

Denormalising alcohol industry activities in schools



Children's education and lives should be protected from the harmful influence of commercial interests. Yet the global alcohol industry is actively engaged in the provision of youth education about underage drinking. Previous research has revealed the concerning nature of these types of programmes, which echo industry narratives and sometimes distort the risk of harm.¹ Despite these concerns the extent of alcohol industry influence in schools has received insufficient attention from public health actors.

In Ireland, it appears that the tide may be turning. Developments in 2022, catalysed by the efforts of community action groups, addiction experts, and others to draw attention to this issue, provide a template for action to reduce the influence of harmful commodity industries in schools.²⁻⁴ The guidance from the Irish Departments of Health and Education is that schools should not use alcohol industry-funded

educational materials. The government's position was re-emphasised in recent media coverage of youth education provided by an alcohol industry-funded charity.² On Dec 9, 2022, the Irish Department of Education and Health Service Executive issued a formal letter to all schools explicitly warning them against using materials funded by the alcohol industry. The letter recognises that funding by the alcohol industry represents a conflict of interest and goes on to state: "In the same way, these guidelines apply in regard to resources funded by other industry sectors where there is a potential conflict of interest".⁵

This change was in part informed by a growing understanding and evidence base on the commercial determinants of health. Promotion of youth education is a key part of the corporate playbook used by industries whose products and practices are harmful to health and the environment. The funding or promotion of

Panel: Countering industry influence of youth education

Markers of industry-favoured youth education programmes

- Adopt norms, values, and worldviews that align with industry narratives.
- Use causal narratives that shift the blame onto individuals, such as children, peers, and parents, by focusing on defining the problem as individuals' lack of control or knowledge, and on peer pressure and parental influences.
- Prioritise teaching about the law and individual-level interventions, personal responsibility or technological solutions.
- Contain misinformation that distorts the evidence on risks of harm, including the selective omission of key information about some risks (eg, cancer or foetal alcohol spectrum disorder).
- Do not provide opportunities to critically discuss the role of other actors such as the industry and their marketing practices and influence on science and policymaking as drivers of harm.
- Can be used by an industry to cast themselves as part of the solution, drawing attention away from the harms caused by some business practices and products and away from policies that are needed to address these harms and protect children and young people.

How to critique industry funded or promoted youth education programmes

Start by asking of the content:

- What are these materials doing? What perspectives and ideas are promoted? Who is likely to benefit from the

dissemination of the included framings? How do such ideas and framings align with industry narratives, their corporate social responsibility initiatives, and their wider corporate agendas?

Beyond the explicit content:

- Scrutinise who is providing youth education materials and check their past and present funding and partnerships.
- Challenge claims of independence by those who receive or have received industry funding or have entered into industry partnerships.
- Challenge the argument that doing something is always better than doing nothing. In fact, refusing to use industry-favourable materials might be more beneficial for children and young people. It is important to remember that a basic principle of being evidence-based (whether evidence-based education, medicine, or public health) is that for an intervention to be classed as effective its benefits need to outweigh the harms. If they do not, then doing nothing (ie, not using a harmful intervention) is itself an evidence-based approach.
- Support teachers, parents, young people, policymakers, and others to identify these features and to understand why they are concerning and the conflicts of interest that emerge.

youth education by harmful industries and their trade associations or front groups is concerning. By funding or endorsing some programmes, industry actors can influence what is provided to and delivered in schools. Given their fiduciary responsibility to shareholders, corporations are unable to support programmes that threaten their business interests. Previous studies reveal that the type of youth education programmes supported by harmful industries normalise those industries' products and their position in society; distort the evidence on risks of harm; cast children, young people, their choices, peers, and behaviours as the problem; adopt personal responsibility framings that echo industry-promoted narratives; focus on individual-level or technological solutions, and reproduce the status quo in terms of policy responses.^{1,6,7} Importantly, such programmes deflect attention from industry as a driver of harm and the need for their conduct, marketing, and promotion of their products to be regulated. There are clear common markers of industry-favoured youth education programmes (panel).^{1,6,7}

Analyses of internal tobacco industry documents provide insights into why harmful industries support the provision of youth education.^{6,8} The tobacco industry recognised that by engaging with particular types of youth education programmes they could disseminate their preferred narratives about smoking harms; frame smoking as an adult choice; shift blame onto youth and parents; portray themselves as part of the solution and tobacco control advocates as extremists; enhance their image as responsible corporate citizens; gain access to key stakeholders including policymakers; and pre-empt or delay policies that threaten their business interests (panel).^{6,8} Many industries, whose commercial interests are in direct conflict with those of children and young people, are actively involved in the provision of youth education programmes, making this a cross-sectoral, trans-national issue for public health actors to confront.⁶⁻¹⁰

The panel outlines proposed ways to critique these programmes to help empower public health professionals, teachers, parents, youth, and others

to counter industry attempts to subvert education. The public health community should take note of the developments in Ireland and the efforts of civil society to address industry appropriation of schools which forms part of the I-Mark initiative that is "designed to challenge and resist the growing influence and impact that the alcohol industry is having on health and wellbeing".¹¹ Such actions to counter and denormalise harmful industry influence of schools and education are urgently needed on a global scale.

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*May CI van Schalkwyk, Mark Petticrew, Nason Maani, Benjamin Hawkins
 may.vanschalkwyk@lshtm.ac.uk

Department of Health Services Research and Policy (MCIVS) and Department of Public Health, Environments and Society (MP), London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London WC1E 7HT, UK; Global Health Policy Unit, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK (NM); MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK (BH)

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