

Service promises a quiet ride but some question wisdom of aiming advertising at schoolchildren

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The wheels on the bus go round and round -- that much we know.

But what we don't know about BusRadio may, some psychologists say, hurt us.

Come fall, buses across the Commonwealth will tune into news, pop music and public service announcements -- along with paid advertising -- as they roll to and from school. The concept, from Needham-based BusRadio, touts its on-board programming as both age- appropriate and a route to a safer, quieter, more manageable ride. Beleaguered drivers, it seems, got some well-deserved peace and quiet in trial runs.

But BusRadio's concept raised the hackles of some mental health professionals who question the benefit of allowing advertisers to careen into another ad-free frontier. Many question whether allowing ads to infiltrate another portion of kid's day is wise, despite modest financial kickbacks to cash-strapped schools -- or just a wreck of an idea.

After all, even if school bus safety is a happy byproduct, make no mistake: BusRadio is a route for advertisers to snag a piece of the \$500 billion pie spent by the nation's youngsters.

"Children don't have that many safe zones from that kind of commercialism," said Chelmsford psychologist Szifra Birke. "The school bus, though, was certainly one of those safe zones."

Starting this fall, some districts, like Lowell, are forging ahead, and receiving modest stipends as a result (Lowell may net about \$15,000). And while Supt. Karla Brooks Baehr bans advertisers from Lowell schools as a rule, she felt buses were different, particularly because 90 percent of the city's fleet already had radios.

That's true elsewhere, too.

"We wanted to see what all the excitement was about," said Robert Cruickshank, business manager for the Chelmsford school system, who was approached by BusRadio last spring, tried it, and called it a "decent product." "We thought it might be something of interest to control students' exposure to music, exposure to advertising."

But do kids understand what they're hearing is "just commercials"? Some say no.

"There's evidence that children under eight see (commercials) as a piece of truth coming at them, as in, 'My teacher says one and one is two, the commercial says buy Nike shoes,'" said Doreen Arcus, a UMass Lowell psychology professor. "Younger

children cannot process the context of a commercial."

Older kids, some reason, will be savvy enough to filter marketers' messages. After all, they see an estimated 40,000 commercials each year, and more than a million by the time they're 21.

"Parents still have to be screeners," said Donald Bermont, a Lowell psychologist who doesn't think kids will be swayed because BusRadio. "If they come home saying they want whatever they're selling, you're going to have to say no. But that's not just true of BusRadio; it's just part of life in America."

But others lament BusRadio's bombastic format and promotion of a consumer culture, and say even 10 minutes of ads each hour (eight from advertisers, two from sponsored contests) send the message that spending is a pastime without promoting the idea of work to get what you want. And that, in bulk, could last well into adulthood.

"The kids can't stop buying, and end up with huge credit card debt, and start off life in a very burdened way," said Birke.

"I knew growing up that my own kids would be saturated in life with the message that they should buy and own more to be more," she added. "But if we as adults aren't aware of how manipulated we are, how can we expect kids to be?"

A happy byproduct of the BusRadio debate, however, might be that communities take a hard look at school funding.

"It's a real wake-up call for how much we're paying for public school," said Karen Sternheimer, author of *It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children*.

"While this seems to be a somewhat distasteful solution -- and at \$15,000, it's not a lucrative one -- that's the central issue. If parents really find it offensive and distasteful, the answer would be to help the district find alternative solutions for whatever budget problems they have ... That's the solution to me -- then something like this wouldn't even be an issue."

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