

Muir, Minister of Education of Nova Scotia : McDonald's promotion OK if students benefit

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While the idea of a McDonald's-sponsored fitness program for elementary school kids may seem a study in contradictions, education and health policy-makers in Halifax say it's an opportunity on which the school might otherwise miss out. The fast-food giant is paying Springvale Elementary School, along with 40 other Nova Scotia schools, to participate in the Go Active! Olympic Fitness Challenge, a program that stresses good nutrition and an active lifestyle. Education Minister Jamie Muir agreed, saying he was comfortable with McDonald's self-promotion so long as there were clear benefits for the Springvale students.

"Certainly, what McDonald's is promoting is consistent with the type of thing we're promoting in education these days," said Muir, adding that McDonald's is a regular supporter of youth through such programs as the Ronald McDonald houses. "

What they're doing is what we're trying to do, and anyone who promotes activity, we're happy to see it."

Wade Marshall, chairman of the Halifax Regional School Board, said that he had no concerns with a corporate-sponsored curriculum, so long as the program operated within school board policies and guidelines.

"Canadians have sort of embraced that everything we do has an aspect of advertising to it," he said.

"I think it's good that at least one of these food companies is taking some kind of responsibility for the food that they serve, and are taking an initiative to look at how to help children and society become more physically fit."

NDP health critic Maureen MacDonald was less forgiving, saying McDonald's was taking advantage of a cash-strapped school system to promote its own interests.

"This really does show that schools are desperate for an infusion of cash to support extracurricular activities," she said. "Corporations are there, and are more than willing to exploit those opportunities, and they do it out of self-interest."

MacDonald also stressed the need for a school board policy to regulate corporate involvement in schools, but school board superintendent Carole Olsen said no such policy exists.

"What we would anticipate is that schools ... would talk to the staff, the students and the school advisory councils and make an individual choice," said Olsen. "And I think in weighing all the factors, Springvale obviously decided that having three classes of children more engaged in physical activity was positive."