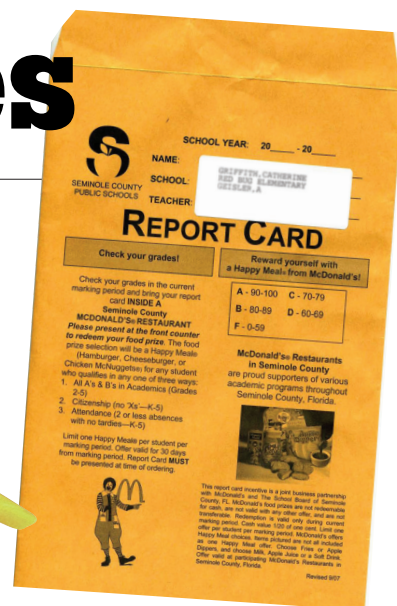


Big Macs for Big Grades



An example of a report card sleeve that was used in Seminole County (Fl.) Public Schools promoting McDonald's Happy Meals.

BY CHRISTOPHER HANN

A controversial program rewards high student achievement with fast food.

WHEN CATHY GRIFFITH, a fourth-grader at Red Bug Elementary School in Seminole County (Fl.) Public Schools, made the honor roll last November, she also read a message on her report card sleeve that she was eligible for a prize for her good grades—a Happy Meal at McDonald's.

Bearing an image of Ronald McDonald, the sleeve explains a food-reward program provided in Seminole County to local schools by the fast-food chain. Students in grades 2-5 who receive all As and Bs can receive Happy Meals as rewards. The program was started by a regional McDonald's office in Florida, which paid to have its name on thousands of report card sleeves.

To Cathy's mother, Susan Pagán, the idea of the school district's rewarding high-scoring students with food of dubious nutritional value didn't sit right. The district claims she was the only parent to have such a problem with it. "I'm not a zealot, not a vegan or vegetarian," Pagán says. "It's just that we eat healthy, and I try not to visit those places at all with my kids. To associate her doing well in school with a Happy Meal, basically a fast-

food product, to me seemed outrageous."

Pagán sent e-mails to the school board, Superintendent Bill Vogel, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, and the local newspaper, the *Orlando Sentinel*, which published a story that spawned a slew of others. CNN's *Prime News*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Chicago Tribune* and even the *London Times* and a Dublin radio station picked up the story and called Pagán for comments. Meanwhile, district spokeswoman Regina Klaers had stated that the school district was committed to its partnership with McDonald's for the rewards program, known as "Made the Grade."

Two weeks later McDonald's had requested that the district reprint 28,000 report card sleeves "sans McDonald's branding or references to our Made the Grade program." The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood declared victory. The flaming brouhaha, begun by a single e-mail, was extinguished. Well ... not exactly.

Two Hot-Button Topics

The situation had become an international sensation because it struck at the intersec-

tion of two hot-button topics in K12 education: childhood obesity and corporate advertising to children. McDonald's came under criticism because just last summer the company pledged to limit advertising to children under 12. Meanwhile, medical authorities say the incidence of obesity among school-age kids is a crisis or even an epidemic. A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the prevalence of overweight children ages 6 to 11 more than doubled—while the prevalence of overweight teenagers more than tripled—from 1980 to 2004. District leaders nationwide are requiring more nutritious foods in their cafeterias and restricting the foods that can be brought to school. Schools have responded to a federal law requiring each district to enact a wellness policy by the 2006-2007 school year. The law does not mandate nutritional standards for the wellness policies, but many districts are taking a tough stand against foods of dubious nutritional value. In some cases, even the modest cupcake has become snack-time contraband.

Other Food for Thought

Although precise numbers are unavailable, food rewards programs in schools have been around for years. Pizza Hut describes its Book It! program, which affects 22 million K6 students, as “the largest reading motivation program in America.” Book It! rewards students who meet monthly reading goals with personal pan pizzas. (Seminole County Public Schools took part in Book It! for 10 years prior to partnering with McDonald's last fall.) Last year, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood launched a drive opposing Book It!, claiming that it amounts to marketing, says Josh Golin, the organization's associate director. “Corporate involvement has become so commonplace in schools that I think people don't even stop to question it anymore,” he says. “McDonald's called attention to themselves by actually putting advertisements on the report cards.”

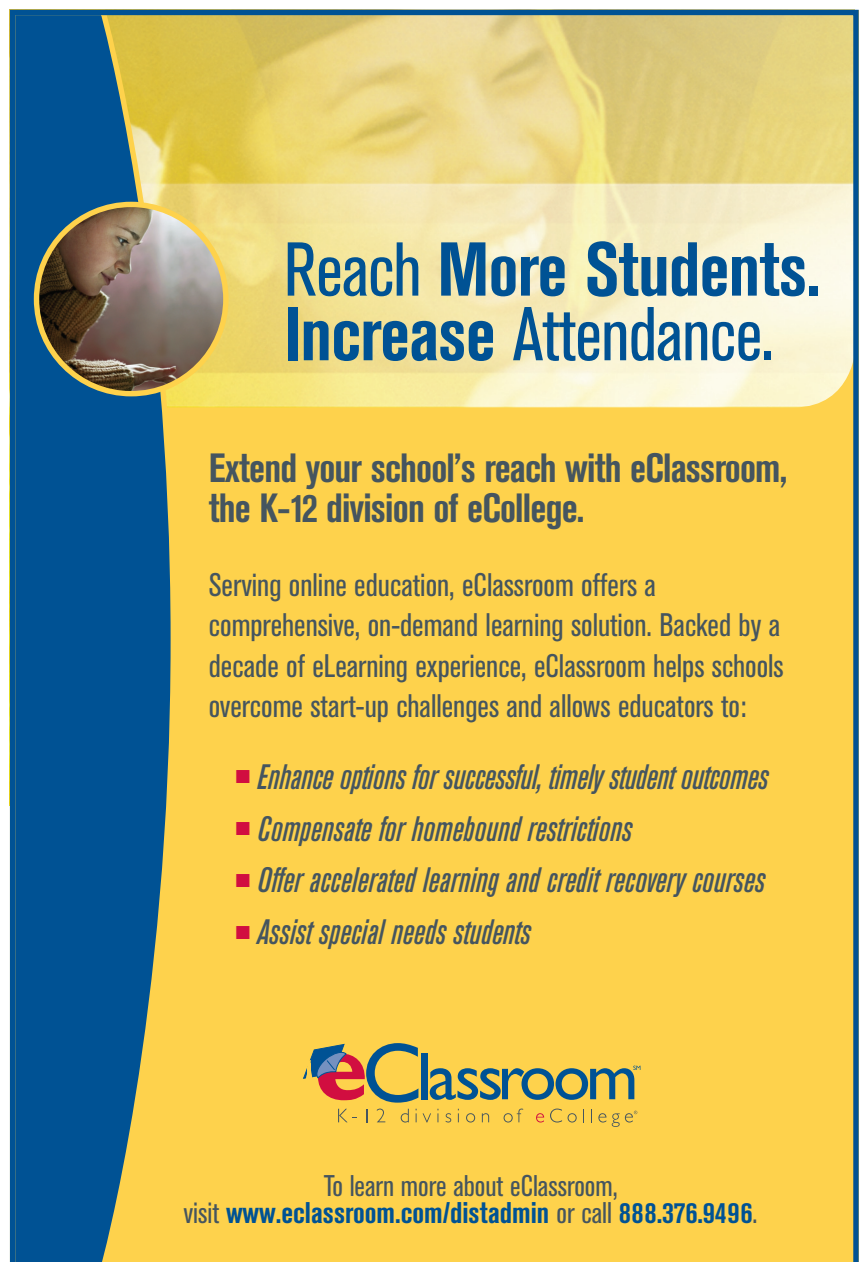
Yet even the controversy in Seminole County has not changed policies regarding food rewards. Eight other districts in central Florida continue to take part in Made the Grade. And while its report card sleeves

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may no longer promise a Happy Meal for high-achieving students, the Seminole County district plans to continue the program through this school year. “It wasn't about the Happy Meal,” Klaers says. “McDonald's is a valued business partner.

We felt it was a perfectly OK incentive because, remember, it is an incentive that comes three or four times a year.” DA

Christopher Hann is a freelance writer based in New Jersey.



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