

Oregon Lottery Scratch-its: The new Joe Camel

by Chuck Sheketoff

Years ago, facing legal and political pressure for marketing cancer sticks to youth, R.J. Reynolds put out to pasture its infamous Joe Camel mascot. Today's "Scratch-it for Schools" campaign by the Oregon State Lottery may not sport a character with a hump, but its cynicism brings back memories of old Joe.

Last November, the Oregon Lottery, with help from the Oregon Department of Education, invited K-12 public schools to gamble on Scratch-it for Schools. This month, the Lottery picked 75 applicants to play the game.

Come April, teams of eight adults, four from each school and four from TV or radio stations, will have five minutes to scratch as many Oregon Lottery Scratch-it tickets as they can. The schools will keep the cash prizes uncovered by their teams.

If a lottery is a bad tax on people's poor understanding of statistics, Scratch-it for Schools is nothing but a public relations scam peddling the lie that lottery games can be a panacea for schools' funding shortages, all the while validating gambling in the eyes of our kids.

The cynical nature of the campaign comes across loud and clear in the invitation to schools to register online. The Oregon Lottery encouraged school officials to fill out the registration on their home computers, because some school computers ban access to the Lottery's website. Many school computers apparently put lotteries in the same category as pornography when it comes to online access.

What do the school computers know that the principals and school district administrators fail to grasp?

The computers apparently know that Oregon public health officials are concerned about problem gambling in general and youth gambling in particular. At least some public schools profess similar concerns, though that didn't stop them from entering and winning slots in the Lottery's Scratch-it for Schools promotion. Both Portland Public Schools and the Silver Falls School District, for example, have policies prohibiting student gambling - playing games of chance for the purpose of exchanging money or anything of value.

And perhaps the school computers also understand the deceptive math behind the Scratch-it for Schools marketing scheme. The Oregon Lottery boasts that last year it raised about \$86,000 through the school-based gambling event. To some, especially kids, that may sound like a lot of money. Yet, considering that the state school budget is \$6,245,000,000, the \$86,000 is peanuts. Actually, it's just a few grains of salt on the peanuts. It's just fourteen one-millionths -- 0.0014 percent -- of an increase in funding for schools.

Put another way, the Oregon Lottery's Scratch-it for Schools event provides enough funding to add a little less than half a minute to the school year of Oregon's schoolchildren. Schools would be better off spending their time giving their students a math lesson and teaching them that the Oregon Lottery accounts for less than 3 percent of the cost of state government.

But Scratch-it for Schools is really not primarily about helping schools. The Oregon Lottery calls the scheme a "promotional program" and is using shills from the media to maximize its slick PR campaign.

Unfortunately, like RJR's Joe Camel, the campaign is aimed at vulnerable youth. After all, how can a marketing campaign targeting schools not implicate their students?

State human services officials are rightly concerned that although students won't be allowed to scratch the tickets, they are likely to get caught up in the excitement and frenzy as their teachers, administrators and parents -- presumably role models -- frantically scratch tickets for a little money.

Instead of helping promote the fantasy that playing the lottery will solve life's challenges, schools should teach kids the facts of life: taxes, not gambling revenues, are responsible for 90 percent of school funding. If schools want more digital cameras, books, assembly programs, playground equipment, computer hardware and software and field trips -- allegedly what past Scratch-it for Schools winners bought with their money -- they'd be better off working to strengthen our tax system's funding for our public structures.

Just as the tobacco industry invented Joe Camel to hook children on a dangerous product, the Oregon Lottery has come up with its own marketing ploy to ready its future prey. Let's hope a public outcry similarly banishes Scratch-it for Schools to the PR pasture for misguided publicity schemes.

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