

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP  
Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities  
Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT  
CC The Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP

07 August 2025

### **Addressing Harmful Industry Influences on Youth Education**

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to share our concerns about the role of harmful industry influence on UK youth education and to ask that the Department for Education issues official guidance stipulating that schools should not use materials funded by harmful industries. We believe this is critical to the government's mission to prevent ill health, reduce inequalities, and ensure every child can thrive. This is particularly important given the omission of key alcohol harm reduction measures in the recently published 10 Year Health Plan. Protecting children from harmful industry influence in schools must form part of a broader, evidence-based prevention agenda to address record levels of alcohol, unhealthy food, and gambling related harm.

In the UK, the alcohol, gambling, and unhealthy food and beverage industries fund self-claimed prevention education programmes aimed at children and young people, including in schools, despite inherent conflicts of interest. Peer-reviewed academic analyses of the materials provided as part of these types of programmes show how they serve the interests of their commercial funders and why they are deeply concerning from a public health perspective. The materials help to normalise harmful behaviours, omit or misrepresent important risks, and shift responsibility for harm onto individuals, including children and young people, and away from the industries and their practices. Additionally, this body of research shows that some of the industry-funded materials and organisations that provide them make unsupported claims about their evidence base and effectiveness in safeguarding children and preventing harm. In short, industry influenced education resources put children's health at risk. These tactics echo the well documented strategies used by the tobacco<sup>1</sup> and fossil fuel<sup>2</sup> industries to manipulate public understanding and maintain industry-favourable, but ineffective, regulations.

Industry-funded education programmes allow corporations to claim that they are addressing public health concerns while simultaneously undermining evidence-based interventions, such as controls on the price, availability, and marketing of harmful products. This approach diverts attention from necessary government regulation; and it puts the onus on the education system to solve problems caused by commercial practices, which is unrealistic and an unfair expectation of an education system that is under pressure.

To ensure that health and wellbeing of children and young people are prioritised over corporate interests, youth education should be evidence-based, as well as designed, delivered, and evaluated completely independently of all industry influence, including funding. The public would

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<sup>1</sup> Landman A, Ling PM, Glantz SA. Tobacco industry youth smoking prevention programs: protecting the industry and hurting tobacco control. *Am J Public Health* 2002; 92(6): 917-30.

<sup>2</sup> Worth K. Miseducation: How Climate Change Is Taught in America: Columbia Global Reports; 2021.

support you in this endeavour. A new poll commissioned by members of this group found that 76% of parents with secondary school-aged children believe that the government should take action to prevent influence on youth education by the gambling and alcohol industries.

We recognise your department's commitment to ensuring children receive high-quality, trusted information that helps them make informed decisions and live healthy lives. As part of this, and in line with the government's broader focus on prevention and reducing inequalities, we ask that you take the following actions:

1. **End industry influence on youth education:** follow the lead of Ireland and issue official guidance stipulating that schools should not use materials funded by harmful industries, and support schools and others to ensure that the guidance is effectively implemented.
2. **Ensure youth education programmes are evidence-based and independent:** all materials should be designed, delivered, and evaluated completely independently of all industry influence and funding, including via third parties.
3. **Support schools and other youth education organisations** to avoid industry influence and to manage conflicts of interest.
4. **Adopt a children's rights-based approach to policymaking** in line with the UK's commitments under the UNCRC. In particular, this should recognise that every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24 UNCRC) and education (Article 29 UNCRC), and that the best interests of the child shall always be a primary consideration (Article 3(1) UNCRC).
5. **Acknowledge the need for comprehensive policy measures** to ensure that children are healthy and safe and can flourish. This means recognising the responsibility of government to go beyond education by actively creating safe environments for children, for example by protecting them from exposure to marketing of harmful products.

We believe that ensuring all young people receive trustworthy, independent health promotion education aligns with the Labour Government's broader mission to tackle the root causes of poor health and create a fairer, more resilient society. The evidence shows that at present harmful industries and the organisations they fund (including industry-funded charities) can influence youth education. Reducing the influence of commercial interests in the classroom is a practical, impactful, and evidence-based step that can support your ambitions for prevention and child wellbeing.

A representative group of signatories would be happy to meet with you to discuss the policies set out in this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Katherine Severi, Chief Executive, Institute of Alcohol Studies

Will Prochaska, Director, Coalition to End Gambling Ads

Chris van Tulleken, Professor of Infectious Disease and Global Health, UCL

Dr May van Schalkwyk, Research Fellow, Global Health Policy Unit, University of Edinburgh

Amandine Garde, Professor of Law, University of Liverpool

Mark Petticrew, Professor of Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

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Katharine Jenner, Chief Executive, Obesity Health Alliance  
Alison Douglas, Chief Executive, Alcohol Focus Scotland  
Ailsa Rutter OBE, Director, Fresh & Balance  
Susan Taylor, Head of Alcohol Policy, Fresh & Balance  
Vivienne Evans OBE, Chief Executive, Adfam  
Anna Route, Hull Food Partnership/Hull Food Inequality Alliance  
Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair, Alcohol Health Alliance, and Special Adviser, Royal College of Physicians  
William Roberts, CEO, Royal Society for Public Health.  
Professor Tracy Daszkiewicz, President, Faculty of Public Health  
Steve Downie, CEO, Breakthrough Recovery Chorley Group  
Professor Ewan Forrest, British Society of Gastroenterology  
Professor John Shepherd CBE, Royal College of Surgeons of England  
Scott Crosby, Associate Director, Humber and North Yorkshire Centre for Excellence  
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Niamh Fitzgerald, Professor of Alcohol Policy, Institute for Social Marketing & Health, University of Stirling  
Professor Colin Drummond, Emeritus Professor of Addiction Psychiatry, National Addiction Centre, King's College London  
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Dr Tim Meek, President, Association of Anaesthetists  
Professor Stuart McPherson, Vice President of British Society of Gastroenterology  
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Wynford Ellis Owen, CEO Council on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CARE - the Charity for Addiction, Recovery and Empowerment)  
Raj Ubhi, Director Children & Young People's Services, Change Grow Live  
Dr Tim Cross, President of the British Association for the Study of the Liver  
Dr Linda Harris OBE, Chief Executive Spectrum Community Health CIC  
Terry Martin, AlcoHelp  
Dr Zul Mirza, Consultant in Emergency Medicine  
Eric Appleby, Chair, Alcohol and Families Alliance  
Dr Piers Henriques, Director of Communications, Nacoa UK  
Dr Alastair MacGilchrist OBE, Chair, Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP)  
Dr Kawther Hashem, Head of Impact and Research at Action on Sugar and Salt  
Annie Ashton, Reformer, PhD student, University of Lincoln.  
Dr Kishan Patel, Public Health Specialty Registrar, CEO of Gambling Harm UK

Dr Dominique Florin, Medical Council on Alcohol  
Aaron Abbott, Founder, Against The Odds Education & Awareness CIC  
Matt Zarb-Cousin, Director, Clean Up Gambling  
Clare Wyllie, Research Director, Tackling Gambling Stigma  
Claire James, Associate Director of Nursing, Change Grow Live  
Anna Gilmore, Professor of Public Health, University of Bath  
Stephanie Slater MBE, Founder/Chief Executive, School Food Matters  
Greg Fell, President, Association of Directors of Public Health  
Alice Wiseman, Vice President, Association of Directors of Public Health  
Peter Roderick, Director of Public Health, City of York Council  
Professor Richard Velleman, Department of Psychology, University of Bath and UK Trustee of AFINet  
Dr Heather Grimbaldeston, Chair, British Medical Association (BMA) Public Health Medicine Committee  
Professor David Strain, Chair, British Medical Association (BMA) Board of Science

### **Addendum - Key Evidence**

Studies have analysed youth education programs linked to these industries, revealing troubling practices. In particular:

#### **1. Alcohol Industry Influence<sup>3</sup>**

- Drinkaware, a charity principally funded by the alcohol industry, has distributed materials emphasising individual responsibility for alcohol-related harms while omitting key health risks, such as the connection between alcohol use and certain cancers.
- Materials provided by the Alcohol Education Trust (now the Talk About Trust) and the SMASHED Project, funded by Diageo, also contain cancer misinformation, for instance omitting the most common forms of alcohol-related cancer or suggesting alcohol-related cancers are only associated with so-called heavy drinking.
- Activities ask students to consider statements like “[d]rinking alcohol makes you happy,” accompanied by images of young adults smiling, having a meal and drinking what appears to be wine.
- Both Drinkaware and Talk About Trust materials appear to teach schoolchildren specific drinking skills, with a Drinkaware lesson showing children how to pour a standard drink and a Talk About Trust lesson explaining how different alcoholic beverages are made.

#### **2. Gambling Industry Influence**

- The Young Gamers & Gamblers Education Trust (YGAM) and GambleAware, funded by the gambling industry, deliver educational materials that promote the industry-favoured idea of “responsible gambling”.

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<sup>3</sup> van Schalkwyk MCI, Petticrew M, Maani N, et al. Distilling the curriculum: An analysis of alcohol industry-funded school-based youth education programmes. *PLoS One* 2022; 17(1): e0259560.

- These introduce young people to gambling products and may facilitate gambling initiations, for example by teaching students how to use a betting slip.<sup>4,5</sup>
- One of these studies found that some of the materials and public statements made by these organisations about their programmes use evidence in misleading ways. It also found that existing evaluations of these campaigns were methodologically flawed and did not measure effectiveness, but were used instead by industry-funded actors to promote their programmes as an effective way of safeguarding children and young people from gambling harm. They are also promoted as a form of harm prevention by the industry's leading trade body which funds YGAM and GamCare to deliver youth education programmes.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Unhealthy Food and Drink Industry Influence

- A 2024 investigation by the BMJ identified cases of food and drink brands marketing to and influencing children in schools and nurseries, through breakfast clubs, nutrition guidance, and healthy eating campaigns. Examples include resources for teachers provided by an organisation whose members include British Sugar plc, Mars, McDonald's and PepsiCo. These activities propagate the dominant narrative around food and health, which is one of personal responsibility instead of system failure.<sup>7</sup>
- A 2025 report from Bite Back found that unhealthy food and drink companies have established a bold presence in schools, using a range of tactics. These include selling their unhealthy products, offering promotions, and organising branded school trips and workshops. In some sixth-form colleges, brands like Costa Coffee and Starbucks have set up entire outlets that sell items packed with sugar.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> van Schalkwyk MCI, Hawkins B, Petticrew M. The politics and fantasy of the gambling education discourse: An analysis of gambling industry-funded youth education programmes in the United Kingdom. *SSM - Population Health* 2022; 18: 101122.

<sup>5</sup> van Schalkwyk MCI, Hawkins B, Petticrew M, et al. Agnogenic practices and corporate political strategy: the legitimization of UK gambling industry-funded youth education programmes. *Health Promotion International* 2024; 39(1).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson E. Food industry has infiltrated UK children's education: stealth marketing exposed BMJ 2024; 387 :q2661 doi:10.1136/bmj.q2661

<sup>8</sup> Bite Back (2025). Fuel Us, Don't Fool Us: An investigation into Big Food in schools.