

Why are South African classrooms and children becoming fast food billboards?

Joint Civil Society Statement

27 February 2025

As civil society organisations committed to food justice, children's health and education rights, we are alarmed by the recent handover of McDonald's-branded 'Mi Desk' desks to two Cape Town schools, facilitated by the Minister of Basic Education, Siviwe Gwarube. This follows similar corporate-branded desk donations from Old Mutual and Hollywood Bets. We are concerned about this disturbing trend, which must end now.

The McDonald's donation of desks to schools should not be seen as charity. It is junk food marketing targeting vulnerable children. At a time when South Africa faces a compounding crisis of malnutrition, obesity, and a non-communicable disease epidemic, allowing fast food branding into schools is grossly irresponsible and negligent. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should be safeguarding children's health, not exposing them to the marketing of high-fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods under the guise of corporate donations. Additionally, McDonald's is using the bodies of children as unpaid, walking billboards for the junk food market. By slapping its logo on the MiDesk, it ensures that its brand is paraded through communities, at no cost, while profiting from the very eating habits that harm children's health.

"Minister Gwarube's decisions cannot be a compromise between private interests and protecting our children from harmful advertising. Her responsibility is to serve the public and the constitution, which means keeping private interests in check and ensuring big businesses don't profit at the expense of our children," says Palesa Ramolefo, of Amandla.mobi.

Over the past 20 years, we have seen South African markets flooded by fast and ultra-processed foods. Foods high in sugar, salt and fat, and low in nutrients are helping to fuel the obesity epidemic - with nearly one in every four children under five now either overweight or obese. Sophisticated marketing campaigns tap into children's deepest desires and longing for love, family, friendship and belonging, while relatively low prices make fast foods even more desirable amidst widespread poverty and deepening inequality. These branded desks are a form of advertising for McDonald's. They instrumentalise children as consumers of unhealthy food, and contribute to normalising the routine consumption of fast food.

"The DBE should be intensifying its efforts to enhance the school nutrition programme, not helping to further socialise young children into the consumption of health-devastating foods.

These foods jeopardise the physical, mental and emotional performance of children, and thereby their futures” says Zukiswa Zimela of Healthy Living Alliance (HEALA).

In its updated [guidelines](#) on policies to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing released in 2023, the World Health Organization notes that children’s rights, including their right to health, their access to safe and nutritious food, and their right to be free from exploitation, are undermined by the marketing of HFSS foods – the category into which McDonalds’ food falls. As such, countries that are party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, like South Africa, have a legal duty to ensure that these rights are protected and fulfilled and that business respects them.

It cannot be said that our government is adequately performing this duty if the DBE actively supports the direct marketing of McDonald’s food to children. This incident demonstrates that the South African government urgently needs to finalise regulations and develop legislation to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food in general, and to children in particular, as was done by other countries globally including Canada ([Quebec](#)), [Norway](#), [Iran](#), [United Kingdom](#), [Chile](#), [Mexico](#), [Ireland](#), [Argentina](#), [Portugal](#), [South Korea](#), [Taiwan](#), [Brazil](#), [Spain](#), and [Sweden](#).

Why are corporations donating school furniture? McDonald’s branded desk donation illustrates the dangers of austerity and the consequent cuts to the education budget – it incentivises corporate actors to encroach into spaces abandoned by the state. It is no coincidence that the ‘beneficiaries’ of these desks are black children in rural and working-class communities. Gaps opened up by deliberate disinvestment are then given a band-aid by corporate ‘philanthropy’. But this is not generosity – it is branding, which also further promotes unhealthy behaviours in children, like gambling in the case of Hollywood Bets-branded desks. Such corporate actors are turning classrooms into advertising spaces and the children who carry the desks when folded into bulky bags into walking advertisements while distracting from the structural failures of the government to fulfil its constitutional duties.

This is the flipside of austerity in public education. Corporate charity is not a substitute for government responsibility. The only sustainable solution is for the National Treasury to properly fund education, and ensure that every child has access to dignified learning conditions without strings attached.

We call for immediate action:

- The Minister and Department of Basic Education must immediately withdraw support for the branded MiDesk donation, recall the branded desks, ensure that the provincial education department supplies desks to the school as per its mandate, and desist from any such partnerships with Big Food and the gambling industry in the future;

- The Minister must issue a public explanation of the contents and mechanics of these branded partnerships in terms of the concerns we have raised, and actively engage with us as concerned civil society organisations on this matter;
- The South African government should urgently finalise the draft regulations R3337 on the Labelling and Advertising of Foodstuffs, and the Audio and Audio Visual Content Services White Paper both of which include provisions to protect children from the marketing of foods that are harmful to health. In addition, Regulation R3337 needs to be strengthened to prohibit the marketing of fast and ultra-processed foods in child-centred settings such as schools and early learning programmes;
- The government must strengthen regulations around corporate social investments to ensure that they are ethical, transparent, and not transactional. Ethical corporate support should strengthen and be subordinate to, not substitute, the state's obligations to learners.

DBE should desist from selling children a [sick future](#). Schools should be safe spaces that protect children from the marketing of products that are harmful to their health, not open markets for corporate exploitation and expansion.

[ENDS]

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