

Schools look to businesses

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At a time when cash-strapped school districts statewide are looking at tight budgets, some are turning to corporate advertising for sports fields and high school gyms, and a few districts in Mercer County could soon join in.

Robbinsville is one of the districts seriously considering advertising as a way to bolster school revenues.

"This can be the next area for corporate marketing," said John Gulluscio, president of Corporate Marketing Association, a sports and entertainment agency that specializes in placing corporate dollars in sports stadiums and arenas.

"What you have in Robbinsville is a venue like any stadium is a venue," Gulluscio told members of

the school board last week.

CMA contracts with several school districts in Monmouth and Middlesex counties, and Toms River Regional in Ocean County. Advertisers in those counties include insurance companies and community colleges.

Companies could select from advertising packages that range from \$3,500 to \$7,500 for signs of various sizes in gym and stadium areas as well as scoreboards and school marquees.

Board member Thomas Halm said bringing in advertising instead of relying solely on taxpayer-funded dollars is a good idea. But some board members asked whether schools could accept advertising money, and what it means for schools to become more commercialized.

"Schools aren't in the business of advertising. . . . I have some hurdles to get over," said Joseph Armenti, who also asked if the board, being a nonprofit entity, could be taxed or even take in the revenue.

But interim business administrator Domenick La Gaipa said because the school board is a nonprofit entity, the revenue from advertising is nontaxable.

Responding to the commercialization of schools, Gulluscio said students are like walking billboards in the classrooms. "Walk into school tomorrow and you'll see students with Nike hats, Juicy Couture on their

jeans, and drinking Gatorade."

Though advertising is becoming an option for more schools, districts have looked at other ways of bringing in revenue, said Mike Yaple, spokesman for New Jersey School Boards Association.

Yaple said booster clubs, education foundations and parent-teacher associations have held auctions with high-end prizes like a trip to France and front-row tickets to a Bruce Springsteen concert. Other districts have partnered with businesses and pharmaceuticals to bring in revenue.

"In a perfect world, schools would have plenty of funding and this wouldn't be an issue. But the reality is that when tax dollars get tight, officials will start looking around for creative ways to raise revenue," Yaple said.

One of the first to implement advertising and naming rights was the Brooklawn school district in Camden County, which in 2001 sold the naming rights of their school's new gym for \$100,000, Yaple said. It is now called The ShopRite of Brooklawn Center. Around the same time, Toms River Regional implemented advertising and naming rights in its district.

Michael Citta, assistant superintendent for the Toms River schools, said the district raised \$1 million over the past five years through advertising. Tobacco and alcohol companies are not allowed to be sponsors, he said.

Citta recommends other schools take the sports-marketing approach. "Funding in education is difficult as it is. We're always looking for an edge to add

to programs without having to tax the taxpayers."

District administrators in Robbinsville met last month to discuss incorporating ad revenue. John Szabo, Robbinsville superintendent, said the administration would support bringing additional funds into the district, but the plans are in the "very preliminary" stages. The school board is expected to consider advertising proposals at its meeting Tuesday.

If passed, the board would determine if the advertising revenue will be used for extracurricular activities, facilities for students or other areas. The board would also determine what ads and companies are suitable for the district, Szabo said.

In Hamilton, an ad hoc committee with two school board members was formed this summer to look into marketing and development possibilities in the district, said Carol Chiacchio, the assistant superintendent for business and board secretary.

"Like every district, we certainly are looking for opportunities to receive revenue that's not going to have a negative impact on the taxpayer," Chiacchio said.

Hopewell Valley Regional is also considering additional revenue sources. The district already allows the football booster team to sell advertisements at games. The money the boosters generate goes to buy equipment for the football team, said Robert Colavita, the district business administrator.

The district also charges rental fees for community members who use school fields or gyms.

The East Windsor Regional school district is taking a careful look at advertising, said Kurt

Stumbaugh, the business administrator.

"We're not opposed to it, we just want to be cautious," Stumbaugh said, adding, "at what level do we expose commercialization? We know kids are hyper-marketed all day, every day, on so many levels. Our choice is, 'at what level do we participate?'"

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