

International Coalition Urges McDonald's CEO to Make Good on His Word & Ban Ronald McDonald from Schools

Advocacy groups around the world are urging McDonald's CEO, Don Thompson, to stand by his assertion that Ronald McDonald does not make appearances in schools. At McDonald's 2014 Annual Shareholder Meeting, Mr. Thompson said, "in schools and our restaurants you never see Ronald McDonald." He named exceptions to the policy in restaurants, but not in schools. Yet Ronald McDonald does, in fact, regularly appear in schools around the world and many regional McDonald's websites advertise the fast food mascot's availability for school visits.

In a letter written and organized by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (United States) and the Instituto Alana (Brazil), a coalition of 47 public health, education, and children's organizations asked Mr. Thompson to widely publicize McDonald's new policy that Ronald McDonald will not be seen in schools and update the company's pledge with the United States Council of Better Business Bureaus' Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. The coalition also urged Mr. Thompson to clearly convey this policy to the company's local franchises and regional marketing associations around the world to ensure that Ronald McDonald no longer promotes the McDonald's brand to captive audiences of schoolchildren.

"The public statement by Mr. Thompson, McDonald's CEO, appears to indicate that he recognizes that schools are not an appropriate forum for promoting the McDonald's brand," said Jennifer Harris, Director of Marketing Initiatives at the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. "However, he must be unaware that Ronald McDonald regularly visits schools and that local franchises actively promote these visits. For example, a web page entitled ['School Shows with Ronald McDonald'](#) for the Houston area states that 'Ronald McDonald would love to visit your students and perform an educational school show.' We urge Mr. Thompson to stand by his words and end this common McDonald's marketing practice that takes advantage of a captive audience of young children."

Despite Mr. Thompson's remarks in June, McDonald's websites continue to advertise Ronald McDonald's availability for schools. CCFC and Alana also found dozens of recent examples of in-school appearances by Ronald McDonald. For example, in February 2014, he appeared before over 350 students at Carl Sandburg Elementary School in Joliet, Illinois and on March 28, 2014 he performed two shows at Southern Elementary School in Falmouth, Kentucky. The coalition has also documented Ronald McDonald appearances in elementary and preschools in other countries including China, Australia, The Netherlands, and Brazil.

For Isabella Henriques, Director of the Children and Consumption Project at Alana, Ronald McDonald visits to schools are not only exploitative but a violation of Brazilian regulations: "Children can't discern advertising from content. In schools, it becomes even more unclear for them—after all, it's as if the institution validated the brand. For us, advertising in schools should be absolutely unacceptable—as clearly stated by the 163 Conanda resolution. In other words, such an action is incompliant with Brazilian Standards and Regulations."

Added Oliver Huizinga, Campaigner for the consumer rights organization foodwatch International, Europe, "Should a fox keep the geese? Of course not. Schools must become ad-free zones and McDonald's should immediately stop all activities at schools. 40 million overweight children under the

age of 5 worldwide are highly alerting—we have to create healthy environments for children. McDonald's is part of this problem and not the solution."

"School visits by junk food mascots undermine my efforts as parent to instill healthy eating habits in my children," said Casey Hinds of US Healthy Kids. "Ronald McDonald is the Joe Camel of fast food and represents an unhealthy brand. It is time to stop using schools to increase profits for a company that contributes to rising rates of Type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease, and obesity in children.

In the United Kingdom, Malcolm Clark, co-ordinator of Sustain's Children's Food Campaign, said, "Schools should be healthy havens where children are free from the messages and pressures of the food industry to consume their products. Whether it is the food that is served, branded teaching materials, or sponsored sports equipment there should be no place for the companies whose core business is to sell us food and drink that is often high in fat, sugar, and salt. That means no Ronald McDonald anywhere near schools. And it should also mean government rules in place to protect children from such junk food marketing beyond the school gates too."

"As CEO of McDonald's, Don Thompson faces a critical choice," said CCFC's Executive Director, Dr. Susan Linn. "He can respect the wishes of the international public health community and ensure that the company's franchises live up to his word. Or he can damage his own credibility and the McDonald's brand by continuing to allow the inappropriate use of Ronald McDonald as a marketing vehicle in schools around the world. We urge him to do the right thing."