological target.

Many schools and organizations do this willingly, lured by the call to “support your school”, however the clear beneficiaries are the product promoters. Marketers are given unprecedented personal access to children and their families while the returns to the school itself are minimal. Children and their families are a multi-billion dollar industry, and marketing programs in schools have undergone extensive cost/benefit analysis with formulated returns. Companies engage psychologists to exploit the “target’s” deepest fears and insecurities and promote “nag factor” techniques that undermine the efforts of parents, health professionals, and those with genuine interest in the well-being of the child at heart. Finally, school markets are particularly lucrative as campaigns are indirectly subsidized by taxpayers who fund public schools.

Ultimately, if these companies sincerely wanted to aid HISD and its schools, the purchase of products by a parent or child would never be a requirement- donations would be made directly payable to the school or in-kind. Why must one buy something to help local schools, PTOs, and teachers?

Alternatives

There are alternatives to direct marketing through schools, and many schools and school districts in the United States are embarking on “unfundraising” policies where product promotion is not part of campaigns to raise funds and materials for schools. Further, support is 100% direct to the school- not 1% to 10%.

Possible options could include:

- Direct cash donations
- In-kind donations
- Collaborating with local businesses (and there are many in East Montrose with long histories of generous support to their community without the requirement of purchase)
- Connecting with parent groups from the upcoming wave of children zoned to Wharton

Our family would be happy to donate to Wharton Elementary and its PTO if we could receive information on what would be helpful (or if a cash donation, how and where to make the check payable). We would also gladly ask others to support Wharton Elementary because we are proud of and grateful for all that the Wharton team has achieved, but we cannot ask this in good faith of our friends and neighbors if it means peddling junk food or questionable financial products to those whom we care about.

We ask Wharton Elementary and HISD to consider being more mindful of commercialization in our schools. Most importantly, we know that the parents, teachers, and administrators at Wharton are capable creators of new ways- thus, we seek your consideration first and foremost.

Sincerely,

Ashley Streetman
Parent of child zoned to Wharton
Co-founder, Friends of Wharton
Co-President, East Montrose Civic Association