

Beyond the Bake Sale

Instead of selling hotdogs, parents should simply donate money to their children's schools.
By Michelle Singletary

It was my first PTA meeting. I was excited and eager to help out. Then the meeting turned to fundraising and there was no turning back. For the next two hours, we talked about why we needed to raise funds, different ideas on how to raise funds, and what plans had already been made to raise funds.

The whole school year is filled with fundraising events — gift-wrapping sale, a walk-a-thon, a spring book fair, a cheesecake auction, a silent auction, and of course the inevitable plea for grocery store receipts, boxtops, and soup labels.

At the second PTA meeting, exasperated I turned to my husband. “Can’t we just write a cheque?” I whispered. I don’t want to run, walk, bake, collect, or sell anything. I can barely find time to do the laundry.

My goodness! My oldest child is only four. I can’t believe this is my fate for the next 18 years — chasing down relatives,

cajoling friends and coercing co-workers into buying over-priced peanut brittle, wrapping paper, calendars, or gummy bears stuffed in a “dishwasher-safe” tumbler with a snap-tight lid.

But the experts say I shouldn’t have to get used to this.

“We don’t encourage fundraising,” says Patty Yoxall, director of public relations for the US National PTA. “I know the lack of funding is a complicated school issue, but our kids are in school only a limited amount of time and they shouldn’t be spending any of their time raising funds.”

Other experts say the demand on parents to fundraise increasingly takes away the time they should be focusing on their kids and their education. Frankly, I think schools and parents are being used.

The US National Charities Information Bureau guidelines say a

American school merchandise sales total about US\$ four billion a year, according to the Association of Fundraisers and Direct Sellers. Schools and other non-profit organizations raise US \$1.7 billion annually through fundraising sales of gift-wrap.

I understand the psychology behind all this selling. It’s not easy to get folks to fork over money, even for a good cause. I also realize this type of fundraising provides money for needed school supplies and activities. But, seriously, how many of us — without the guilt — would spend US\$11 for a five-ounce Coca-Cola mailbox tin filled with mixed candy?

“I don’t think people mind paying a premium if it’s a fair market value for a product if they know part of the money is going back for a good cause,” says Vickie Mabry, associate director for the Association of Fundraisers.

Well, I mind, especially when it’s a for-profit company benefiting from my guilt money.

Here’s a suggestion. Why don’t we parents agree to stop peddling to each other? If you want to give money to a school, fine. But this routine of “I buy from your kid, you buy from mine,” is maddening.

If you’re willing to buy US\$25.00 worth of peanut clusters, scented candles or holiday tote and tissue bags, which will surely end up in the hall closet, then why not give directly to the school?

That way, the school gets 100% of our donations and we get to skip all the selling. Now **that’s** value.

(Adapted with permission from the Washington Post Writers Group)



minimum of 60% of every dollar spent should go directly to the charitable cause. On average, however, US schools get 46% of what they raise from selling merchandise for professional fundraising operations.

“All this fundraising is described by the companies as a win-win situation for everybody. I think that’s a bunch of baloney,” says Alex Molnar, a professor of education and director of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education.

“This primarily benefits the businesses. They get us to buy stuff we wouldn’t normally buy by attaching their products to a school. The kids have just become a marketing device.”