

TV Program for Schools Costs \$1.8 Billion in Class Time, Study Says

Channel One, the 12-minute news program that is broadcast daily to eight million students, costs \$1.8 billion a year in classroom time, including \$300 million for its two minutes of commercials, a study by the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee has found.

In the study, "The Hidden Costs of Channel One," which is being made public today, researchers used data from the National Center for Education Studies to determine the cost of educating a single public school student, per minute, state by state. Twelve minutes a day — which comes to a total of roughly six school days a year — cost an average of \$229 per pupil nationally (\$366 in New York, \$401 in New Jersey and \$345 in Connecticut).

That figure, the amount of time that Channel One broadcasts, was multiplied by the number of public school viewers — 7.8 million students, or 94 percent of Channel One's audience — to come up with what the researchers said was the total cost of the programming to taxpayers.

"This study communicates clearly that Channel One, whatever else it might be, is not free," said Prof. Alex Molnar, director of the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education at the University of Wisconsin School of Education.

"Channel One costs time, and time is money," said Professor Molnar, a co-author of the report with Max B. Sawicky, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute in Washington.

David M. Tanzer, president and chief executive officer of Channel One, said he objected to the entire premise of the report: that the program is not educational. Mr. Tanzer noted that Channel One, which covers current events, sometimes with teen-agers as anchors, had received some 150 awards, including the George Foster Peabody Award in broadcasting.

"More than 35,000 teachers in 12,000 schools watch our show 180 school days a year," he said, "and they've renewed at a 99 percent rate since the beginning. Educators clearly

have a very high opinion of our programming."

Channel One was introduced in 1990 by Whittle Communications and later sold to Primedia. The company installs television sets and VCR's in every participating middle and high school. In return, 80 percent of the schools' classrooms watch Channel One programs on 90 percent of school days. Advertisers like Reebok and Nintendo pay about \$200,000 for a half-minute commercial.

Many financially strapped school districts embrace Channel One because it supplies expensive audiovisual equipment. Opponents call it an advertising vehicle of little educational value.

In response to the report, the Citizens Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools, an advocacy group based in Seattle, has asked that city's school district not to renew contracts with Channel One. Currently, all middle schools and 4 of 10 high schools broadcast the program in Seattle, one of the primary battlegrounds in the fight over advertising in schools.

The district's superintendent, John H. Stanford, has actively sought companies to advertise in schools with posters, on lunch menus or by sponsoring educational materials, saying the additional revenue improves the district.

Bruce S. Hunter, principal of the Washington Middle School in Seattle, said that recent budget cuts limited his ability to buy equipment, and that the school could not afford televisions without Channel One. He also said he was happy with the content of the programs.

"We feel middle-school students don't get enough information about the news," Mr. Hunter said. "This is an opportunity for us to give them that exposure each day and use it as an opportunity to discuss some of the current events."

But some parents are angry that students are required to watch television during the school day.

"My tax money is being wasted and the kids are not learning what the teachers and the district has planned for them during that time,"

said David O. Wall, whose daughter watched Channel One for three years at Washington Middle School. "I'm even more disturbed that they're being advertised to during that time."

Andrea Okonski, a volunteer coordinator for the Citizens Campaign, agreed, saying, "If there's a national problem of funding our schools, seeling off the school environment to commercial interests isn't the answer to that problem."