

# Learning the lessons of funding

Can schools and commercial interests ever have productive relationships? A new set of guidelines aims to help, writes Catherine O'Mahony

**S**chools are re-opening this week to a grim financial picture. Principals will be dealing with reduced state funding and will be looking for ways to finance building maintenance, after-school activities and special needs education.

Parents will be the first called on to make up the deficit.

But could there be an untapped resource for schools in the shape of industry personnel, sponsorship and funding?

Sheena Horgan, a specialist in marketing to families and children at PR firm Insight, believes so. "There's a fantastic opportunity for schools that can manage to make sponsorship work and still stay ethical," insists Horgan. "Schools need resources and personnel. Companies have them."

Horgan believes the absence of a framework for establishing workable partnerships between industry and schools is a major hindrance to developing better relationships. In 2005, the government's national obesity taskforce called for a code of practice to be developed on industry sponsorship and funding in schools and local communities. The call was repeated earlier this year. Nothing has been done.

"We need to try and get people speaking the same language. A school principal cannot compete with the marketing prowess and might of a major consumer brand. This is a big part of the problem," said Horgan. She has developed a code of practice for brands and schools which she has been showing to all the stakeholder groups.

This details the issues that need to be considered when framing a sponsored school programme. Schools, she says, need to have a method to help them determine which industry ideas are genuinely benefi-

cial and which are excessively commercial. Students and parents need to feel they are getting real benefits and not lose faith in their school's integrity.

Brands, meanwhile, need to learn how to engage with schools responsibly and how to avoid distracting schools and pupils from their education or undermining existing health messages.

The document includes a cost-benefit analysis from the various points of view of schools, brands, parents and students.

"This is a starting point," she said. "I don't think this is a simple or a quick process."

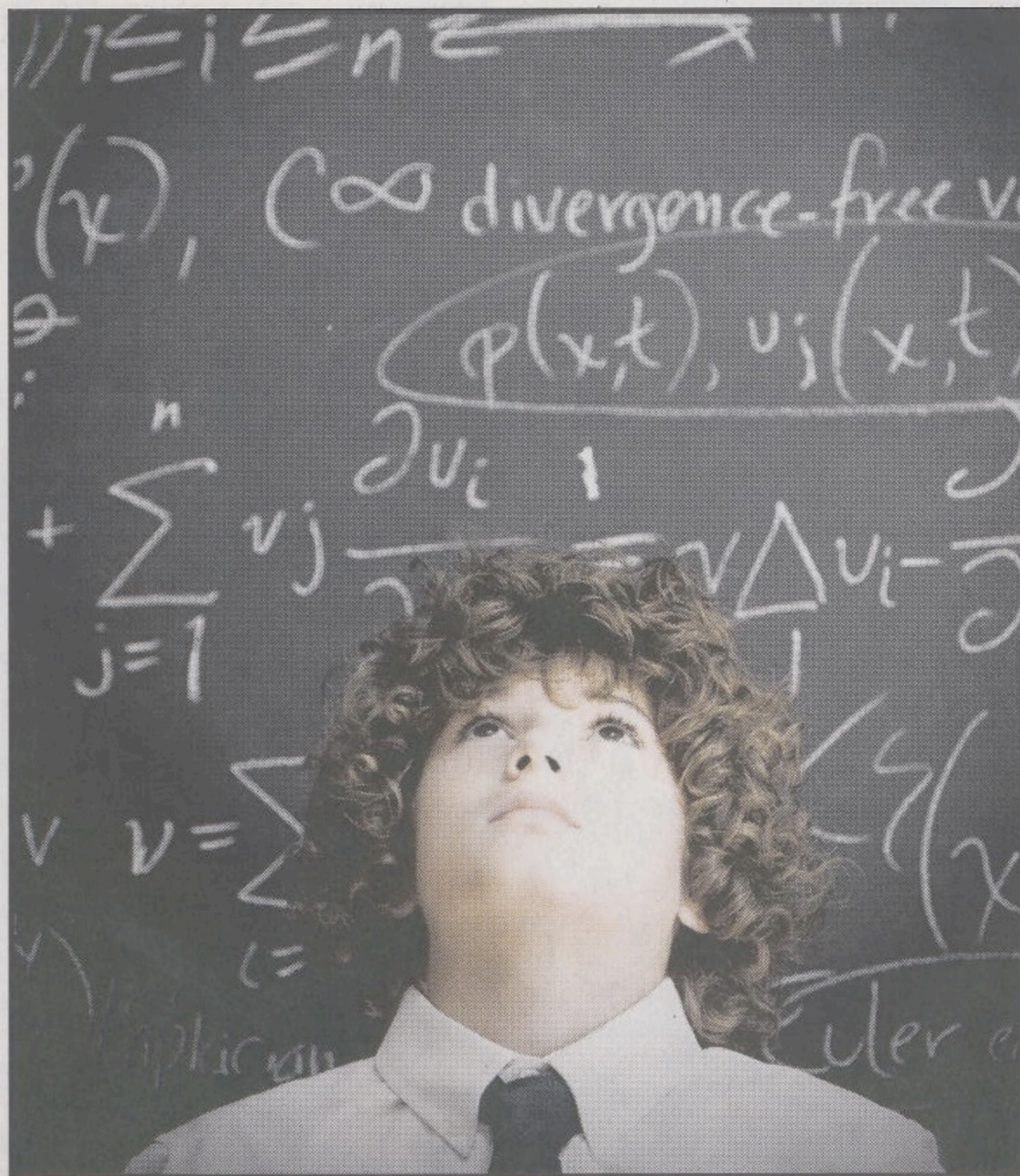
Reaction is likely to be mixed.

The INTO, the main teachers' union for primary schools, has been critical of branded school programmes in the past, particularly those that required children to collect vouchers to fund computers and schools equipment. It operates its own internal guidelines which recommend that no commercial schemes should be directed at pupils in primary schools, that schools should be free from commercial presentations and from proof-of-purchase incentive schemes.

Both Tesco and SuperValu have run voucher schemes that required families to spend large sums on shopping to part-finance what were often very modest pieces of school equipment.

A lobby group comprising a group of teachers and psychologists, the Campaign for Commercial-Free Education, has worked out that, in order for a school to claim a "free" gymnastics mat that retails at about €280, under the SuperValu scheme, customers would have to spend €32,840 in the shop.

"The notion that plenty of schools got loads of free computers from this sort of thing was never a reality," said John Carr, general secretary of the



Many schools will find that their finances don't add up this year

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INTO. "These schemes just lead to pressure on very young children.

"We take the view that relationships between schools and commercial enterprises that are based on sound principles can make sense. What concerns us is the exploitation of very young children. In recent years, schools have experienced a constant bombardment from companies trying to target advertising material at children."

Across Ireland, 13 primary schools have declared themselves commercial-free, and Joseph Fogarty of the Campaign for Commercial-Free Education is hoping more will join this year.

Fogarty, himself a national school principal at Corballa National School in west Sligo, said children deserved a commercial-free space in schools.

"We don't want this because we hate capitalism," he said. "We want this because children have no other advertising-free space in their lives. In our schools, the message on the blackboard is bought and paid for by the government. It's not a revolving billboard that someone like Tesco or SuperValu can just buy into when they feel like it."

Fogarty is critical of virtually all existing schools programmes. He notes that Renault, in a scheme backed by the National Road Safety Authority, has been distributing branded material to primary school children declaring its cars to be "the safest on the road".

He is outraged by AIB's Build a Bank Challenge for second level schools, which sends AIB staff into schools to teach children about financial

planning. He disliked last year's Google art competition, which had children designing logos for Google in art classes.

Fogarty said he did see some scope for companies to get involved with schools, but said they must respect the school's integrity.

"If a company is feeling philanthropic, just give us a cheque. We'll happily cash it and tell all the parents and staff who paid for the new computer room or whatever. Just don't try and advertise to kids."

Many brands have become reluctant to get involved at all with the education system, according to Horgan. Having observed the media backlash that often results when others try it, many who might otherwise wish to get involved have been put off.

In the US, there has been a furore over the prevalence of

sugary soft drinks in school vending machines, fuelling childhood obesity.

In Britain, Cadbury's, which usually treads very carefully in its corporate social responsibility programmes, ran into trouble with its 2004 Get Active programme, which invited children to collect tokens on wrappers to buy sports equipment. The irony was quickly spotted and the media response was furious.

Sheena Horgan conceded that badly-managed school programmes helped nobody and could result in a PR disaster for brands.

"Things like voucher schemes are problematic and they really need to be very carefully planned. Those supermarket schemes ended up introducing a competitive element in many schools, and that wasn't acceptable.

"Companies need to remember that they can't talk to the kids, they can only try and talk to parents."

But she is convinced that a properly planned partnership between a school and a brand can work very well for everyone concerned, once maximum benefit accrues to the school and careful rules are followed.

Horgan cited as more positive examples quieter initiatives, such as the teacher training provided by Intel in some Irish schools, the An Taisce-backed Green Schools programme (which is partially backed by the ESB), or the efforts made by credit unions to promote financial literacy in schools.

The difficulties schools are experiencing in providing adequate playground supervision, or after-school programmes, might well be eased by bringing in personnel from companies, she said.

"This shouldn't be an all or nothing approach," she said. "The question is the way it is done. Activities like this, even if you get no external PR at all, can be brilliant for internal PR, and companies need that in the present climate."

Asked if it made moral sense for industry to pick up the slack left by the state in terms of education spending, Horgan said; "That's just the situation we're in. We can complain about it forever if we want, or we can think about practical ways around it."