

The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption

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Executive Summary

Textbook Adoption: The process, in place in twenty-one states, of reviewing textbooks according to state guidelines and then mandating specific books that schools must use, or lists of approved textbooks that schools must choose from.

Textbook Adoption Is Bad for Students and Schools

It consistently produces second-rate textbooks that replicate the same flaws and failings over and over again. Adoption states perform poorly on national tests, and the market incentives caused by the adoption process are so skewed that lively writing and top-flight scholarship are discouraged. Every individual analyst and expert panel that has studied American K-12 textbooks has concluded that they are sorely lacking and that the adoption process cries out for reform.

- *Textbook adoption has been hijacked by pressure groups.* The textbook adoption process has been a feature of American education since Reconstruction, when former Confederate states issued guidelines for school materials that reflected their version of the Civil War. In the present day, special interest pressure groups from the politically correct left and the religious right exert enormous influence on textbook content through bias and sensitivity guidelines and reviews that have dumbed down textbook content in an attempt to render them inoffensive to every possible ethnic, religious, and political constituency.

- *Textbooks are now judged not by their style, content, or effectiveness, but by the way they live up to absurd sensitivity guidelines.* Do literary anthologies have more male than female story characters? Do textbooks portray stereotypes such as female nurses or male mechanics? Do history textbooks suggest that religious strife has been a cause of conflict in human history? Do they mention junk food, magic, or prayer; suggest that the old are wise or the young are vigorous; or leave out any ethnic, racial, or religious group, no matter how small? If they do, that is grounds to have a textbook rejected.

● *The adoption process encourages slipshod reviews of textbooks written by anonymous development houses, according to paint-by-numbers formulas.* Textbooks are not actually carefully reviewed—and sometimes are not read at all by those who act as “reviewers.” They are scrutinized instead with a superficial “checklist” approach that identifies whether textbooks have presented key words and phrases without viewing the entire textbook for quality, accuracy, and content. States often apply “readability” formulas to ensure that textbooks use simpler words and phrases, resulting in a lowest-common-denominator approach. Reviewers almost never have to sign their reviews, and the entire process is cloaked in secrecy laws. Meanwhile, textbooks are almost never field tested to gauge whether they are effective in raising student achievement.

● *Finally, textbook adoption created a textbook cartel controlled by just a few companies.* Requiring publishers to post performance bonds, stock outmoded book depositories, and produce huge numbers of free samples have all raised the costs of producing textbooks. This has frozen smaller, innovative textbook companies out of the adoption process and put control of the \$4.3 billion textbook market in the hands of just four multi-national publishers.

The Bottom Line

There is no evidence that textbook adoption contributes to increased student learning. In fact, the vast majority of adoption states are also in the bottom half of all states when it comes to NAEP reading and math scores.

How To Reform Textbook Adoption

Textbook adoption is a fundamentally flawed process: it distorts the market, entices extremist groups to hijack the curriculum, and papers the land with mediocre instructional materials.

We do not believe the adoption process can be set right by tinkering with it. Rather, legislators and governors in “adoption” states

should devolve funding for and decisions about textbook purchases to individual schools, districts, or even teachers.

Instructional materials are key parts of the domain where we should rely on front-line educators to make the best decisions for *their* pupils. That means that textbook selection and purchasing decisions should be made as close as possible to the teacher, ideally by the teacher herself. If that's not practical, then they should be made by the school or district.

Six Steps Toward Reform

For states that choose to maintain textbook adoption, we recommend six steps toward reforming the process.

- Textbook guidelines should create incentives for quality rather than quantity.
- State officials should eliminate their bias guidelines in general and California should abolish its “social content” guidelines in particular. Generally, state adoption processes should abandon the checklist approach—including the use of computerized keyword searches and correlational analyses.
- Abandon the use of readability formulas.
- Adoption state officials should drop policies and practices that discourage small, high-quality publishers from competing in the textbook market.
- State education officials should reform the adoption process to reveal the names of reviewers and encourage personal responsibility.
- Districts, or groups of school districts, should be authorized to petition the state education department to add specific textbooks to the state-approved list.

Nationwide Reforms

These additional recommendations represent an effort to bring the textbook sector into better alignment with the No Child Left Behind act and the premium it places on rigorous scientific research and proven instructional programs.

- State lawmakers, private foundations, and professional associations should create a book review industry for textbook authors.

- Fund new research centers to appraise textbook effectiveness—and substantially expand textbook research and evaluation at the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse. Federal, state, and private dollars could be used to fund pilot tests of the effectiveness of different textbooks on student achievement.

- Adoption state lawmakers should create a textbook “safety net” that will prescribe instructional materials in failing schools.

- Congress should consider modestly expanding federal funding to assist states in purchasing effective instructional materials in math, science, and history—as it has with the “Reading First” program. But funds should only be provided for the purchase of materials shown to be effective in increasing student achievement.

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Foreword

Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Textbooks are a problem for American education in two ways. First, because so many of them are mediocre and some are dreadful. And, second, because so many K-12 teachers and schools depend so heavily on them for the core of their curriculum.

To rely for one's course content and lesson plans on inferior instructional materials is like boxing with an arm tied behind one's back: success is apt to prove elusive.

Why U.S. schools and teachers are textbook-dependent is a many-splendored problem that is not our immediate topic. Simply stated, lots of teachers don't have a solid foundation of knowledge in the subjects they're teaching—some are not well educated, some are teaching “out of field,” etc.—and so it's a huge challenge for them to cut loose from the textbook, plan their own courses, and assemble their own materials. They may also lack the time or wherewithal. And, especially when teaching core subjects for which students and schools will be held accountable, they are likely to be pressed by principal, department head, or district curriculum director to use “approved” textbooks that are supposedly attuned to applicable standards and aligned with the tests by which progress will be gauged.

Why the textbooks are so dreary, however, and what might be done about it, is our present concern. For the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Foundation, it's not a new concern. In the past year, for example, as part of our continuing diagnosis of social studies, we published *A Consumer's Guide to High-School History Textbooks* by Diane Ravitch (and a number of other leading historians) and *The Stealth Curriculum* by Sandra Stotsky. In 2003, Fordham trustee Ravitch wrote her bestseller, *The Language Police*, alerting the country to the censorship of textbooks (and anthologies, literature readers, even test items) by political pressure groups and, more recently, by publishers themselves.

Censorship is not the only reason that school textbooks are so weak, nor is Fordham the only organization to worry about them. Honorable mention must be made, for example, of the fifteen-year-old Textbook League (<http://www.textbookleague.org>) and American Textbook Council (<http://www.historytextbooks.org>). Both organiza-

tions have done fine work in reviewing individual textbooks and discerning patterns across them.

Yet school textbooks, overall, are astonishingly under-examined when you consider the scale of this industry—some \$4.3 billion per year—and the central role that these tomes play in American K-12 schooling. It's a lot easier for a parent or taxpayer (or, for that matter, a teacher) to get good consumer information about food processors and CD players than about this ubiquitous classroom "technology." Considering that the textbook is to the teacher what the hammer is to a carpenter or the knife to a chef, one might suppose it would be thoroughly scrutinized and susceptible to accurate comparative information. Not so.

One reason that textbooks get so little scrutiny also turns out to be one of the main reasons they're so vulnerable to politically-motivated censorship: they are not bought and sold in a free market. Rather, in twenty-one states, they are "procured" via a government-run purchasing system called "adoption" that seems irretrievably entangled with the screeching identity politics of both left and right—a whole panoply of ethnic, religious, gender, and political pressure groups who have designs on textbook content. This dysfunctional system constrains the textbook options available to schools and teachers, constrains what authors and publishers can put in their books, constrains the normal functioning of supply and demand, and contributes to the educational mediocrity enshrined in so many of the books that survive this archaic and bizarre process.

Ravitch nailed the adoption process for giving rise to conditions within which pressure-group censorship thrives. Censorship is always a problem in a land founded on freedom of expression and in a field that prizes academic freedom. But when applied to K-12 textbooks in particular, it also renders them huge and boring—and thus "dumbs down" content while causing both class time and homework time to be as dull as possible. In short, censorship leads to books that foster low academic achievement. This at a time when *raising* achievement is the principal challenge facing American elementary/secondary education and when the federal No Child Left Behind act and innumerable other efforts are striving to boost standards, increase student achievement, and hold schools and school systems to account for their results.

If statewide adoption leads to both censorship and mediocrity, it's obviously a problem for American education. But this problem is completely within the capacity of policy makers to solve.

We had heard for years about the malign effects of the textbook adoption process, particularly as it operated in California and Texas, states large enough to influence the entire textbook industry and shape the national market for instructional materials. We had heard, for example, of the horrendous market-entry obstacles encountered by small publishers of high-quality textbooks (the "Open Court" reading series, for example, and the Saxon math textbooks). Then *The Language Police* exposed how these mechanisms work—or fail to—and how they throw sand into the gears of education reform.

So we asked what might be done, and it did not take us long to figure out how, at least, to start: by focusing on textbook adoption as the very first issue to address in Fordham's new series of "Compact Guides to Education Solutions," short reports that present in concise and digestible (and actionable) format issues in K-12 education and guidance for policy makers and opinion leaders on how to tackle them.

We asked veteran journalist David Whitman to do the heavy lifting: to look into the statewide adoption process and explain for lay readers where it came from, how it works, what problems it causes, and what might be done instead. Whitman, a former social policy writer for *U.S. News & World Report* and former researcher at Harvard's Kennedy School, delved into the murky world of textbook adoption and prepared this report for the Fordham Institute. You will find the fruits of his labors in the four chapters that follow. We are much in David's debt for a job well done.

We are also lastingly grateful to Diane Ravitch for her encouragement and guidance in this project, as well as for the superb book that precipitated it and the introduction that follows this foreword; to Frank Wang, former chief executive officer of Saxon Publishing, for helping us understand the lay of this weird land; to summer intern Jess Castle for exemplary fact checking and proofreading; to Fordham research director Justin Torres for guiding the entire process from beginning to end; and to Lori Drummer and Jane Cunningham of the American Legislative Exchange Council for teaming up with us to disseminate the results and recommendations to members of that

outstanding organization of reform-minded legislators. (With their help, we expect to spend some time in key textbook adoption states encouraging policy makers to consider declaring their independence from this dysfunctional process.)

What do I conclude? Four points stand out.

First, statewide adoption is plainly unnecessary for the functioning of K-12 education and appears to do it no good. Most states get by fine with no such process and most of those that shun it do better on national tests than those that rely on it.

Second, everyone who has ever looked closely at the adoption process has come to the same conclusion: it does far more harm than good. Yet no previous study has marshaled such a wide range of research into textbooks and the adoption process. This review shows plainly that liberals, conservatives, independent scholars, and academic review panels alike share a surprising unanimity about the deplorable state of today's textbooks. And just about everyone who isn't making money off the process also agrees that statewide adoption is a potent source of this mediocrity.

Third, what sustains this process in the face of such criticism is pure self-interest. Adoption serves the interests of the textbook-publishing cartel (though not the small "boutique" houses); of political pressure groups on the left and right; of elected officials who have somehow been persuaded that they know better than educators what children should read; and of bureaucracies, boards, committees, and others whose very existence (or at least whose livelihood) hinges on the adoption process.

Fourth, at a time when just about everything else in American education is judged primarily by its success in contributing to student achievement, all the incentives and dynamics of the textbook market are shaped by other considerations. The federal No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) deals with instructional materials only in a glancing way (through the "Reading First" program). But the fact that few textbooks are subject to any sort of independent field testing of their educational effectiveness is not only a scandal and an outrage, it clearly violates the spirit of NCLB, which places a premium on methods and materials that have been *proven* to work. I'm usually loath to suggest further federal involvement in K-12 education, but Congress should

seriously consider legislative action here, perhaps requiring instructional materials paid for with federal dollars to prove their efficacy, which would make life less pleasant for textbook adoption states.

I challenge you to read the following pages and not come away convinced that the textbook adoption process damages K-12 education in America and should be done away with or, at minimum, radically overhauled.

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Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President
Washington, D.C.
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Introduction

Diane Ravitch

David Whitman has prepared for the Fordham Institute a splendid survey of what's wrong with textbooks today. The main problem of textbooks, we know, is their quality. They are sanitized to avoid offending anyone who might complain at textbook adoption hearings in big states, they are poorly written, they are burdened with irrelevant and unedifying content, and they reach for the lowest common denominator. As a result of all this, they undermine learning instead of building and encouraging it.

This study, and others that have examined textbooks, show that it doesn't have to be this way. There are plenty of examples of fine textbooks from the recent past, as well as from other countries. Good history books contain vivid narratives about significant people and exciting events that changed the course of human affairs; such books certainly do not sidestep controversial topics. Good literature anthologies contain a blend of outstanding traditional literature as well as recent writing that is worthy of study and analysis; such anthologies are not assembled primarily in terms of the authors' gender and ethnicity (unless they are intended to be compilations of writings by women, men, or members of specific groups). Good textbooks in mathematics and science focus on the facts and ideas that are necessary to build a cumulative foundation of knowledge in each field; they do not avoid issues that raise hackles, like evolution, and they are not stuffed with irrelevant sociopolitical commentary about subjects like global warming and the accomplishments of women and individuals with disabilities in these fields.

In my research for *The Language Police*, I found—as this report does—that the textbook adoption process in California, Texas, Florida, and other states had warped the quality of textbooks. I talked to many publishers who told me (off the record, of course) that their editors were trained to remove anything controversial or potentially controversial from their materials before submitting them to any of the twenty-one adoption states. Editors were instructed to avoid or delete anything that might offend feminists, conservative religious groups, disability groups, ethnic activists, or any other imaginable

self-designated spokesmen for any other conceivable organization of aggrieved victims.

My contribution to this particular discussion was to discover that the education publishing industry—including both the textbook publishers and the test publishers—had adopted internal guidelines that listed words, phrases, and representations of reality that were to be avoided. These guidelines included hundreds of words and scores of representations (otherwise known as “stereotypes”), and they were broadly disseminated, shared, and acted upon by private companies, as well as state and federal testing agencies. I called these behaviors censorship because the private companies were not acting of their own free will. They were taking steps to please state agencies and to qualify for state contracts. Most notably, the publishers were self-censoring in order to win contracts from state education departments in the big states that practice statewide adoption and purchasing.

Since the publication of *The Language Police*, I have learned a few things that merely add to my sense of outrage.

First, I found that the actual list of proscribed words and phrases was far larger than what I had originally reported. My glossary of banned words had only about 500 fairly well-known words that bias reviewers had decided to oust from common parlance, like “fireman” and “actress.” Several months after my book appeared, I received a set of guidelines used by the New York State Education Department that included a significant number of additional words that were deemed offensive; these guidelines were drawn from a book that contained literally thousands of words that were “biased.” It was clear to me that these trends, unchecked, would continue to eviscerate the expressive and denotative power of the English language.

Second, I discovered that there is no natural ally in the fight against the corruption of textbooks. In my book, I argued that the textbook adoption process should be eliminated because it provided a means for pressure groups that wanted to impose their political views on textbook publishers. I argued for a free market in the world of textbook publishing, where decisions about which book to buy were made by individual teachers or schools, not by state agencies. I imagined that the organization best suited to leading the fight against state regulation of textbook purchasing was the Association of American

Publishers (AAP), which represents the industry. That organization, I felt sure, would be in the forefront of freedom to publish and therefore prepared to oppose a process that allowed state bureaucrats and political pressure groups to demand revisions of content.

Unfortunately, I was wrong. When I spoke to the annual meeting of the Association of American Publishers in February 2004, I urged them to assume the leadership of the fight against state textbook adoptions because of the censorship pressures exerted on publishers. They listened politely; a few publishers at the meeting agreed with me. But the organization itself, I discovered (by reading its reports on lobbying activities in the states) was actively working to block any legislative efforts to weaken or abandon state textbook adoptions. At the AAP meeting, some publishers worried that states might reduce their textbook spending if there were no adoption process, but there is no evidence that adoption states spend more per pupil than non-adoption states, called “open territories.” The AAP, sadly, uses its considerable clout to protect the adoption process in the big states that benefits a very small number of publishing giants and disadvantages a large number of small publishers who simply cannot afford to meet the expensive requirements of the process and to break into the textbook market.

Third, the politically correct censorship of education materials does not end in the classroom. My readers have told me of innumerable instances of similar censorship in children’s trade publishing, in college textbooks, in hymnals, and in other arenas of publishing as well.

I continue to read textbooks, especially history textbooks, and to be deeply dismayed by their abysmally dumb and oversimplified content. I do not gainsay the difficulty of writing a comprehensive textbook of U.S. or world history, but it is shocking to see how thin is the content presented to American students, whether in elementary school, junior high, or high school. Recently, when reading the report of the 9/11 Commission, I was impressed by its terse history of Islamic fundamentalism. It was accurate, dramatic, and informative. What struck me was recalling that in any high school textbook in either U.S. or world history, the same subject is usually given only a paragraph or a sentence. How can our young people possibly be prepared to

understand international events when they are given so little background and context?

The lack of any advocacy group that brings citizens together to demand action on the recommendations of this report continues to be a problem. I have had literally hundreds of emails from readers who wanted to know, “Where can I join up to be part of this movement?” It was embarrassing to acknowledge that no such organization exists. It should.

I hope that this edifying and comprehensive study of the politics of textbook adoption, elegantly prepared by David Whitman, will bring us closer to the day when state policymakers recognize that they must eliminate state textbook adoption altogether. There is no good reason for the state to restrain competition and to provide a platform for every grievance group that wants to exclude whatever they don’t like from textbooks. There is no good reason for state interference in the educational materials marketplace, other than to offer research-based information about which textbooks are of the highest quality, gauged solely by their effectiveness in helping children meet academic standards.

*Diane Ravitch
New York City
September 2004*

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THE MISSING SCHOOL REFORM LINK

In the last decade, education reformers have tackled many of the fundamental failings of American K-12 education. The explosion of charter schools, voucher programs, virtual schools, home schooling, statewide open enrollment, and other schooling options has introduced choice and competition. The standards and accountability movements, boosted by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, have obliged states to develop academic standards in core subjects, to test their students and schools, and to create rewards, incentives, sanctions, and interventions, all designed to boost academic achievement and school effectiveness. Yet in the midst of these ambitious efforts to remake the nation's public schools, one essential building block of student achievement has been left largely untouched: textbooks.

This omission by education reformers is surprising, given the outsized role that textbooks play in what students learn. "Next to the teacher," U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige asks rhetorically, "what could be more important than the quality of materials that students use?" In fact, textbooks have now become the *de facto* curriculum in many of our schools. A 2002 survey of elementary and high school teachers found that about 80 percent use textbooks in their classrooms. Nearly half of student class time was spent using textbooks. And those numbers, from a survey sponsored by the National Education Association and the Association of American Publishers, most likely *understate* teachers' and students' true dependence on textbooks. Shadow studies, which track teachers' activities during the school day, suggest that 80 to 90 percent of classroom and homework assignments are textbook-driven or textbook-centered. History and social studies teachers, for example, often rely almost exclusively on textbooks, instead of requiring students to review primary sources and read trade books by top historians.

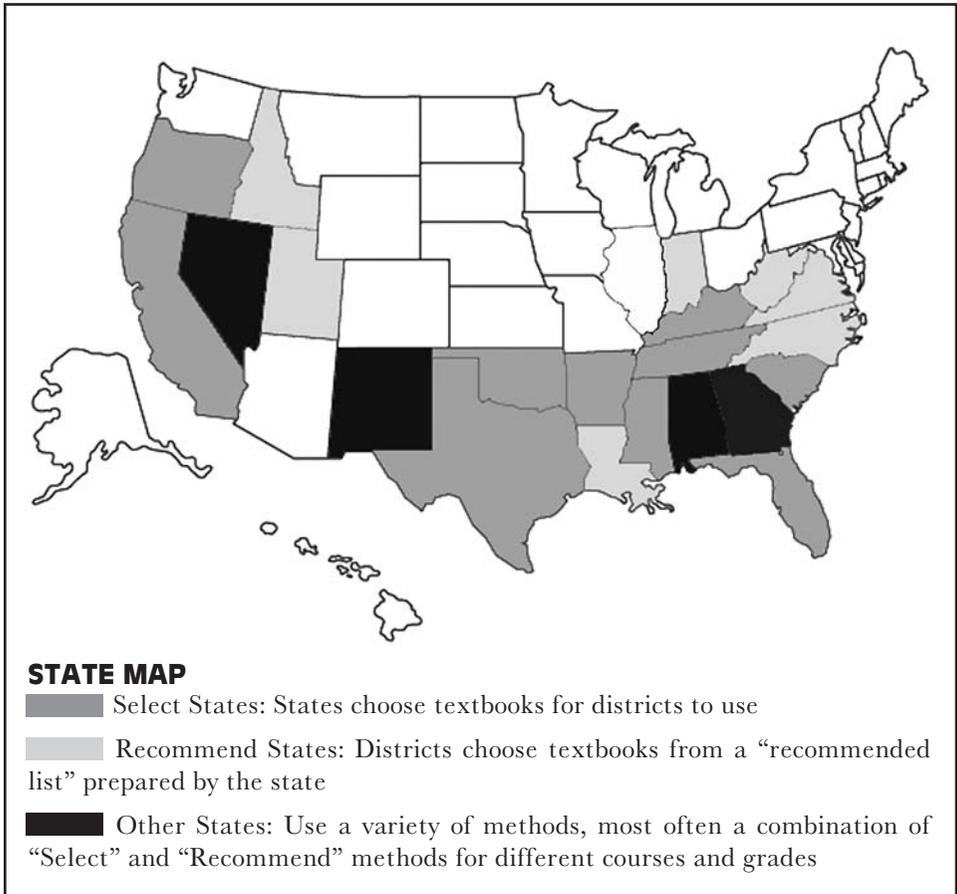
In light of this heavy reliance on textbooks to shape and convey

what teachers teach and students are supposed to learn, it's remarkable that so little attention has been paid to them. The painful truth is that today's textbooks fail students—and are directly implicated in the poor showing that U.S. youngsters make in international achievement tests. Several years ago, William Schmidt, professor at Michigan State and U.S. coordinator for the Third International Math and Science Study, examined the impact of curriculum on achievement in more than twenty-five nations and assessed the role that curriculum played in the test performance of U.S. students. He found that textbook content in different nations correlated closely to what their children learned—and how they fared on tests. U.S. math and science textbooks were hundreds of pages *longer* than those in other lands. But they were so dumbed down, and flitted so relentlessly from topic to topic, that American schoolchildren were learning less than their peers. In decimals and fractions, for example, eighth graders in Iran, Slovenia, Latvia, and Iceland made larger gains over the year using their textbooks than U.S. eighth graders. "This is the smoking gun," Schmidt observed. "Curriculum matters."

In other textbook-heavy areas of the curriculum, particularly history, the performance of American schoolchildren is every bit as disappointing. In both 1994 and 2001, more than half of high school seniors scored "below basic"—the lowest outcome possible—on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. history. High-school students routinely report that they are bored by their history classes. In the Valley Girl vernacular, history is "so yesterday." But it takes little imagination to see that student ignorance and disinterest are nurtured by boilerplate writing and chock-a-block, narrative-deprived textbooks. Not surprisingly, these glorified encyclopedias make poor nighttime-reading companions.

While textbooks have not topped reformers' educational agenda in recent years, the shortcomings and the failings of the industry that delivers textbooks into U.S. classrooms have not gone wholly unexamined. A half-dozen scholars and foundations have examined the state of textbook pedagogy. Book-length examinations have included Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, *A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco* (1988); Lee Burrell, *Battle of the Books* (1989); Joan Delfattore, *What Johnny Shouldn't Read* (1992); and James Loewen, *Lies*

My Teacher Told Me (1995). Many of these books are a decade old or more. (Older still—from 1979—was Frances FitzGerald’s important volume, *America Revised*.) More recently, Diane Ravitch’s definitive 2003 best seller, *The Language Police*, unearthed the secretive and often bizarre “bias and sensitivity” screenings that today’s textbooks undergo. At the same time, the American Association for the Advancement



of Science, the American Textbook Council, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have assembled expert panels to conduct studies of textbook content in specific subject areas.

Not all of these analysts share the same ideological stripes. James Loewen, for example, criticizes textbooks from the political left, as did FitzGerald, while Ravitch assails the excesses of both politically cor-

rect liberals and right-wing fundamentalists. Nevertheless, a collective consensus emerges from all these assessments that is astonishingly consistent. Every reviewer of American textbooks reports that they consist of politically blanched, dumbed-down text, larded with disconnected facts that are sometimes erroneous and not infrequently misleading. Invariably, today's textbooks are described as deadly bores, incapable of telling a story or providing a compelling narrative, and lacking any author's voice. Instead, students struggle through coffee-table-style textbooks, weighed down with graphics, editorial cartoons, sidebars, color illustrations, boxes, and goofy exercises. These doorstoppers—which average 750 to 1100 pages in length—are so heavy that the Consumer Product Safety Commission has warned that an “overweight backpack” phenomenon may be sending thousands of children to emergency rooms with back and neck injuries. Gone are the days when, say, world-class historians like Richard Hofstadter, Henry Steele Commager, and Samuel Eliot Morison wrote engaging high school textbooks that were long on narrative and short on pages. In 2003, more than half-a-dozen states considered legislation to limit the size and weight of textbooks—surely a dubious moment in publishing history.

The content and marketing of today's textbooks are controlled by a highly dysfunctional government-run textbook adoption process. Twenty-one states now have a statewide textbook adoption process, in which a central textbook committee or the state department of education reviews, amends, and selects the textbooks that schools may purchase with public monies for students across the state. (Sometimes they allow local districts and individual schools to purchase other instructional materials with non-state resources.) The rest of the states are “open territories,” where districts can purchase textbooks of their own choosing. But since publishers naturally want to make their textbooks available in as many schools as possible, the adoption states that regulate textbooks effectively determine their content nationwide, particularly the huge adoption states of California and Texas. The K-12 textbook market is a big money maker for four mega-publishers, creating a powerful financial incentive not to mess with Texas—or California. Last year, sales of “el-hi” (elementary/high school) textbooks totaled \$4.29 billion, about a billion dollars more

than publishers received from higher-ed textbooks.

In practice, this textbook adoption process bears no relationship to the popular understanding of how schools pick their pupils' textbooks. As Ravitch has pointed out, virtually every assumption that people make about textbook development and selection turns out to be wrong. The conventional wisdom is that a scholar toils in a library or his study to synthesize and distill centuries of history, literature, or science into a learned and well-written textbook. Publishers test textbooks to see if they successfully engage students and effectively boost achievement, and they review manuscripts to ensure that the content is accurate and up-to-date. Teachers then review the leading textbooks in their field and pick those that they judge best suited for their students.

If only it were so. The truth is that textbooks are hurriedly put together by teams of hack writers from "development houses," known in the el-hi world as "chop shops." Publishers are preoccupied with scrubbing textbooks of any references that adoption panels in California and Texas might object to, while at the same time scrambling to add state-endorsed keywords, figures from history, and visual aids to ensure their spots on the adoption lists of those states. Quantity trumps, quality gets bumped. In adoption states, Johnny's teacher doesn't pick the textbook at all—or if she does, it's from a short list of survivors of the adoption gantlet. Nationwide, only about one in four teachers say they pick the textbooks used in their own classrooms.

The conclusions of studies of textbook adoption are well captured in the opening sentences of Harriet Tyson-Bernstein's 1988 book for the Council on Basic Education, *A Conspiracy of Good Intentions*. Her theme, still pertinent today, is that textbook adoption has evolved into a classic tale of unintended consequences:

Imagine a public policy system that is perfectly designed to produce textbooks that confuse, mislead, and profoundly bore students. . . . Publishers and editors are virtually compelled by public policies and practices to create textbooks that confuse students with non-sequiturs, that mislead them with misinformation, and that

profoundly bore them with pointlessly arid writing. None of the adults in this very complex system intends this outcome. To the contrary, each of them wants to produce good effects, and each public policy, regulation, or conventional practice was intended to make some improvement or prevent some abuse. But the cumulative effects of well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable state and local regulation are textbooks that squander the intellectual capital of our youth.

Though the textbook adoption process is deeply flawed, of all the problems facing American education today this one *ought* to be among the more easily solved. It would not cost very much. Unlike some education reforms that might be prohibitively expensive, states spend relatively little on K-12 textbooks: from a high of 2.3 percent of total education expenditures to a low of 0.5 percent, according to the Association of American Publishers' school division. On average, states spend 0.95 percent of their education budgets on textbooks—not quite a penny of every educational dollar. No, cost is not the obstacle to reforming the textbook adoption process. More than anything else, reform requires two no-cost items: A willingness to challenge the status quo, and a commitment to more demanding curricula for American school children.

Roots of the Textbook Mess

The textbook adoption process was, in effect, born to twist American history and frustrate the development of a common civic purpose. Its origins trace to the aftermath of the Civil War, when most publishers had their headquarters in the North. Embittered ex-Confederates distrusted Yankee publishers and wanted Dixie schoolchildren to have their own textbooks—so southern states established textbook adoption processes to make sure anti-Confederate books stayed out of their schools. Northern publishers obligingly complied, publishing separate textbooks for schools in the South and North. For decades, Southern textbooks referred to the Civil War as “the War for Southern Independence” or “the War between the States.” Today, nearly 150 years later, most adoption states are still located in the South and West.

The early development of the textbook adoption process also set two other precedents that figure importantly in today's system. The first trend emerged after World War I, when immigrants and interest groups attacked that era's schoolbooks for failing to include their stories in the American odyssey. German Americans and Irish Americans complained, as did Jewish Americans. The American Federation of Labor fought to have organized labor portrayed more favorably. The American Legion contended that textbooks lacked patriotic fervor. In the 1950s, during the height of the Cold War, the Daughters of the American Revolution put out a list of 170 "subversive" textbooks. These were the first stirrings of "identity politics" in textbook adoption—which have now reached full fruition with bias guidelines in California that require precise proportionality in the portrayal of ethnic groups, genders, different types of families, the elderly, the disabled, religions, organized labor, and the like.

The second precedent was created by Christian fundamentalists who objected to science instructors teaching the theory of evolution. In the 1920s, more than twenty states passed anti-evolution resolutions. Perhaps the most famous textbook challenge in U.S. history took place in the mid-1920s during the "Scopes trial," when a substitute biology teacher named John Thomas Scopes challenged Tennessee's so-called "monkey law" barring the teaching of evolution. The trial featured sparring between Scopes's legendary lawyer, Clarence Darrow, and Tennessee's attorney, famed orator William Jennings Bryan. Scopes was convicted (though his conviction was later overturned on a technicality) but Darrow's biting cross-examination of Bryan did much to discredit the creationists. Six decades later, Christian fundamentalists renewed their attacks on the teaching of evolution and other "secular humanist" subjects and topics—and ultimately succeeded in having an important influence on textbook adoption in Texas.

California's Sensitive Guidelines

In the mid-1970s, California took the lead in modern-day textbook adoption reform. As Frances FitzGerald documented in her 1979 book, *America Revised*, textbooks from the 1950s and 1960s were overloaded with patriotic pablum, at the cost of honest examination of where the nation had failed to live up to its creed of equality. Women and

immigrants were largely invisible in history textbooks, and the settlers' brutal treatment of Native Americans was minimized. African Americans seemed to appear in history textbooks only as slaves, and the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade were papered over. After Vietnam, the feminist movement, and the race riots of the 1960s, textbooks desperately needed revision and updating to eliminate stereotypes and sexist or racist language.

To redress the use of stereotypes, California enacted its well-intentioned "social content standards" in 1976. These required the state textbook review committee to approve only instructional materials that "accurately portray the cultural and racial diversity of our society, including the contributions of both men and women in all types of roles . . . [and the] contributions of American Indians, American Negroes, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and members of other ethnic and cultural groups." No textbook could contain "any matter reflecting adversely upon any person because of their race, color, creed, national origin, ancestry, [or] sex." In addition to multicultural tolerance, textbooks had to accurately portray the roles of labor and entrepreneurs, and the necessity to protect the environment. The books also had to encourage thrift, fire prevention, and humane treatment of animals. At the behest of health food groups, California enacted "the junk food rule," which discouraged the depiction and mention in schoolbooks of foods with little nutritional value.

At first glance, California's social content standards—at least as applied to minorities and women—appeared to be a common sense and overdue effort to redress the use of stereotypes and prejudicial language. No doubt, in the early years, those guidelines did force publishers to eliminate racist and sexist stereotypes. But the implementation of the social content standards by the California department of education in its "legal compliance reviews" soon outstripped common sense. Since nothing could reflect "adversely" on any group, even, say, a reference to Hell's Angels would have to cite the motorcycle gang's positive contributions. The state education department also interpreted the law to mean that ethnicity, gender, and orientation had to be portrayed in an "equitable way" (not just accurately), which led both the state and ethnic and feminist groups to count and categorize every reference to men, women, people with disabilities, members of ethnic

groups, and the like. A selection in a reader, or chapter in a social studies textbook, might lack literary quality or skew history. But if it had the right numerical balance of genders and minorities, the textbook could be approved. If, however, it contained elegant writing and classic stories, yet failed to adhere to the multicultural bean-counting rules, it could be rejected.

Among the first books to be challenged under California's standards were the Holt Basic Reading series, which the National Organization of Women attacked as sexist. A California multiculturalist group also criticized the books as racist, objecting to phrases like "the deputy's face darkened" and "the afternoon turned black." Chastened Holt editors quickly regrouped and determined that the next edition would have at least 50 percent females and depict members of minority groups based on their precise percentages in the population. Diane Ravitch reports that the Holt editors "agreed they would show American Indians in business suits. . . . Girls would be pictured fixing a bicycle tire, not looking for a boy to do it, and a 'Caucasian boy or man would be shown unashamedly crying if the situation were appropriate.' Girls would be seen working with electricity, studying insects, and solving math problems, while boys would read poetry, chase butterflies, and pay attention to their appearance."

After stories in the readers were rewritten to change the sex and ethnicity of heroes to heroines—Judy Blume's story "Freddie in the Middle" became "Maggie in the Middle"—the Holt editors submitted revised editions of the readers in 1977 to the California state board. One editor who had to count the sex of each character in one volume wrote a relieved memo stating, "The in-house count shows 146 female and 146 male characters, or a ratio of 1:1. Animal characters were not included in this count." Yet this editor's celebration was premature. At adoption hearings in Texas in 1980, the education task force of NOW attacked the Holt readers because, they said, when animal characters were added in, males outnumbered females by 2:1. "Children of this age are influenced by a story about Mr. Rabbit just as much as they are by a story about Mrs. Jones," one feminist critic declared.

The message sent to publishers was unmistakable: Hew carefully to our rules or your book may get rejected in the biggest textbook markets in the United States. One publisher was told that California's

junk food rule mandated removal of an illustration of a birthday party because children were depicted around a cake, which lacked sufficient nutritional value. A story entitled “A Perfect Day for Ice Cream” was changed in junior high anthologies to “A Perfect Day”; publishers deleted all references to chili burgers, pizza, and ice cream to avoid running afoul of California law. Another publisher changed the sex of the engine in *The Little Engine That Could* from male to female after state evaluators said the story was gender imbalanced. Even math books were studded with female and minority characters to illustrate what was sometimes called “Rainforest Algebra.” A 1998 third grade math book from Scott-Foresman lists no fewer than twenty-one multicultural advisors on its front page.

Once this Orwellian system of textbook review was in place, it set a precedent that made it impossible to satisfy every ethnic, religious, and age group. When California issued a new history framework in the late 1980s, Houghton Mifflin proposed a textbook series for K-8 students by a lead author, UCLA professor Gary Nash. Nash happened to be an outspoken left-wing critic of “triumphant” American history textbooks and may have been the nation’s leading multicultural historian-advocate. His series for Houghton Mifflin is surely among the most ethnically and culturally diverse American history textbooks ever written. But even this wasn’t enough. Nash was denounced throughout California for being hopelessly Eurocentric. At public hearings on the Nash series, Ravitch reports that:

A spokeswoman for the Hoopa, Yurok, and Karok tribes of Northern California complained that the books misinterpreted Indian religions. Muslim groups claimed that the books misrepresented their religion and that only a Muslim could write an accurate account of Muslim history. Chinese Americans said that the books marginalized Chinese people. Japanese Americans said that the books should have referred to World War II internment camps for Japanese Americans as “concentration camps.” Gays claimed that the books failed to name homosexual public figures who might serve as role models. The anti-gay Traditional Values Coalition

insisted the books were anti-Christian. An African American member of the state curriculum commission charged that the books were written from the perspective of slave masters, immigrants, and Pilgrims; some black educators demanded the adoption of Afrocentric textbooks to show that ancient Egypt was a black African nation and the source of all civilization's greatest advances. Latinos carped about under-representation. Jewish groups said the book expressed a Christian point of view, showing Judaism as a way station toward Christianity. Atheists objected that there was too much text devoted to religion in history.

In 1990, after Houghton Mifflin made dozens of revisions to Nash's textbooks to appease feminists, and ethnic and religious activists, the state board of education finally approved the series. But by that time, publishers themselves had learned to anticipate the objections that California might raise—and had formulated their own bias/sensitivity guidelines. In effect, publishers agreed to censor their own textbooks *before* they showed them to state officials. As Ravitch details in *The Language Police*, the self-censorship of the publishers' bias guidelines was often more radical—and far more detailed—than even California's social content standards.

One publisher's bias guidelines (Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley) fill 161 pages. They state that company textbooks must include illustrations of tall and short people, heavy and thin individuals, people with disabilities, and families headed by two parents, by one parent, by grandparents, by aunts/uncles, and by other adults. When writing about the development of the U.S. Constitution, authors are directed to cite the dubious claim that it was patterned "partially after the League of Five Nations—a union formed by five Iroquois nations." It is also taboo to mention the academic achievement of Asian American students, since this might suggest that Asian Americans are "studious" or a "model minority." To ward off any hint of geographic chauvinism, rival Harcourt's bias guidelines even direct writers to avoid using the word "America" unless it is qualified by North, South, or Central. One must be specific, authors are informed, because there is

no place simply “called America.”

Though on the long side, the Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley bias rules are very much in keeping with the robotic egalitarian spirit of other publishers’ guidelines. McGraw-Hill’s direct illustrators to replace women who are depicted as secretaries, nurses, librarians, tellers, or teachers by women doctors, police officers, managers, and construction workers. Men should be portrayed as nurses, secretaries, and elementary school teachers. As Ravitch notes, McGraw-Hill is really directing its artists “to tell lies about history. Until the latter decades of the 20th century, most women who worked were in fact nurses, teachers, and secretaries. . . . To pretend otherwise is to falsify the past. It minimizes the barriers that women faced.”

Earlier this year, at a Cato Institute forum on textbook adoption in Washington, D.C., Ravitch summed up the current phoniness and reflexive political correctness of sensitivity guidelines by referring to what might be called the “up on the roof” test for illustrators. It is impermissible now to “show an older person seeming old,” Ravitch observed. “The thing with older people is that we’re really vigorous, and the best way to portray a person who is older is preferably in a jogging suit. That’s the main thing we like to do.” The other activity that old people do in textbooks, Ravitch said, “is to get up on the roof a lot. Either the mother is up there, or the old people are up there. But Heaven forbid that the young men should be up there—they’re being nurses and secretaries and teachers.”

The Texas Traditionalists

The liberalization and multicultural additions to textbooks in the 1970s set off a backlash among Christian fundamentalists in the 1980s. Organizations on the religious right, such as Focus on the Family, Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum, and Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority pressured school districts and supported a series of local lawsuits to have “immoral” textbooks dropped from school curricula. Harking back to the Scopes trial, several southern states passed laws requiring “balanced treatment” of evolution and creationism that endured until a 1987 Supreme Court decision striking down Louisiana’s statute put an end to the legislative challenges to evolution.

The religious right's indictment of school textbooks was every bit as sweeping, and in many respects as extreme, as the left's multicultural critique. None of the court challenges mounted by the religious right received more national attention than a Tennessee case, *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*, initiated by fundamentalist parents in 1983. The parents objected to the Holt reading series that, before its revisions, had been denounced by liberals just a few years earlier. In her careful history, *What Johnny Shouldn't Read*, Joan Delfattore provides a summary of the extraordinary array of objections that parents raised in *Mozert*:

In order to protect their children from ideas they considered harmful, the *Mozert* plaintiffs attacked every item in the Holt reading series that could conceivably start a discussion about world unity, nontraditional gender roles, family democracy, moral relativity, the brotherhood of man, nonreligious views of death, imagination, reason, neutral descriptions of religion, skeptical references to religion, critical views of the founders or policies of the United States, socialism, social protest, universal communication, magic, imaginary beings, environmentalism, kindness toward animals, vegetarianism, negative views of war or hunting, fear of nuclear war, disarmament, or gun control. Despite their variety, all of these objections share the same roots: dependence on biblical authority as opposed to any form of logic, creativity, self-reliance, or self-definition; and total commitment to one religious and culture group, to the exclusion of globalism and multiculturalism.

At bottom, the fundamentalists who launched the textbook challenges of the 1980s opposed the time-honored view that a central purpose of schooling was to teach children to think for themselves. The *Mozert* plaintiffs, for example, opposed the inclusion of *The Wizard of Oz* in the Holt readers. At the start of the tale, the Lion wants courage, the Tin Man needs a heart, and the Scarecrow wants a brain. By showing bravery, compassion, and intelligence, the Lion, the Tin Man, and

the Scarecrow each make their wish come true. For fundamentalist parents, the flaw in the fable was that none of the committed trio prayed to God for the power to change. Salvation, in the protesters' view, could only come from Christ, not from human effort. The Holt readers were also attacked as immoral and anti-Christian because they included stories where misbehaving youngsters were not always punished. "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" offended these parents because, as Delfattore summed up, "Goldilocks gets away scot-free after committing illegal entry, petty larceny of porridge, and vandalism of Baby Bear's stool."

Many of the objections to "anti-Christian" material showed the same hypersensitivity, the same eagerness to transform the ordinary into the offensive that liberals displayed in California. One story in the Holt readers, "Benjamin Franklin Flies his Kite," recited the droll epitaph of the famed inventor and author: "The Body of B. Franklin, Printer, Like the cover of an Old Book, Its contents torn out and stript of its lettering and gilding, lies here, food for worms. But the Work shall not be lost: For it will, as he believed, appear once more, In a new and more Elegant Edition, Revised and Corrected by the Author." In the Holt reader, a fictional journalist, commenting on Franklin's epitaph, wonders whether Franklin perhaps believed in reincarnation. But no true Christian could speculate about reincarnation, according to the fundamentalist protesters. Thus "Benjamin Franklin Flies His Kite," said the *Mozert* plaintiffs, taught that Franklin was Hindu—and would therefore lessen children's pride in America by making them think one of the nation's founders was a Hindu, too.

More than a few conservative columnists, including George Will and James J. Kilpatrick, scoffed at such complaints about textbooks, and fundamentalists eventually lost virtually every court case that their various organizations brought to reject or alter the school books. Still, the religious right ultimately won important victories in the textbook wars. Holt made numerous revisions to the Basic Reading Series that spawned the *Mozert* case to reduce the taint of "secular humanism," and then quietly let the readers go out of print. A successor series from Holt called "Impressions," which had unusually high literary quality, was also abandoned in the mid-1990s after the religious right objected to the inclusion of a small number of classic fairy tales

that referred to magic, monsters, and witches. In fact, by the start of the 1990s, publishers had already added the concerns of the religious right to their bias and sensitivity guidelines, self-censoring textbooks and readers so as to avoid controversy and attacks from fundamentalists. Textbooks would henceforth refer only to the positive contributions that religion has made to history, and no longer suggest that religious belief has also been the cause of violence, strife, and war. This interpretation of religion's role over the centuries was patently phony, as events in the Middle East, Ireland, and elsewhere demonstrate almost on a daily basis. Unfortunately, once truth and scholarship in textbooks took a back seat to pleasing pressure groups, the biggest losers were the students.

The religious right also ended up influencing textbook content indirectly by having a lasting impact in Texas, the second largest adoption state in the country. Like California, Texas had statutory provisions that prohibited the adoption of instructional materials that showed bias toward any particular group or presented genders and ethnicity in stereotypical roles. But unlike California, Texas did not have extended "social content" guidelines—and other provisions of state law were actually a throwback to the cheerleader textbook era of the 1950s. Textbooks were required to promote "understanding of the essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, and emphasize patriotism and respect for recognized authority." Nor could textbooks "encourage life styles deviating from generally accepted standards of society." As much as California was renowned for its left-wing textbook critics, Texas was every bit as identified with right-wing activists, particularly Mel and Norma Gabler and the Texas Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The Gablers had been a husband-wife cottage industry of textbook criticism since the early 1960s, when they first became disturbed by the lack of emphasis on states' rights in one of their son's high school textbooks. Each year, for several decades running, they prepared long lists of particulars, opposing virtually every textbook put up for adoption in Texas. They alleged that the textbooks were unpatriotic, humanistic, anti-creationist, or anti-religious. When the Holt Basic Reading Series was challenged by the religious right in *Mozert*, the Gablers were there to lend their support and expertise. (The Gablers,

using their organizational name Educational Research Analysts, had already submitted seventy-six pages of objections to the Holt readers.) The Texas state textbook committee ignored many of the Gablers' requests for changes. But the requests were so voluminous that the Gablers' low batting average in a big adoption state still meant that the couple could effectively influence textbook content nationwide. The Gablers, for example, disliked federal social programs in general and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in particular. At their urging, the Texas adoption committee ordered one publisher to remove mention of the New Deal from a textbook timeline of events in American history.

Over the years, the Gablers were often seconded at textbook hearings by representatives of the Texas Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (TSDAR). In 1988, a TSDAR representative submitted about ninety pages of comments on the literature books proposed for use that year. Many of its objections, as with the Gablers, bore a close resemblance to the alarmist critique of the religious right. Delfattore notes, for example, that the TSDAR representative warned that "Jonathan Swift's 18th century satire 'A Modest Proposal' will incite Texas youth to eat people. John Hersey's 'Hiroshima' should be balanced by an account of the bombing of the *Arizona*. Poems by African Americans about racism are Communist propaganda. . . . *Romeo and Juliet* promotes teenage suicide. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is unacceptable because it is sad."

The Center Cannot Hold

As TSDAR's objections illustrate, the religious right, much like the politically correct left, wants to fill the role of thought police. But censoring the truth and stamping happy faces on controversial but important topics is wrong, whether the ink pad is owned by conservatives or liberals. Diane Ravitch lamented the pattern of conspiratorial denial among members of the religious right at the Cato Institute when she observed, "You can't show a picture that shows a rainbow [anymore]. Why? Someone might think that's a gay agenda. . . . You can't have pictures that show an udder on a cow. Why? It's too sexual. This is ridiculous."

For all intents and purposes, the politics of textbook adoption are

now effectively controlled by left- and right-wing extremists. In all but a few instances, political moderates, earnest teachers, and ordinary education-minded parents are absent from state hearings on textbook adoption. And unlike the case, say, of university-level textbooks and trade books, there is no professional or scholarly truth squad reviewing K-12 textbooks to see that they are historically accurate, of high literary quality, compellingly told, and promote learning. (A few small organizations such as the Textbook League and American Textbook Council do good work but enjoy little visibility or impact.) In place of an independent review process, a coalition of strange bedfellows from the politically correct left and the morally correct right zealously monitor textbook content.

The extremists of both sides could not disagree more about the issues. Yet both share common assumptions about textbooks and their impact on children's minds. As Joan Delfattore has written, "politically correct extremists, like their fundamentalist counterparts, operate on the assumption that education has two functions: to describe what should be rather than what is, and to reverse the injustices of yesterday's society by shaping the attitudes of tomorrow's." Yet the role of textbooks is not to return children to an Ozzie and Harriet past, nor to bring students to an egalitarian future, where everyone merrily marches to his own drummer. Textbooks are not meant to be didactic agents of salvation. They are meant to help children understand the world as it is, and why it is.

The politically correct left and the religious right similarly share the conviction that children are easily led astray and unable to think for themselves. Thus, students who read stories with ice cream and chili burgers will feel compelled to gorge themselves at fast food restaurants. And students who read *Romeo and Juliet* will go forth and commit suicide. Children, in other words, are sheep. This view would no doubt surprise tens of millions of parents. But even if children are fragile flowers, the attempts of the "thought police" to censor their exposure to the world are hopelessly naïve. Through the media of movies, television, and Internet games, children today are inevitably exposed to, even immersed in, all of the textbook unmentionables, from violence, homosexuality, and divorce to junk food, Islamic terrorists, and "stereotypes" about black athletes and high-achieving Asian American students.

In short, textbooks today are trapped in an ideological straitjacket that, in contrast to the surrounding popular culture, restricts content and sterilizes social realities. Yet virtually all of the parties who monitor textbook content have made a separate peace with the adoption process. Fundamentalists are happy because textbooks airbrush religion and avoid topics that upset the religious right. Multiculturalists are pleased because all cultures and ethnicities are represented and treated as though they have equal historical significance. Feminists prize the unisex language. And publishers, like puppies sent to obedience school, have developed their own bias guidelines to pre-empt controversy and avoid potential challenges from right or left—before the choke collar gets pulled.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan might observe that textbook reform has become a classic case of the perfect becoming the enemy of the good, with the right and left forming an unholy coalition to block reforms, while the center falls apart. This polarization, as chapter three examines in greater detail, has made many K-12 textbooks unreadable, incoherent, dishonest, and boring. The impact on textbook content of this unspoken left-wing/right-wing alliance brings to mind an old Woody Allen joke: If you could combine the conservative magazine *Commentary* with the left-wing journal *Dissent*, the resulting publication could only be called *Dysentery*.

2

INSIDE THE ADOPTION PROCESS

The twenty-one states that currently have statewide adoption policies are mainly in the South and West and are dominated by California, Texas, and Florida, which account for as much as a third of the nation's \$4.3 billion K-12 textbook market. Few elite textbook publishers can afford to spend millions of dollars developing a textbook series and *not* have it adopted in these high-volume states. Publishers stand to make or lose a fortune in these states; California, for example, spent \$442 million on K-8 textbooks in 1998-1999 (though textbook spending in California has plummeted in the wake of the state's recent budget crisis).

On the whole, the adoption process is similar in California and Texas. In both states, publishers present their wares at public hearings to members of a textbook review committee, which also hears testimony from representatives of advocacy groups. The textbook committee members, many of them teachers from around the state, review the instructional materials to see if they accord with state standards on content and match up with state curriculum guidelines. Committee members are wooed by publishers' sales representatives, who sometimes offer free trips, special seminars, innumerable sample books, and other perks. The committee then makes recommendations to the state board of education, which usually consists of elected and/or appointed members who are not specialists in history, reading, math, or science. The state board then makes the final decision whether to accept or reject a book, or perhaps adopt it contingent upon the publisher making specified changes.

The adoption process in California and Texas differs in two important respects. First, as noted earlier, California has prescriptive "social content" requirements while Texas has historically favored patriotic and socially conservative books. And California adopts textbooks statewide only for grades K-8, while Texas adopts for grades K-12—

which gives Texas a disproportionate impact on high-school textbooks nationwide.

In the abstract, the adoption process sounds innocuous. Yet just about every scholar and analyst who has reviewed its workings has panned it. The best that can be said about statewide textbook adoption, according to these reviewers, is that textbook committees sometimes catch factual errors (e.g., the U.S. did not drop an atomic bomb on Korea), and that the tight deadlines of the adoption process put pressure on publishers to keep textbooks up-to-date. No one, however, has suggested that textbook adoption strengthens student learning or raises academic achievement.

The distressing but little-known truth is that nearly all of the states where students perform poorly on achievement tests are adoption states—while almost all of the top-performing states are open territory states, where school districts are free to select their own textbooks and other instructional materials. On the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fourth grade math test, for example, eleven of the fifteen lowest-scoring states were adoption states. The same number were among the fifteen lowest-scoring states on the 2003 fourth grade NAEP in reading (both Texas and California were among the states at the bottom; see page 23). Similar results were found on the eighth grade tests (see pages 29 and 31). And the pattern holds for the past several NAEP administrations in reading and math (see appendix beginning on page 70).

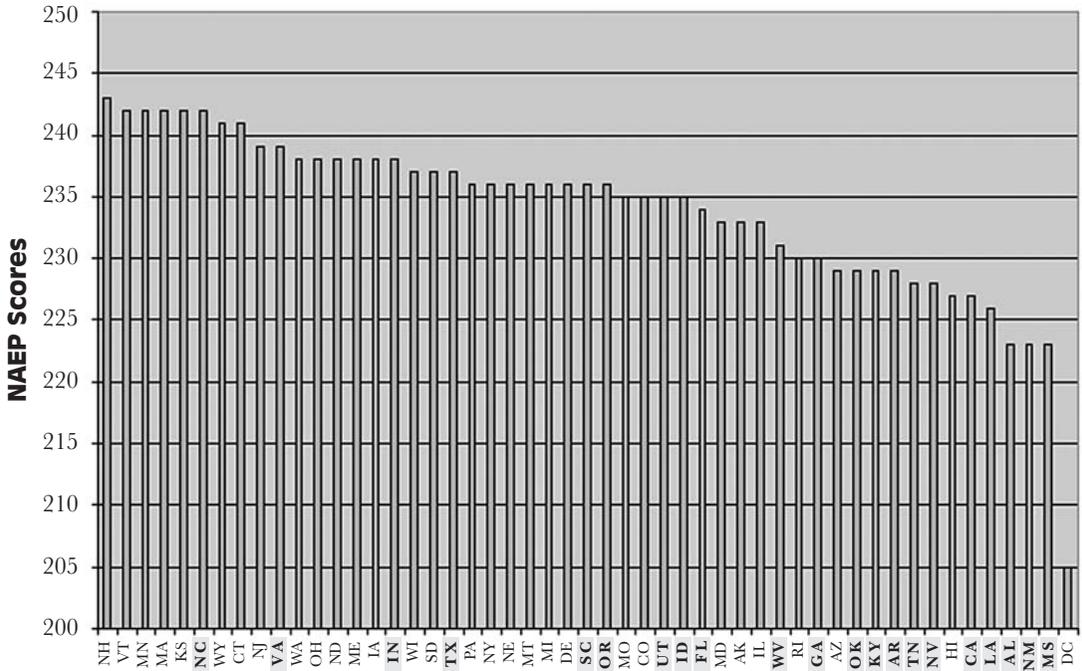
The consistent cellar-dwellers include adoption states such as California, Nevada, Alabama, New Mexico, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas. Also among the consistently low-scoring states are Arizona and Hawaii, two states that have some history of involvement with textbook adoption. (Arizona began to loosen its adoption process gradually in the late 1970s, slowly giving districts more autonomy, until adoption disappeared entirely in the early 1990s. Hawaii operates like an adoption state, since it has but a single school district and thus any books chosen at the district level are, in effect, adopted statewide.) By contrast, most of the consistently high-scoring states are open territory states: Vermont, Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska, Maine, Kansas, Missouri, and North Dakota. Only two adoption states

consistently post high scores on the NAEP: Virginia and North Carolina.

The breakdown of scores by adoption and non-adoption status on the 2003 NAEP is not new. On average, from 1992 to 2002, eight of the top ten states on the fourth grade NAEP tests were open territories, and nine in ten of the lowest scoring states were adoption states. The pattern is exactly the same among eighth graders from 1992 to 2002. (See the appendix beginning on page 70.)

Obviously, textbook adoption is hardly the only factor in these states' low academic performance, and the absence of adoption does not alone explain the relatively stronger performance of other states.

2003 4th Grade NAEP Math Scores—All States



*Adoption states are highlighted.

But this decade-long record of academic mediocrity is hardly an endorsement of statewide textbook adoption. It may not account for low scores but it obviously doesn't lead to high scores. California even had to postpone its high school exit exam for two years recently

because the state could not prove that it had given seniors the required “opportunity to learn” the curriculum and skills on which they were to be tested. Simply put, too many students would have failed the exam.

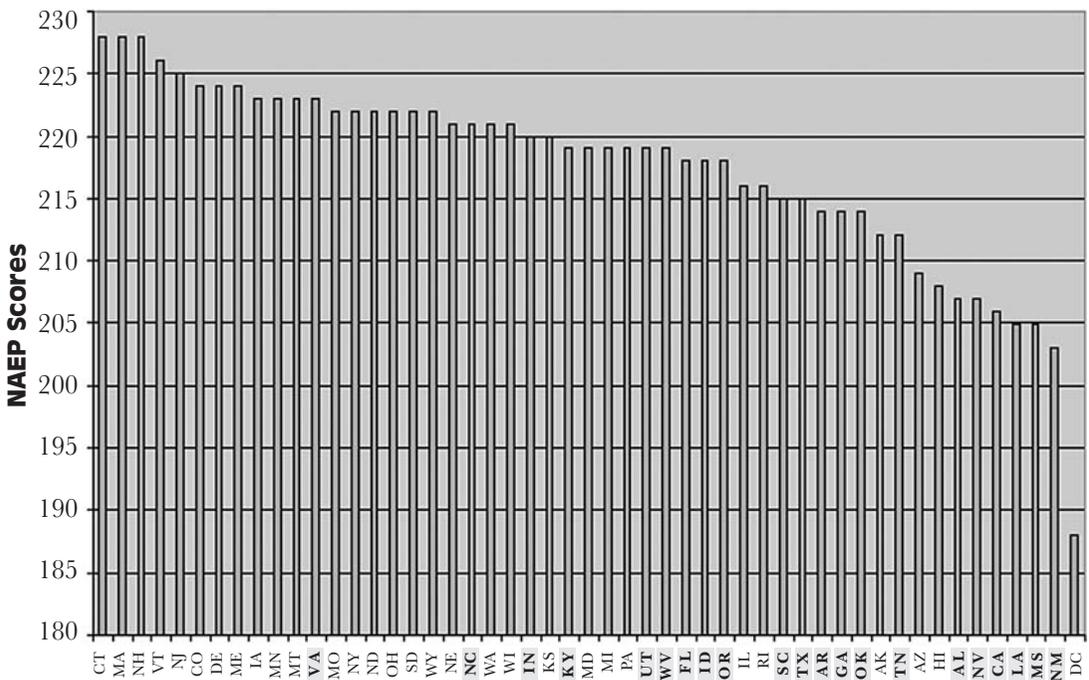
The long history of textbook adoption has also created a self-sustaining inertia and fatalism, even in states that change their guidelines. In 1995, the Texas legislature revised adoption laws so that textbooks could only be challenged for factual inaccuracies or failing to comply with the state’s curriculum standards. But textbook adoption continues to be politicized in Texas, and publishers continue to cater to the Lone Star State’s traditional sensibilities. Diane Ravitch reports that publishers cut or revised language numerous times before submitting textbooks to the Texas 2002 adoption process. Examples of the publishers’ Texas two-step that year, according to Ravitch, included:

[One] headline in [an] 11th grade American history textbook read: “An Awful Human Trade: In West Africa, an alleged slave-ship snafu reflects the trauma of an ongoing business of marketing children as forced labor.” The editor [for a publishing house] deleted it with a comment: “Too depressing and portrays Africans negatively.” A headline in a 12th grade history textbook read: “Death Stalks a Continent: In the dry timber of African societies, AIDS was a spark. The conflagration it set off continues to kill millions.” The editor deleted it with the comment: “Too full of inappropriate issues; too negative, we don’t want to portray Africa as AIDS-ridden”. . . . In a science textbook, editors rejected this statement: “A scientific panel says fossil fuels are the main culprit in Earth’s heating up.” The comment: “We’d never be adopted in Texas.”

The most outrageous sanitizing of material pertained to Matthew Shepard, the University of Wyoming student who was tied to a fence, tortured, and beaten to death because he was gay. Ravitch reports that, in the textbook industry, there is still a love that dares not speak its name:

An article written for a twelfth-grade textbook had this headline: “To Be Young and Gay in Wyoming: Despite its dangers, Matthew Shepard loved his home state. Now he is part of its legacy.” The editor wrote: “Even though the article focuses on tolerance and acceptance, Shepard’s homosexuality can’t be mentioned. Can you redo the article so that Shepard’s sexuality is ignored”?

2003 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores—All States



*Adoption states are highlighted.

The Mad, Mad World of Adoption Reviews

Participants in textbook committee reviews and scholars who have studied textbook selection describe a counterproductive and almost surreal process—one bearing little resemblance to the business-as-usual routines that publishers are advised to follow in state manuals.

Studies have consistently documented three fatal flaws:

1. Textbooks are not actually carefully reviewed—and sometimes are not read at all. Instead, they are scrutinized against superficial “checklist” criteria.

2. Committee members do not review schoolbooks to see whether they “work” as education tools. Publishers do not have to show that their books help students retain knowledge and raise achievement, or even field test instructional materials first to see how well they function in real classrooms.

3. The review process almost inevitably drives publishers and states to embrace the lowest common denominator in textbook content.

It should hardly bear repeating, but the obvious starting point for adoption reviews should be that textbook committee members actually *read* the books they are purporting to review. In most cases, this proves impossible—there are simply too many tomes to pore through and ponder in the time allotted. In the mid-1960s, the Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman was asked to sit on California’s committee to review new math textbooks. After agreeing, he was telephoned by the state book depository and told that the new textbooks were ready to be shipped to him for review—all 300 pounds of them. More recently, James Loewen spent the better part of ten years reviewing twelve textbooks that averaged 888 pages apiece for his 1995 book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Loewen concluded from his experience that textbook “committees face a Herculean task . . . in a single summer [textbook reviewers] cannot even read all the books, let alone compare them meaningfully.”

The consequence of reading overload is that committee members must indulge in various gimmicks and fictions. After attending a few committee meetings, Feynman discovered that other members farmed out the reading of textbooks to teachers and professors in the community. Then, instead of reading the text and reaching their own judgments, they simply averaged out the responses they got from their “readers.” In a wry essay about his experiences entitled “Judging Books By Their Covers,” Feynman reported that he determined to slog through all of the textbooks and rate them himself. But to his astonishment, he discovered at one committee meeting that six of the ten committee members had given ratings to a math book that only had

blank pages in it (the publisher had failed to complete the textbook in time to get it to the state book depository). In an ultimate act of absurdity, the math book with blank pages was rated higher than volumes one and two in the same series.

Even the ambitious reviewer who manages to read all the textbooks up for adoption in a given year is unlikely to provide coherent ratings, due to the plethora of criteria. The only study of state criteria for rating textbooks, done in the early 1980s, found that reviewers had to rate and keep track of about seventy different items or criteria. “The sheer impossibility of applying so many criteria . . . to a deep stack of books corrupts textbook selection,” writes Harriet Tyson-Bernstein. In place of an honest review, many committee members end up using the “flip test.” Since, as Loewen notes, “raters only have time to flip through books, they look for easy readability, newness, a stunning color cover, appealing design, color illustrations, ancillary filmstrips, and ready-made teaching aids and test questions, seizing on these attributes as surrogates for quality.” Teachers on textbook committees, for example, often look through teacher manuals carefully, but do little more than page through the student text to see what the pictures and graphics look like.

Reviewers, of course, cannot treat textbooks just as picture and activity books, so in lieu of reading the text, many use checklists to measure textbook compliance with state standards. They may, for example, check the index for certain topics, request computerized word searches for various keywords and facts in the state curriculum, count the number of black, white, Hispanic, and male and female faces in illustrations, and apply “readability” formulas to the text to make sure that the prose is not too demanding.

Checklist reviewing is particularly vulnerable to the abuse of “mentioning.” In fact, if a horror movie were ever made about the textbook process, it might well be called “The Mentioning.” First coined by Dolores Durkin at the University of Illinois, “mentioning” refers to textbook prose that flits from fact to fact without providing any context for the information. As Tyson-Bernstein notes, a student may be informed that Aristotle “studied the political organization of 150 city states and put his conclusions in a book called *The Politics*” without ever being told what Aristotle concluded. Not surprisingly,

publishers often employ the “mentioning” strategy to give the appearance that they have met state standards. Key words and facts will be boldfaced and appear over and over again in the text. Multiple versions of assignments and student worksheets will be included, reflecting the latest pedagogical fads. Old assignments will be renamed, say, as “Critical Thinking” skill exercises, to make them appear cutting edge.

No one denies that today’s textbooks *look* great. They are packed with color pictures, crisp layouts, clever illustrations, and art elements that break up the prose-heavy pages that once dominated textbooks. But the checklist mentality and flip test provide only the most superficial gauges of prose, quality, accuracy, and effectiveness of instructional materials.

Results Don’t Count: The Efficacy Gap

While adoption states have dozens of criteria for judging textbooks, those lists have one conspicuous omission. None of the adoption states asks, “Is this book effective at improving student knowledge and achievement?” It would seem beyond argument that a chief goal of textbook adoption, if such a process is worth having in an age of results-driven education reform, is to find schoolbooks that engage students’ curiosity, help them retain knowledge, and enable them to excel academically. Surely, most parents would suppose that their children’s schoolbooks are selected by educators because the texts have been shown to produce results and help children learn. The fact that the adoption process does not require el-hi publishers or anyone else to demonstrate the efficacy of their textbooks is one more testament to how adoption reviews have abandoned common sense.

More than a few adoption states are openly hostile to the notion that results matter, or that textbooks should be piloted to see how they work. During the 2001 adoption process in California, the former chairman of Saxon Publishers, Frank Wang, attended a textbook committee hearing at which several teachers showed up unbidden to praise the impact of Saxon’s math program on their students. Saxon Publishers was then a medium-sized publisher whose math curriculum had a record of boosting student test scores in places that used it. (It has since been purchased by Harcourt Achieve, a division of textbook

giant Reed Elsevier.) But Saxon math was controversial among some progressive math teachers because of its emphasis on mastering basic skills and repetitive math drills. The hearing started getting contentious when the chairman of the curriculum commission pounded her gavel to interrupt the discussion. “Effectiveness, while certainly something that we all look at as consumers, [is] not a criteria [here] and I think it is important that we keep that in mind,” she announced. “Test scores [are not] part of the criteria.”

During the last decade, Saxon Publishers has repeatedly offered to give its math books for free to schools or school districts that wished to field test them, but few adoption states have taken Saxon up on its offer. During the pilot testing, the performance of students who used Saxon math would be compared to the performance of students who used math textbooks of another publisher, as has been done in innumerable social science experiments. The founder of Saxon Publishers, retired Air Force colonel John H. Saxon, Jr., was so confident about his products that he sought to give away \$10 million worth of them—also with little success. In an open letter to President Clinton in 1993, Saxon reported that Texas governor Ann Richards had not even responded to his offer to provide \$500,000 in free books for Texas schoolchildren, and that all school districts in South Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia, with more than one high school had also spurned his offer of free books to be used in field testing. More recently, Saxon’s Frank Wang was talking to a state education department representative from Alabama on the speaker phone and offered once again to donate textbooks to the state for field testing. In a southern drawl, the state textbook administrator responded, “Yes, sir, you can give anything but the textbooks.” Feeling exasperated, Wang thought for a moment. “Well, could I give the superintendent a Mercedes?” Wang inquired. “Yup, you can give the superintendent a Mercedes,” the state official shot back. “But you can’t give the textbooks.”

In the business world, and for most consumers, the notion that products should be field-tested is taken for granted. When Mom goes out to buy a car, she test-drives it first. Yet when Mom sends Jane off to high school to get an education, the schoolbooks that her daughter will read haven’t been independently tested. Some adoption states have even barred schools from field-testing textbooks. In 2000, the

Florida legislature passed an amendment that stated, “No school district or publisher may participate in a pilot program of materials being considered for adoption during the 18 months prior to the official adoption of the materials by the Commissioner of Education.” *Consumer Reports* rates the quality of hundreds of items each year, and many trade publications also review the effectiveness of products in their fields. But no one, least of all state adoption reviewers, regularly analyzes whether children’s schoolbooks produce the intended results.

Triumph of the Lowest Common Denominator

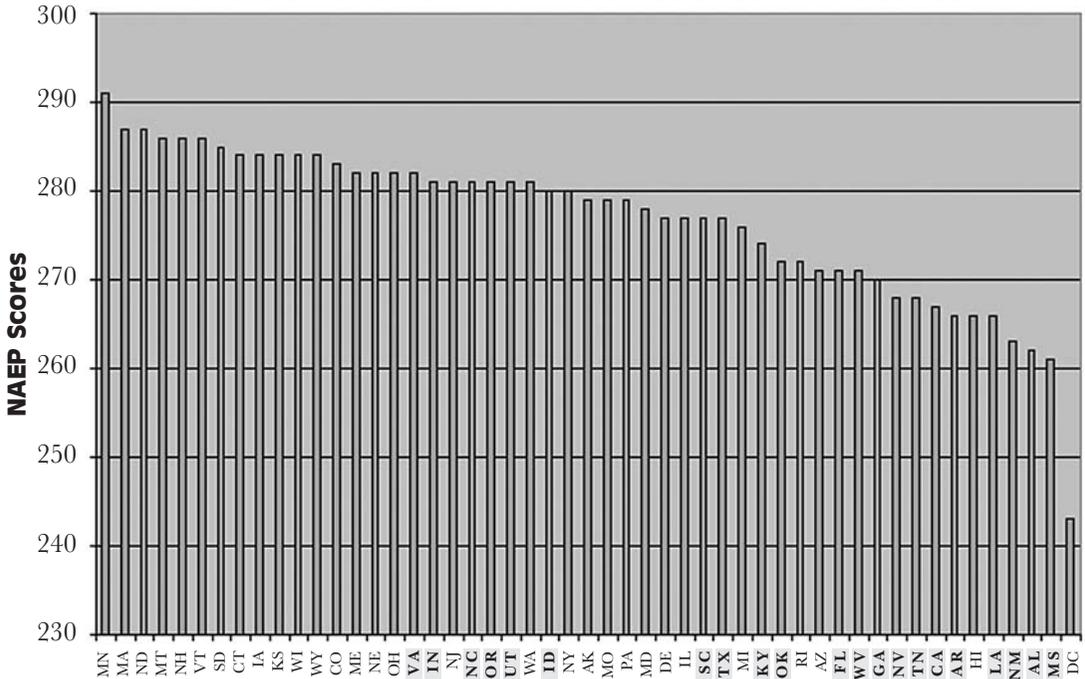
For el-hi textbook publishers, the ultimate goal of adoption reviews today is to go along to get along. Publishers want their books adopted in California, Texas, and other key states, most of which require them to produce detailed charts showing how every book correlates with state standards or curricular guidelines. In practice, publishers typically stick the California and Texas charts together and produce textbooks that meet the many standards, criteria, and curricular goals of both states. As textbooks have to cover more and more topics, keywords, and the like, they end up jumping from subject to subject, covering little material in depth. Members of review committees and state boards are often not experts in any specific curricular area. Their suggested revisions rarely elevate the sophistication, scholarship, and literary quality of textbooks.

The triumph of the lowest common denominator in adoption reviews is in large measure a reflection of the adoption processes in California and Texas. As Joan Delfattore has written, “Publishers aiming for the approved lists in both states have responded by producing books designed, as far as possible, not to offend anyone. In order to increase minority representation in textbooks, for example, publishers include Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech in high school literature anthologies—but only after removing references to racism in various Southern states, making the speech sound bland.” This denuding of content fuels an intellectual race to the bottom. “Once textbooks are sanitized,” writes Diane Ravitch, “they are guaranteed to be blander and less realistic than a daily newspaper, a weekly news-magazine, or a television newscast, and far less interesting than any of them.” Is it any wonder that kids are often bored in school?

The Misbegotten Market

The core failure of the K-12 textbook market is that it is not really a market. In fact, it is so dominated by perverse incentives that it is hard to see how the state textbook adoption process could be reformed, apart from abolishing it. American K-12 textbooks are mediocre or worse, not because state adoption officials made a few bad choices, or because the states have implemented some short-lived ped-

2003 8th Grade NAEP Math Scores—All States



*Adoption states are highlighted.

agogical fads that will soon disappear. The problem, to use the rhetoric of the 1960s, is the system itself—as well as the inherent difficulty of government regulation of textbook content.

As Ravitch has noted, the el-hi textbook market is more akin to a government procurement process than a competitive marketplace that provides consumers with choices that please them. Unlike university textbooks, which thousands of individual professors purchase,

or trade books, which millions of consumers buy online and in book stores, el-hi textbooks aren't generally sold in the open market. Adoption states, especially Texas and California, in effect issue "specs" for what they want in their textbooks, much as the General Services Administration might issue specs for wastebaskets or the Defense Department for toilet lids.

In a properly functioning market, consumers are the "invisible hand" that shows publishers which books are selling and which are headed for the remainders table. But in the K-12 textbook market, the customary feedback loop between manufacturer and user is missing. Former congresswoman Pat Schroeder, now head of the Association of American Publishers, defended el-hi publishers in a television interview, pointing out that they are only following the time-honored business model, "The customer is always right." But as Schroeder freely concedes, the problem with the K-12 textbook market is that the customers and buyers (i.e., the state adoption agencies) aren't the actual *consumers* (i.e., teachers and students).

The El-Hi Publishing Cartel

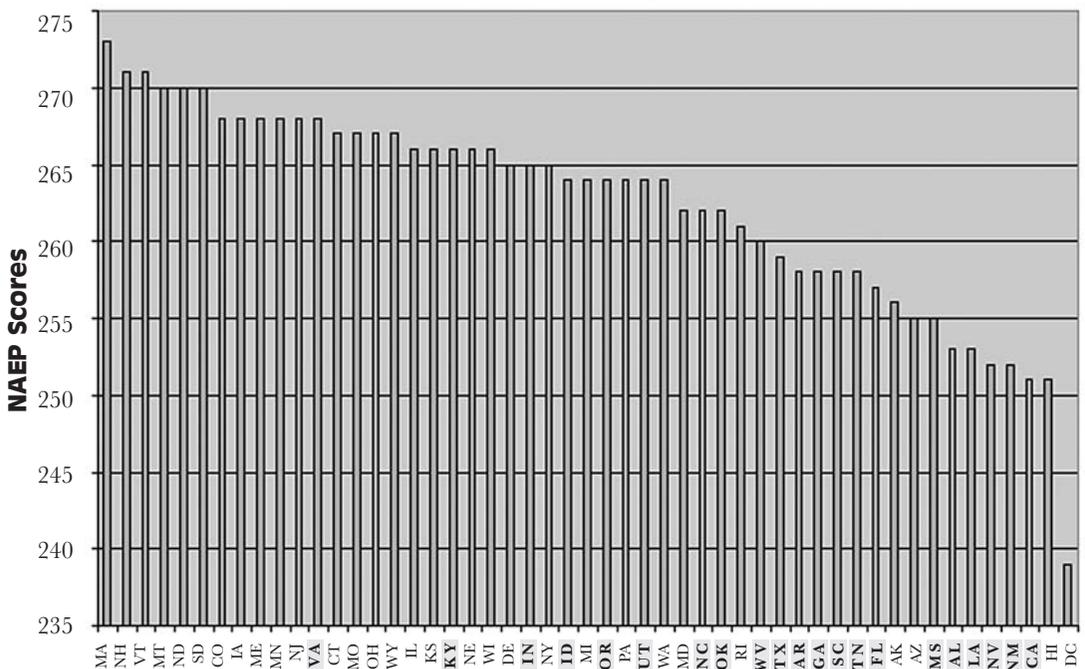
In the last two decades, the el-hi publishing industry has gone from having considerable competition among independent publishing houses to a cartel of four mega-publishers. Dozens of venerable houses, including MacMillan, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and Prentice Hall have either been acquired and absorbed as imprints or shut down. Today, four multi-national conglomerates—Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Reed Elsevier, and Houghton Mifflin—chalk up a total of about \$3 billion in el-hi sales and account for roughly 70 percent of all K-12 textbooks sold.

Not surprisingly, the cartel's development, by restricting choices and imposing prohibitive entry barriers, has made it harder than ever to develop or locate high quality textbooks. Publishers now typically spend millions in development and production costs merely to prepare a textbook for the adoption process, and few medium-sized publishers can afford such outlays or the risk of going insolvent if they aren't adopted. In addition, state committees have repeatedly buttressed the cartel by demanding gilded textbooks and every imaginable supplemental instructional aid. Gilbert Sewall of the American Textbook

Council points out that “any company that plans to compete nationally in school publishing must be capital intensive and ‘full service,’ offering study guides, workbooks, and technology, along with discounts, premiums, and an array of teacher enticements. Spanish text versions, margins, texts, binders, and answer keys may determine which books are adopted.”

The state adoption process discriminates as well against smaller publishing houses by requiring all publishers to post performance

2003 8th Grade NAEP Reading Scores—All States



*Adoption states are highlighted.

bonds as a guarantee that their textbooks will be delivered as promised, a requirement left over from the early 1900s. Many adoption states require publishers to provide large numbers of free samples, keep state depositories stacked with books, and field teacher consultants. “In every stage of production, from paper to printing, economies of scale favor mammoth enterprises,” writes Sewall. This flawed production system, which benefits only giant publishers, helps explain

why schools face such a narrow range of textbook choices today—and why so many textbooks are indistinguishable in tone and format.

The Quantity Imperative

Somehow, today's el-hi publishers have accomplished the impossible: They have managed to turn out textbooks with more pages but less content. The explanation has to do with the powerful incentives that publishers face to produce quantity rather than quality. "No one punishes a publisher for having too much material in a textbook," says Stephen Driesler, executive director of the Association of American Publishers' school division. On the other hand, if a textbook fails to cover the lists of topics, names, pedagogical exercises, ideas, facts, keywords, sanitized language, and curriculum standards from California or Texas, it may get rejected in the adoption process.

While the adoption process rewards "mentioning" and pedagogical and graphics glitz, the adoption states do almost nothing to reward authors for providing engaging prose, deft analysis, careful scholarship, and a text and exercises that help pupils retain knowledge. These measures of quality are hard to quantify and are not part of state criteria—though they provide elemental yardsticks that textbooks (and all instructional materials) should be judged by. But the problem is not just that the textbook adoption system is silent about issues of content and quality; in practice, adoption policies subtly discourage publishers, authors, and teachers from pushing for more demanding curricula.

Nearly every state, for example, has promulgated English Language Arts (ELA) standards, and those states use their standards to judge literature anthologies and reading texts. For her 2003 book, *The Language Police*, Diane Ravitch reviewed all of the state ELA standards and found to her dismay that, in state after state, "the standards are mind-numbingly detailed about various strategies that students will use to analyze, predict, interpret, criticize, synthesize, and summarize what they have read, but completely blank about what students should read." The literary canon is out while the English professoriate's loose cannons are in. In forty-one states, the ELA standards do not mention a single writer or literary work, even as recommended reading—which is all the more remarkable since some state ELA stan-

dards pontificate for fifty pages. One of the joys of a good education is reading great literature. But states are afraid to specify anything that students *should* read to become literate for fear of offending someone. “Suppose the state’s [reading] list does not have the right gender balance?” Ravitch asks. “Suppose it has too many white males?” These are reasons to avoid any specific literary requirements or even recommendations.

For publishers, the quantity imperative and the tight time deadlines in state adoption processes all but guarantee that quality will be neglected. The image of a distinguished author beaver away for years to write a compelling textbook is largely a thing of the past. Today, publishers often start with a unified checklist of all the names, standards, facts, and subjects that must be covered to win approval in California and Texas. Next, a team of consultants is hired to prepare study aids and draft questions and student exercises. A separate team prepares the illustrations, graphics, maps, tables, and charts. In-house editors and committees review the text for bias, sensitivity, and compliance with state criteria.

The actual writing of these tomes, however, is generally farmed out to “development houses”—where teams of writers who are not subject experts collaborate on the text, which can often run to 1,000+ pages. The tag team approach to constructing these books is one reason they lack a single authorial voice and coherent “story.” To make their textbooks look more learned and substantial, some el-hi publishers add the name of a distinguished scholar to the list of textbook authors, though the famous professor may have done nothing more than “consult” with the publisher at some point during the early stages of preparing of a textbook.

In 2004, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute published a report reflecting the views of experts who had examined high school textbooks on U.S. and world history. Shortly after the textbooks were assigned, Princeton history professor Theodore Rabb called Diane Ravitch (who led the project) to inform her that he might “have trouble reviewing one of these textbooks.” Explained Rabb, “It says on this textbook that I was on its editorial advisory board. But I’ve never seen the book.” Rabb received no royalties from the popular textbook, Holt’s *Continuity and Change*, that he allegedly had provided guidance

on—and proceeded to review the book anyway. (He criticized it for thin treatment of Homer, inattention to the centrality of law in the Roman Republic, and too ready dismissal of the Vikings.)

Rabb's experience is not unusual. More than a few distinguished professors have been startled to discover that they purportedly wrote textbooks they had never laid eyes on. Yet, as the American Textbook Council's Gilbert Sewall has pointed out, publishers' disregard for quality and scholarship is a natural outgrowth of the adoption market. "Mass-market educational publishers cannot afford to have deep convictions about what their books contain, how 'hard' they are, or even if they are 'literary,'" Sewall writes. "The complex phenomenon known as the 'dumbing down' of textbooks is a rational activity on the part of value-free sellers who seek to capture a larger share of nationwide market. Textbook buyers are mainly concerned that their textbooks be able to reach all students, including the least academically capable."

Harriet Tyson-Bernstein summed up the perverse market incentives of textbook adoption by analogizing the process to a kind of Catch-22. Government regulation of content, she argued, was often counterproductive—and was itself part of the schoolbook scandal. She warned that (emphasis in the original):

Every adoption state governor, state board member, chief state school officer, and state agency official must recognize the paradox at the center of the textbook dilemma: **The harder they try to regulate the content of textbooks, the less useful textbooks become for their own students and students elsewhere in the United States.** . . . All the adoption states and many large school districts contribute to the thinning out and dumbing down of textbooks used all over the nation.

3

THE CONTENT-LITE CURRICULUM

The sanitized textbooks described earlier are not just those published a decade or two back, when the politically correct left and morally correct right were ascendant. The tangled tradition and malign consequences of textbook adoption live on in the science, history, and world history textbooks that students are using today, and in the anthologies that are supposed to introduce young Americans to the world's great literature. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Textbook Council, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute have all recently commissioned expert panels to examine middle school science books, high school biology and algebra textbooks, and U.S. and world history textbooks. In her 2003 book, *The Language Police*, Diane Ravitch also reviewed sixteen U.S. history and eleven world history textbooks, as well as a number of literary anthologies.

The findings of these reviews, summarized in the pages that follow, are relentlessly consistent—and damning: today's textbooks are incoherent, overloaded with splashy graphics and nifty exercises, devoid of controversy, whimsy, and wonderment—and about as exciting to read as the Federal Register.

Don't Know Much About a Science Book

At the turn of the decade, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) established several panels to review middle school science textbooks, high school biology textbooks, and popular algebra books. The results of that evaluation were dismaying, to say the least. Not a single middle school science textbook reviewed was deemed satisfactory. The study found that most “cover too many topics and don't develop any of them well. All texts include many classroom activities that are either irrelevant to learning key science ideas

or don't help students relate what they are doing to underlying ideas."

A basic goal of life sciences, for example, is to have students appreciate how matter and energy are transformed in living things—e.g., how plants turn sunlight into chemical energy, or how plants use matter from carbon dioxide from air and water to create sugar. Instead of studying this process of transformation, however, students would learn a fact here and there. Rather than teaching how plants create energy, the science textbooks had students do exercises where they used microscopes to look at stomates, the miniscule openings on the undersides of leaves that take in carbon dioxide from the air.

The gulf was wide between the textbooks' presentation of earth science, life science, and physical science and the field's standards for science education. Repeatedly, the textbooks failed to teach middle schoolers key science ideas as measured against the National Research Council's National Science Education Standards and the AAAS's own Benchmarks for Scientific Literacy. Dr. George Nelson, who headed the science textbook review panels, said, "Our students are lugging home heavy texts full of disconnected facts that neither educate nor motivate them. It's a credit to science teachers that their students are learning anything at all."

AAAS's parallel study of ten widely used high school biology textbooks found the biology curricula presented almost as poorly. Once again, the texts were long on arcane facts and short on coherence. Dr. Bruce Alberts, a cell biologist who then headed the National Academy of Sciences, observed, "Our textbooks continue to be distorted by a commercial textbook market that requires that they cover the entire range of facts about biology, thereby sacrificing the opportunity to treat the central concepts in enough depth to give our students a chance to truly understand them." Dr. Nelson added, "Although the textbooks are filled with pages of vocabulary and unnecessary detail, they provide only fragmentary treatment of some fundamentally important concepts."

The AAAS's findings square almost exactly with a two-and-a-half-year investigation of twelve middle school physical science textbooks led by John Hubisz, a visiting professor of physics at North Carolina State who went on to head the American Association of Physics Teachers. The textbooks reviewed by Hubisz's team contained

numerous errors, showing, for example, that the equator passes through Tucson and Tallahassee, and depicting the Statue of Liberty as a lefty. One textbook misstated Newton's First Law of Physics. But apart from these howlers, the books featured "many irrelevant photographs, complicated illustrations, experiments that could not possibly work, and diagrams and drawings that represented impossible situations." The textbooks, the reviewers concluded, were saddled with a "huge amount of clutter that detracts on every page from the learning of science." "The only positive thing we could say about a book," Hubisz observed, "is that it was the best of the worst."

Don't Know Much About History

History is especially dependent on textbooks, and American students' command of history is embarrassingly weak. Only about one in ten high school seniors scored "proficient" or better in U.S. history in the 2001 NAEP U.S. history test.

The February 2004 Fordham report, *The Consumer's Guide to High School History Textbooks*, provides some benchmarks of today's mediocre-to-miserable history texts. Project director Ravitch asked a panel of scholars to evaluate six leading U.S. history textbooks, based on their accuracy, context, organization, selection of supporting materials, lack of bias, historical logic, literary quality, use of primary sources, historical soundness, democratic ideas, interest level, and graphics. The highest score any textbook received from the historians was 78—a gentleman's C—and the panel gave failing marks to two of the books. All of the textbooks were long, however, averaging 1,000 pages, and chock full of eye-catching illustrations, color photographs, and graphics. In summarizing the panel's observations, Ravitch noted that the reviewers felt the texts "blunt the edges of events and strip from the narrative whatever is lively, adventurous, and exciting. In part, this happens because so much needs to be covered and compressed in the texts; in part, it is due to the lack of an authorial voice and the ability to express wonderment, humor, outrage, or elation."

The chief historical shortcoming of the texts cited was their willingness to rewrite history by downplaying the European heritage of America, while exaggerating the significance of pre-Columbian civilizations and African tribal kingdoms. Several textbooks herald the

reign of Mansa Musa, an Islamic ruler of Mali, who took a pilgrimage (a *hajj*) to Mecca in 1324 with an imposing entourage and thousands of slaves. Mansa Musa's connection to American history, if any, is never explained. Closer to home, Meso-American civilizations, such as the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incans, are extolled for their architecture, artistry, and technology. Yet the link between the institutions and traditions of the Mayan civilization (which died out 900 years before the United States was founded) and the formation of the United States is left obscure. American history is trimmed and tucked to fit California's social content guidelines as well. Treatment of World War II devotes as much space to events on the home front, such as the employment of women in war industries (Rosie the Riveter) and the internment of Japanese-Americans, as it does to the events on the battlefronts of the Pacific and Atlantic. The rebellious 1960s come out well in the textbooks, especially the Black Panthers, who are made to sound like members of a social service organization.

The multicultural rejiggering of American history might be defensible if it were done honestly, with the contributions of non-European civilizations judged by the same standards applied to the West and its European descendants. But U.S. history textbooks generally soft-pedal the ugly or primitive aspects of Meso-American and African societies. The facts that the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, for example, and that Mali was an important center for the Islamic slave trade, are papered over. Ravitch argues that:

The texts should have a consistent critical lens, in which gross violations of human rights—like slavery, cannibalism, genocide, human sacrifice, and the oppression of women—are recognized as wrong. . . . However, the current textbooks are selectively critical. They condemn slavery in the Western world but present slavery in Africa and the Middle East as benign, even as a means of social mobility, by which slaves became family members, respected members of the community, and perhaps achieved prosperity and high office. The Aztec ritual of human sacrifice is glossed over as something that their religion required to ensure the sun would rise the next

day, a minor detail in what was otherwise a sophisticated and complex culture that valued education and learning.

Airbrushing the warts of non-European societies is a form of intellectual fraud that misleads students. Indeed, it is doubly harmful because it gives a false picture of the evolution of societies, as though change typically occurs naturally, without rancor, struggle, and strife. Happy-face history thus saps the vitality and controversy of social studies textbooks, the very qualities that might make history less boring to today's students. In today's U.S. history texts, Diane Ravitch notes, "Historical conflicts lose their drama, and the ideas of passionate individuals shrivel to simple platitudes. When history . . . [has] the life squeezed out of it, the predigested pap that is left is not memorable."

If It's Tuesday, It Must Be the Hittites

Enrollment in world history classes has grown dramatically in the last decade, driven in part by California's and Texas's new requirements for world history in sixth grade. More than 55 percent of all secondary students take world history courses before they graduate (compared to a third in 1990), and a number of states now require world history for high school graduation. The explosion in enrollment has created a slew of new world history textbooks—which, thankfully, explore non-Western civilizations in far more detail than their predecessors did twenty years ago.

Still, two recent reviews of today's world history textbooks by panels of distinguished historians show that these texts also have fundamental failings. Both the 2004 Fordham review and a 2004 report from the American Textbook Council conclude that today's world history books suffer from a bad case of "collapsed narrative." The texts are burdened and disrupted by an overload of pictures, sidebars, and instructional activities, while the narrative veers from being overly detailed about obscure facts to being superficial about important historical moments. Three of the six books reviewed in the Fordham report earned failing grades. To be sure, it isn't easy to write a coherent and compelling textbook covering the grand span of world history. Even so, these books are characterized by a forced march from

civilization to civilization. The textbook ethos, as Diane Ravitch summed up in the Fordham report, is, “If this is Tuesday, we must be studying the Hittites.”

Inevitably, world history textbooks suffer from superficiality by trying to cover too much too fast. Unfortunately, their authors have compounded this shortcoming by stuffing the books full of every pedagogical exercise ever dreamed up in an ed school. Paul Gagnon of Boston University’s Center for School Improvement, one of the reviewers for the American Textbook Council (ATC) report, observed that the dominant high school world history textbook, *Connections to Today*, “takes superficiality for granted.” But Gagnon identified the root of the problem as being publishers’ attempt to “adapt all popular theories and strategies at once.” This something-for-everyone pedagogy produces a bewildering clash of teaching methods and a didactic deluge for students. Here is how the ATC study summed up the mind-numbing format of *Connections to Today*:

[The textbook] is divided into eight units, Paul Gagnon notes, each containing 37 chapters which in turn contain 162 sections. Eight two-page items are called “You Decide: Exploring Global Issues,” one at the end of each unit. Thirty-seven half-pages called “Parallels through Time,” one in each chapter, and 37 vignettes called “Up Close,” supposedly offer in-depth treatments of people and events. Each of the 37 chapters closes with two pages including “Skills for Success,” and questions/activities under “Critical Thinking”; “Analyzing Primary Sources”; “For Your Portfolio” (writing assignments); “Analyzing Tables”; [and] “Internet Activity.” *Connections to Today* contains 37 Art History Exercises and eight excerpts from World Literature. There are small “Global Connection” boxes in each chapter and similar boxes for “Issue of the Day.” There are 162 end-of-section reviews, each with questions that supposedly require Critical Thinking and an Activity, which by itself would take a full day of classwork.

The preceding *summary* is difficult to read through once. Imagine being a high school student who, day after day, had to read and complete this curricular cornucopia.

Ironically, one reason for the multiplicity of instructional approaches is that jazzing up the text is thought to make history more exciting for students—the idea being that they should come to see that dusty old social studies has personal relevance. Texas’s curriculum standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, known as TEKS) now require that history textbooks should relate past and present, and highlight contemporary situations with precedents in the past. When Texas talks, textbook publishers comply—often in silly ways. The ATC study notes, “In the 1999 edition of *Connections to Today* . . . students are asked to link ‘The Hero,’ past and present, by comparing Odysseus with Indiana Jones. ‘Hairstyles’ in ancient Rome are compared with the 1960s Beehive. ‘Going Shopping’ in medieval Baghdad is likened to an indoor suburban mall.” This view of history—that it is worth studying chiefly for its “personal relevance”—is ultimately a narrow, utilitarian view that saps history of its transforming role. In fact, most students enthralled by a good history book or novel get caught up in the yarn precisely because it transports them to a place and time so different from their own.

Apart from pedagogical overkill, the chief flaw of world history textbooks cited in the panel reviews is the genre’s dogmatic embrace of cultural equivalency. Ravitch summarizes the tone of the six volumes she reviewed as follows:

All of the world’s civilizations were great and glorious, all produced grand artistic, cultural, and material achievements, and now the world is growing more global and interconnected. Some bad things happened in the past, but that was a long time ago and now the cultures of the world face common problems. . . . The idea of progress has disappeared, because no culture is more or less advanced than the other.

As with U.S. history, world history textbooks sugarcoat practices in non-Western cultures (like the oppression of women) that would be

condemned if done by Americans or Europeans. African tribal kingdoms from a thousand years ago are made to sound as consequential as the civilizations of China and Europe. To the extent that Africa is acknowledged to be a troubled continent today, blame is placed at the feet of the European colonialists. The lack of arable land and navigable rivers on the African continent is mentioned in passing, if at all, and the history of genocide in Rwanda, Uganda, and other African nations gets short shrift. The ATC study points out that the textbook *Patterns of Interaction* “does not mention AIDS at all. *Connections to Today* mentions AIDS but give no context or reason for the epidemic. Neither textbook explains the scourge of African diseases from cholera to sleeping sickness.”

Perhaps the gravest failing, though, of the world history textbooks is their inability to explain the origin and significance of modern democracies. The ATC study found that, when textbooks cover “non-democratic political systems, which are today located mainly in the non-Western world, [they] offer an apology or free pass. Oppressive governments, economic failure, and human rights violations are repeatedly blurred, ostensibly in the name of cross-cultural sensitivity and editorial ‘compassion’ for the ‘underdog.’” Thus the great struggle of the 20th century between democracy and totalitarianism becomes just another “development” worth noting, with the repressive and murderous nature of totalitarian regimes minimized. The Communist Party in China may have killed a million landlords and tens of million more may have starved to death due to Mao’s catastrophic Great Leap Forward. But the ATC study notes that Mao’s “Long March is recounted in glowing terms as a liberation movement.” The textbooks treat Maoism, as Ravitch notes, with a benign rhetoric that is completely contradicted by the chapter on Chinese Communism in *The Black Book of Communism*. The Soviet regime is sanitized, too, so that students learn little of the horrors of life under Communist rule, such as the gulag.

Undoubtedly, the textbooks of a half-century ago indulged in simple-minded flag-waving about the American triumph and democratic ideals. But in response, today’s world history textbooks have swung too far the other way, minimizing the global human rights tragedy. The whitewashing of the non-Western world ought to concern both liberals

and conservatives. In 2004, a high school student can read a thousand-page world history textbook without ever having to grapple with one of the most elemental truths about the nature of the world around him: that hundreds of millions of people around the globe still live without basic rights and freedoms, in societies run by military strong men and dictators.

The Jihad That Wasn't

After September 11, many Americans were shocked to discover that thousands of school children in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had been taught to detest America, Jews, and the West while attending state and privately-financed *madrassas* or religious schools. Wahhabist Muslims, a branch of Sunni Islamic fundamentalists also known as *muwahhidun*, had spread their influence from Saudi Arabia to other Arab nations, and a number of Arab terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, have been influenced by Wahhabist theology. To be sure, the *madrassas* and *muwahhidun* are not the norm across Arab society, nor is it the case that Islam is an inherently violent religion. But Islamic fundamentalism and anti-U.S. sentiment in various guises held sway—and hold sway—in a number of Arab nations. Unfortunately, these were not facts that an American schoolchild was apt to encounter in history class. The truth was that any young person who based his or her understanding of the Mideast on world history textbooks would have been mystified as to why Islamic terrorists might attack the United States or why tens of thousands of Arabs consider the U.S. to be the Great Satan.

The avoidance of the more militaristic and radical aspects of Islamic fundamentalism in world history textbooks is entirely in keeping with the political dynamics of textbook adoption. The strange-bed-fellows coalition of politically correct left and morally correct right ensures that religion is treated positively in history texts. To appease those on the multicultural left, all religions are created equal (just like all cultures), and all material on Islam must be vetted by Muslim activist groups like the Council on Islamic Education to ensure that textbooks accord with their views. To placate the religious right, textbooks must avoid suggesting that religious belief has been a recurrent source of conflict and war. Over a decade ago, Joan Delfattore warned

presciently that the Christian fundamentalists' campaign to systematically suppress "the fact that religion can lead to violence not only falsifies history but also distorts contemporary world events involving religious militarism. It is rare that the omission of a particular story or piece of information is of world-shaking importance in itself, but the pattern of eliminating particular ideas wherever they occur is censorship in its most radical form."

Today, this censorship is felt in the failure of world history textbooks to speak honestly or critically about Islamic fundamentalism. In a hard-hitting February 2003 report on the coverage of Islam in seven widely-used world history textbooks, the ATC's Gilbert T. Sewall blasted el-hi publishers for circumventing "unsavory facts that might cast Islam past or present in anything but a positive light." Islamic achievements, he noted, "are reported with robust enthusiasm. [But] when any dark side surfaces, textbooks run and hide. Subjects such as *jihad* and the advocacy of violence among militant Islamists to attain worldly ends, the imposition of *sharia* law, the record of Muslim enslavement, and the brutal subjection of women are glossed over." Some Muslim critics and several university professors with multicultural leanings or training in Near Eastern studies attacked Sewall's indictment of the textbook treatment of Islam as too sweeping. Yet even if one takes a minimalist view of Sewall's disturbing findings, it is plain that Islamic fundamentalism rarely receives honest discussion in today's textbooks. The two most blatant efforts to censor the treatment of this touchy topic are the sanitizing of the meaning of *jihad* and the lame effort to rewrite the history of discrimination against women in the Arab world.

The term "*jihad*" is usually translated to mean "holy war," though its literal meaning is "striving in the path of God." There is abundant evidence that *jihad* historically has referred to holy wars, and the manual of Islamic law or *sharia* has a chapter on *jihad* detailing the proper conduct of hostilities. Just as Christian crusaders sought to spread their faith by taking sword in hand against non-Christians, so, too, did the Islamic armies attack non-Muslim believers. In recent decades, however, some Muslim theologians have averred that *jihad* refers simply to striving in the spiritual or moral realm. A 1998 guide for el-hi publishers prepared by the Council on Islamic Education contends that *jihad* refers to any "struggle in the cause of God, which can take

many forms. In the personal sphere, efforts such as obtaining an education, trying to quit smoking, or controlling one's temper are forms of *jihad*." In this subdued rendering of *jihad*, going to school, applying a nicotine patch, or counting to ten to calm down are all the same as joining a holy war.

As it happens, the Council on Islamic Education has been the chief Muslim advocacy group that el-hi publishers have asked to vet their textbooks. Sewall reports that Houghton Mifflin, Glencoe, Scott Foresman, and Prentice Hall all sought the Council's imprimatur between 1987 and 1997. Some publishers (though not all) went on to pander to the Council's sensibilities when writing about *jihad*. Houghton Mifflin's world history textbook, *Patterns of Interaction*, manages to achieve the feat of writing about Islam without even mentioning *jihad*. Prentice Hall's *Connections to Today*, the most widely used world history textbook in U.S. schools, states, "Some Muslims took on *jihad*, or effort in God's service, as another duty. *Jihad* has often been mistakenly translated simply as 'holy war.' In fact, it may include acts of charity or an inner struggle to achieve spiritual peace, as well as any battle in defense of Islam." The glossary in *Connections to Today* defines *jihad* as "an effort in God's service." A high school student reading this definition could be forgiven for concluding that a group of Quakers on an American Friends Service Committee retreat were on *jihad*, too.

Besides toning down the notion of *jihad*, world history textbooks miss almost altogether the deep-seated distinctions between American and Europe societies and nations headed by Islamic fundamentalist clerics. In theocracies like Iran, religious authorities run the government according to Islamic holy law, or *sharia*. Typically, there is no separation of church and state, no trial by jury, no due process. Yet in the Glencoe-McGraw Hill volume, *World History: The Human Experience*, Islamic fundamentalists are described as wishing to "return to Muslim traditions" and are likened to conservative Protestants in the U.S. Textbook dictum holds that, if you can't say anything nice about religion, it's better not to say anything at all. Thus while world history textbooks appropriately note the removal of the repressive Western-backed Shah of Iran in 1979, most fumble and mumble when it comes to the ruthless regime of his fundamentalist successor, Ayatollah Khomeini—who, Ravitch reports, is typically described as a

“stern cleric.” The books entirely omit his *fatwa* against author Salman Rushdie, though Khomeini called for “zealous Muslims” to execute the novelist and placed a \$3 million bounty on his head. (Rushdie went into hiding and managed to survive the fatwa—but two of the book’s translators were stabbed, one fatally, and some bookstores that sold Rushdie’s “blasphemous” novel, *The Satanic Verses*, were firebombed.)

The repression of women in Islamic societies, particularly in the Arab world, is papered over, too, though textbook authors would never write so nonchalantly about discrimination against women in the United States. Here are just two excerpts from oft-used world history textbooks on the status of women in Muslim societies, adapted from the many examples in Sewall’s report:

From Holt, Rinehart, and Winston’s high-school textbook, *Continuity and Change*: “Although men had most of the power in Arab society, women had some freedom. For example, women could own and inherit property. Women contributed to the group through such activities as spinning and weaving. A woman’s primary role, however, was that of mother.”

From Glencoe’s *The Human Experience*: “Islam did, however, improve the position of women. It forbade the tribal custom of killing female infants and also limited polygamy, or the practice that allowed a man to have more than one wife. A Muslim could have as many as four wives but all were to be treated as equals and with kindness. Also, a woman had complete control over her own property.”

No textbook author would subject the paragraphs above to the textbook adoption process in California or Texas if the phrase “Arab society” (in the first excerpt) were changed to “American society,” or if the words “Christianity” and “Christian” were substituted for “Islam” and “Muslim” in the second selection. Prose of this ilk is not only hypocritical but dishonest. The facts are that Arab women are routinely denied the same opportunities as men, and women who seek

to assert their independence by ridding themselves of their burkas or veils are not welcome in fundamentalist societies. Half of the women in the Arab world are illiterate. At best, women in Arab states are second-class citizens; at worst, as Sewall notes, they are treated as little more than human chattel.

From Twain to Xena

Apart from Ravitch's 2003 book, *The Language Police*, there do not appear to be any recent independent reviews of K-12 literature textbooks and anthologies. But her findings provide ample ground for alarm. She concludes that literature textbooks have abandoned the notion of exposing students to much of the literary canon of the American giants (e.g., Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, Emerson, Twain, Dreiser, Wharton, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Ellison, Faulkner) in favor of publishing selections from little-known writers who seem to have been picked in part because of their ethnicity and gender. Implicit in the very concept of the traditional canon was the idea that it is possible to judge literary quality: A few writers will be deemed great; others will be considered accomplished novelists and poets; and some authors will be thought of as capable but lesser talents. The work of most writers, however, will fail to endure or be read by future generations.

Today, however, standards of literary quality are no longer the guiding principle for literature textbooks. As a result, literature textbooks and readers are a weird potpourri of outstanding fiction and poetry, undistinguished writing, nonliterary features (like essays on homelessness or air pollution), lots of pedagogical tips for teachers, and suggestions for students about how to take tests and find the main idea in a story or article. One literature textbook teaches students how to "read a weather map, a time line, and a telephone book." Ravitch summarizes the tone of literature textbooks as follows:

No effort is expended to teach students the differences among writing that is banal, good, better, or best. The stories of Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, and O. Henry are mixed haphazardly with student essays, study skills, and never-heard-of, soon-to-be-forgotten pieces by little-

known writers. One book, published by Prentice Hall (with the subtitle “Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes”), has an excerpt from a script of the once-popular television program *Xena: Warrior Princess*. This script would not qualify as “literature” by any standard other than one in which absolutely everything in print is “literature.”

Despite the amalgam of genres and writers, selections from the same authors appear in many of the textbooks. Ravitch reports that:

Certain writers appear again and again. They are Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Cade Bambara, Jane Yolen, Gary Soto, Laurence Yep, Pat Mora, Julia Alvarez, Walter Dean Myers, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Rudolfo A. Anaya. Most of them are not well known to the general public, but their stories, essays, and poems are omnipresent in the textbook world. . . . [Students] will certainly know the work of Cisneros; there is hardly a literary textbook at any grade level, regardless of publisher, that does not include her writing.

No doubt many of these authors are talented, though it is hard to read through Ravitch’s list without concluding that publishers are surreptitiously applying a surname-selection screen that discriminates against white Anglo-Saxons. Yet there is another feature of the list that is less obvious but equally telling: most of the writers are contemporary authors. Unlike the fusty classics, contemporary writing is particularly prized in literature anthologies, in large measure because the National Council of Teachers of English has adopted the position that literature must be relevant to high school students and “include” them. Captain Ahab, Heathcliffe, Hester Prynne, and Miss Haversham are all so old, from such a different era, that they are hard for teenagers to “relate” to—or so the theory goes.

This narrow, functional view of literature seems counterproductive, at least if the aim is to stimulate young people’s imaginations and taste for reading. Great literature is often engaging precisely because it affords a free ticket to travel into other worlds, other eras, and the

lives of characters quite different from our own. A basic goal of literature textbooks should be to broaden children's horizons, not narrow them. As Ravitch writes:

Literature actually does what the bias and sensitivity codes claim to do: It teaches us about our common humanity. . . . Great literature does not comfort us; it does not make us feel better about ourselves. It is not written to enhance our self-esteem or to make us feel that we are "included" in the story. It takes us into its own world and creates its own reality. It shakes us up; it makes us think.

4

TOWARD THE REFORM OF TEXTBOOK ADOPTION

The textbook adoption process is broken. It consistently produces second-rate books that replicate the same flaws and failings over and over again. These sanitized tomes are long-winded yet shallow, methodically executed but incoherent, and laden with eye-popping graphics yet eye-glazingly dull to read. States with textbook adoption policies perform poorly on national tests, and the market incentives caused by the adoption process are so skewed that lively writing and top-flight scholarship are discouraged, as are tests of the books' classroom effectiveness. Every individual analyst and expert panel that has studied American K-12 textbooks has concluded that they are sorely lacking and that the adoption process cries out for reform. Yet it plods on in twenty-one states. Why?

The cause *isn't* money per se; the states spend just under a cent of every education dollar on instructional materials, and el-hi publishers would ring up billions of dollars of textbook sales even under a reformed system. This archaic and dysfunctional arrangement persists rather because of its accustomed familiarity and the institutional self-interests of publishers, political pressure groups, and the state education departments in California and Texas, all of which have reached a mutual accommodation at the expense of the nation's schoolchildren. Education officials get to put their time-honored stamp on textbooks; the multicultural left and religious right are pleased because texts are scrubbed of anything that might displease them; and the publishing cartel has learned to censor itself to win book approvals in California and Texas, thereby continuing to rake in huge profits and dampen competition. The system fails to serve the public interest, yet it does serve the parochial interests of its participants and immediate stakeholders. Thus, reform is not likely to come from within. The Association of American Publishers has periodically mouthed pro-reform sentiments, but its lobbyists in Sacramento, Austin, and

Tallahassee actively oppose any change of the current system and mainly concern themselves with keeping the state textbook funding pipeline as large as possible.

Yet there are some grounds for hope. Most states do not adopt K-12 books statewide. Furthermore, sunlight is beginning to illuminate this long-obscure process, especially since publication in 2003 of Diane Ravitch's bestselling *The Language Police*. Meanwhile, society may be losing some of its patience for multicultural silliness and the overbearing rectitude of the religious right. And there is widening recognition among education experts and policy makers that today's K-12 textbooks are failing to educate students at the very time the nation is striving to leave no child behind—and judging more and more of its education policies and practices by their effectiveness with respect to academic achievement.

What might reform of the textbook adoption process entail? Previous fixes offer one crucial lesson: Incremental reforms don't work. Many of the counterproductive aspects of textbook adoption resulted from well-intentioned—and, at the time, seemingly plausible—steps to fix an existing problem in the textbook publishing and selection system. California's 1976 social content guidelines aimed to redress textbook imbalances of gender, race, and ethnicity, but ended up creating a rigid multicultural spoils system that distorts history. Texas sought to favor traditional lifestyles and protect religion from criticism—and ended up encouraging the censorship of information that might, say, help children understand Islamic terrorism and religious conflict in the Middle East. When Texas tried to reform the process in 1995, so that textbooks could only be challenged for factual inaccuracies or failure to comply with state standards, the publishers kept right on rolling, assuming that nothing had really changed in the Lone Star State. El-hi editors knew better than to submit a textbook to Texas officials that would inform schoolchildren that hate-crime victim Matthew Shepard was gay.

The textbook adoption process is so filled with perverse incentives that it is like a modern-day Hydra: cut off one head and another takes its place. The only way to slay this monster is to abolish the whole system. Eliminating statewide textbook adoption would make adoption states like open territory states, and would refashion the current K-12

textbook procurement system to make it operate more like a healthy market—one with competition among publishers, and incentives to produce quality textbooks that work. In a functioning marketplace, responsibility for selecting instructional materials would return to school districts, individual schools, and particularly to teachers, much as happens now in open territory states (as well as in charter and private schools). Smaller “boutique” publishers would be able to flourish and offer a wider range of instructional products, including biographies, primary sources, trade books, memoirs, and anthologies. Educators would have more choices. Some of those would inevitably be better than today’s mediocrities. Prices might decline with increased competition, and there would be less need to pay for bulk and glitz. Children’s backpacks might stop splitting at the seams. And more students might manage to remain awake while reading their assignments, because what they would be reading would not be soporific. They might even learn more.

Deregulating the textbook market does not mean that textbook content would no longer be scrutinized. Every public school would still be obliged to meet state or district academic standards, and its students’ learning would still be monitored on state and district assessments. But within a results-based framework of accountability, teachers and schools would be free to choose the instructional materials that they believed best served their students. Unlike the current process, quality, not quantity, should count, and educational outcomes, not inputs and checklists, should be the gauges of success. These two concurrent goals—deregulating the textbook market, while strengthening the standards and accountability movement—should be the keystones for overhauling the nation’s textbook system.

Having survived for decades, the adoption system may seem an unlikely candidate for elimination, both because of vested interests and inertia and because of fear that chaos would ensue—today’s devil, whatever his faults, may seem preferable to tomorrow’s surprises. In fact, however, abolishing textbook adoption is less radical than it seems. Most states get by just fine without it. Their school boards, schools, and teachers manage to find suitable instructional materials—and their students generally outperform students from adoption states. In higher education, hundreds of thousands of professors

successfully pick their own course textbooks, without the assistance of a state committee whose members may not even have time to read the books they are ostensibly evaluating. The fact that many home-schooled students have done well suggests that even relatively well-informed parents are capable of choosing appropriate texts and literature for their children. If complications arise from decentralizing textbook selection, they are more likely to result from shifting the purchasing process to districts than from teachers who are incapable of selecting books for their students.

To turn the adoption train around, it's not necessary that every adoption state simultaneously abandon its regimen. If several of the largest adoption states were to change their practices, the whole post-Civil War system would slowly unravel, freeing publishers from the whims of California and Texas regulators. Of course, pressure groups from the right and left will object. They will argue that K-12 textbooks, unlike university textbooks, are paid for with taxpayer dollars, upping the need for public review and comment. Multiculturalists and fundamentalists are correct that they have a constitutionally protected right to object to textbooks not of their liking.

They do not, however, have a constitutionally protected right to determine textbook content all across the country. Ideally, their protests should be made locally, in public schools that the protesters' children attend, and should involve the teachers and principals who chose the disputed books. Some protests will be judged legitimate, some not, just as in the past. But deregulating textbook adoption would no longer mean that children nationwide had to read about Mansa Musa in U.S. history books to please the California PC-police or review timelines of U.S. history that omit the New Deal because a Texas couple doesn't like that part of our history. Deregulating the selection of instructional materials would put an end to the national hijacking of textbook content by a handful of zealots.

Strengthening the Standards Movement

A number of adoption states have already started placing more emphasis on textbooks that assist students and teachers to attain state academic standards. There are, however, two prominent shortcomings in current efforts to link textbooks to instructional improvement and

accountability. First, of course, any plan to refashion textbooks to align better with state academic standards is beneficial only insofar as the standards themselves are well-crafted. To date, states have a mixed record in this respect. The second failing is that publishers and states have often conducted “standards-based reviews” of textbooks in a narrow, mechanistic way that can further detract from instructional coherence.

Standards-based or standards-aligned textbooks will proliferate in the coming years, if only because of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). That law requires states to test students annually in grades three through eight (and at least once during high school) in math and reading. In 2007, they will also be required—as a condition of receiving federal Title I dollars—to test their students in science. NCLB contains sanctions and interventions for schools in which students fail to make “adequate yearly progress.” The testing provisions and sanctions of NCLB are sure to generate new interest in standards-based textbooks, particularly since many textbooks in use today have not been updated to reflect the recent wave of state academic standards. Most states purchase instructional materials on a six-year cycle—which means that many current textbooks were adopted before states created or updated their standards. Driven in large measure by NCLB, the Association of American Publishers has recommended that, “By 2004 every student in every class should be provided a current standards-based textbook in each of the core academic areas: reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social studies.” It remains to be seen whether poorly written or incomplete standards can yield standards-aligned textbooks that cover essential content and prove a useful aid to learning. The prospects, however, are not good.

There are also problems with the process of aligning textbooks to standards that militate against comprehensive subject coverage and general coherence. El-hi publishers create extremely detailed “standards mappings” and “curriculum mappings” based on state standards that show, page by page, paragraph by paragraph, how the textbook reflects state academic standards. The problem, however, is that these “mappings” are often of a mechanistic “checklist” variety. The textbooks that result touch on dozens of points pertinent to the standards.

But they typically fail to provide a cohesive, engaging text that enables students to master the subject at hand. Gilbert Sewall of the American Textbook Council has noted that when the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) framework specifically mentioned Desmond Tutu, as it did in 2001, it was “assured that Desmond Tutu will obtain a prominent position in new editions. If a formerly unknown figure like Erastotenes appears on the TEKS list, he enters textbooks with a flourish.” (Erastotenes was the Hellenistic astronomer who figured out that the world was round.) These may be worthy additions to course materials. But as Sewall notes, “They are grafted on to already overburdened world history textbooks without any regard for coherence.”

It's the System, Stupid

Textbook adoption is a fundamentally flawed process: it distorts the market, entices extremist groups to hijack the curriculum, and papers the land with mediocre instructional materials that cannot fulfill their important education mission. The adoption process cannot be set right by tinkering with it. Rather, legislators and governors in “adoption” states should eliminate the process and devolve funding for and decisions about textbook purchases to individual schools, individual districts, even individual teachers.

The state's proper locus of influence over what teachers teach and children learn is its academic standards, tests, and results-based accountability system. It's the results that matter, and here state policy makers should be insistent and demanding. (The federal No Child Left Behind act more or less requires this, at least in reading, math and science.) But with that centralized control of results should come maximum freedom for teachers, schools, and school systems to produce those outcomes in the ways they think best. The state has no more business determining what textbooks they use than determining which poems (if any) a fifth grade teacher asks her class to memorize in April or which science experiments a chemistry teacher assigns to her eleventh graders in October.

Instructional materials—including but not limited to textbooks—are key parts of the domain where we should rely on front-line educators to make the best decisions for *their* pupils, in *their* schools, in the

context of *their* curricula. That means textbook selection and purchasing decisions should be made as close as possible to the teacher, ideally by the teacher herself. If that's not practical, then it should be done by the school or district.

A variety of other steps—some of them sketched below—should also be taken to assure that those selecting and purchasing the books will be well informed as to the relative merits, shortcomings, costs, and effectiveness of the options they are considering. This marketplace, like any other, needs informed and discerning consumers, as well as plenty of choices. And, of course, suitable procedures must be put in place so that scarce public school dollars are used properly and productively.

We can hear the objections: administrators, district leaders, policy makers, politically connected activists of every stripe, even some education reformers, will say that textbook adoption is too ingrained and has lasted too long to simply be repealed. Self-interested publishers will likely say the same thing. Teachers and principals, it will be argued, need guidance on what instructional materials to choose. The market does not function efficiently enough to distribute these materials without state intervention. Ending textbook adoption, it will be said, could even mean a return to the bad old days of schoolbooks awash in racial stereotypes and mindless jingoism—or Marxism and one-worldism.

Such objections, however, represent a failure of imagination. And they're archaic. It is unthinkable, for example, in today's America, that a serious publisher would include racist, anti-religious, or sexist material in a book. Indeed, the regimen of self-censorship is so deeply ingrained in publishing firms that even the end of statewide adoption may leave most textbook options almost as flaccid, boring and bulky as they are today. (In time, however, market forces will enable "boutique" publishers with more interesting and perhaps more economical products to gain entry.)

Another objection to anticipate: Ending adoption will mean that fights formerly joined at the state level will henceforth occur at the community level, as parents and activists weigh in at school board and PTA meetings where textbooks and other materials are chosen. That will surely happen in some places. Yet, the community level is

precisely where public discussion over textbook purchases *should* occur.

Yes, one result of this reform may be a patchwork of different communities, even different schools, using different textbooks. But there is no reason that San Francisco and Houston school kids—or even Houston and Abilene—must read the same books, so long as all of them are aligned with state standards, prepare youngsters for state tests, and are effective in raising student achievement (a point addressed below). In instances where districts choose ineffective textbooks that do not strengthen pupil outcomes, the state may want to intervene—just as it would do when persistent academic failure is caused by other problems.

How odd that so many states show greater faith in their bureaucracies and committees than in the teachers and principals they hire to educate their children. How odd that we go to such pains to select professional educators—and then assume that they cannot be trusted to choose the tools they use.

Eliminating textbook adoption does not require abandoning state accountability. But accountability should focus on ends and results, not means and inputs. Operational responsibility should be local. The result will be better instructional materials, better suited to the methods of particular teachers and the needs of particular children, as well as greater vitality and innovation in textbook publishing itself.

Half Steps Toward Reform

Is the adoption habit too strong to break? Are there half steps that would ease some of the shortcomings of today's adoption process without going cold turkey?

Of course there are. Below, we offer six reforms for states that want to modify, rather than obliterate, their present adoption systems. These partial measures will not be as effective as dumping the process itself. But they would alleviate some of its worst failings and help to give better textbooks a fighting chance to emerge and be used.

In considering half-measures, however, the economic Theory of the Second Best provides a cautionary note. It says that, when a particular market already deviates significantly from a pure market, attempts to move it partially toward purity can make it even less efficient. Hence there is no guarantee that any one limited reform will make the K-12

textbook market better—or worse. Each must be considered for its merits and its risks.

Recommendation 1

- Textbook guidelines should create incentives for quality rather than quantity.

Without exception, every reviewer of today’s textbooks complains that they are overlong; cluttered with graphics, illustrations, and exercises; and bereft of a coherent narrative and story. Yet much of that problem stems from the adoption process itself, which encourages an overload of art, illustrations, pedagogical approaches, complementary materials, and Spanish language editions. Publishers that produce the most “extras” are rewarded. In Texas, for example, rating sheets long gave publishers credit for producing a slew of materials to complement the textbook, and Texas has required publishers to produce Spanish editions of textbooks—though few districts purchase them.

Adoption states should erase requirements that reward publishers for quantity and “extras,” instead encouraging plainer, shorter texts that are well-researched and well-written. The preproduction process for K-12 textbooks has gotten so skewed that some publishers and development houses select the graphics before any text is written—one reason why the pretty pictures and vivid charts do not always illustrate the actual words on the page. El-hi publishers themselves are well aware of how expensive and cumbersome this has become. In 2003, Stephen Driesler of the Association of American Publishers’ school division testified at a Senate hearing that, “AAP members would welcome any changes in the textbook selection process which would increase the focus on the pedagogical quality of the materials themselves.”

The theory underlying the present requirements is that children learn differently and therefore must be taught through diverse media: photographs, illustrations, graphics, first-person accounts, role-playing exercises to make the story “relevant,” Internet games, and so on. The corollary assumption is that children will be bored if asked to read a long, continuous narrative with few pictures or other diversions. But the latter assumption is unconvincing. Japanese schoolchildren, with

few illustrations in their textbooks, easily outperform their American counterparts. And it is worth noting that the best-selling children's series in the last decade has been the Harry Potter books, which have virtually no illustrations, photographs, or graphics—and go on for hundreds of pages with plain old black and white text.

States could experiment with other means to free teachers and publishers to concentrate more on quality. Academic standards, for instance, should not push publishers to cover a thousand topics. No area of the high school curriculum is more tainted by the quantity imperative than world history, which gallops through a breathtaking array of civilizations and epochs. In the 2004 Fordham review of world history textbooks, Diane Ravitch recommended that, “States should encourage teachers and schools to give students opportunities to spend a semester or a year engaged in the study of single cultures, regions, or civilizations. If ever there was a course in which students have no idea why they are studying this or that civilization, it is world history as presently organized.”

Finally, adoption states could encourage the development of top-notch instructional materials by inviting (and perhaps subsidizing) school districts to form partnerships with local universities. University professors might be better able to assist in the preparation of specialized curricula in math, science, history, or literature. In their own courses, they tend to rely more on trade books, primary sources, novels, anthologies, and research reports, widening the range of top-notch books available to students. That approach could work well in many high school courses, too.

Recommendation 2

- State officials should eliminate their bias guidelines in general and California should abolish its “social content” guidelines in particular. Generally, state adoption processes should abandon the checklist approach—including the use of computerized key-word searches and correlational analyses.

Eliminating state bias and sensitivity reviews may sound retrograde and callous. Yet there is no reason to expect that it would cause textbook authors and publishers to return to the bad old days when

books were sexist, Eurocentric, and full of stereotypes. Sensitivity to bias is now bred in the bone among authors and development houses, and publishers have their own extensive internal guidelines, criteria and procedures. Any textbook that contained discriminatory, sexist, or stereotypical material would provoke public outcry and embarrass the publisher. The problem today with bias guidelines is not that they are a necessary bulwark against offensive textbooks. The problem is that the guidelines themselves disdain common sense and lead to dull, censored textbooks.

More broadly, the adoption process should shun the checklist approach. One reason that bias reviews damage textbooks is that they apply a mechanistic formula to the depiction of gender, ethnicity and race. The little engine in “The Little Engine That Could” *must* be female; one *must* have an equal number of male and female animals in children’s fables, and so on. Inevitably, a formulaic review of textbooks begets mechanical prose and stilted narratives full of “mentioning.”

Some adoption states pay contractors to correlate textbook content with curricular requirements by using an automated method to detect word frequencies and passage lengths. Under this method of “review,” as Harriet Tyson-Bernstein noted, “The book that uses the word ‘mitosis’ four times in two pages will have an advantage over the book that explains mitosis well in one-and-a-half pages while only using the term twice.” The detailed academic “standards mappings” that publishers now prepare in some adoption states, though springing from the admirable impulse to align textbooks with state standards, suffer from the same shortcoming. Tyson-Bernstein points out that, “Although publishers know hardly anyone reads [the mappings], they must produce these instruments anyway because they are required. Publishers freely admit that they ‘cut the suit to fit the cloth,’ grasping at mere words or captions that will prove congruence.” If states scrapped the checklist approach, the suit might better fit the buyer.

Finally, state reviewers should be obliged to actually *read* the textbooks and form their own judgments as to the quality of the text. Each reviewer might, for example, be obliged to sign a statement attesting, “I have read this book myself and have reached these conclusions about it.” The ugly alternative is continued reliance on the “flip test.”

Recommendation 3

- Abandon the use of readability formulas.

Educators first started using readability formulas about 75 years ago to judge the difficulty level of texts for elementary students. Such formulas gauge the difficulty of text primarily by counting the numbers of syllables in words and the numbers of words in sentences. Used informally, readability formulas can generate helpful indicators of reading difficulty, but adoption states soon came to apply them rigidly. Tyson-Bernstein reports that, “Publishers discovered they could lose a sale if the adoption committee submitted a randomly chosen passage to a formula analysis and found that the score was too high or too low. Defensively, textbook authors and editors began to write to adapt text so that it would survive a readability formula check. Short words (‘it,’ for example) had to be substituted for long words (‘elephant,’ for example).”

Readability formulas, in other words, literally “dumb down” textbooks. Meanwhile, studies have shown that teachers themselves can peg the reading level of instructional material with fair accuracy—which suggests that there is no urgent need for readability formulas to begin with. “There is overwhelming evidence that formula-driven prose is bad for children and bad for education,” Tyson-Bernstein notes. “There is also evidence that writers with a record of successful writing for young audiences often refuse to work for textbook publishers because they cannot tolerate the absurd restrictions that readability formulas impose.” More mechanistic prose is the last thing that textbooks need.

Recommendation 4

- Adoption state officials should drop policies and practices that discourage small, high-quality publishers from competing in the textbook market. Four such barriers to competition are: Requiring publishers to post performance bonds, to provide excessive numbers of free book samples, to stock state book depositories, and to publish frequent revisions.

A number of adoption states still require publishers to post

performance bonds, a practice devised a century ago when fly-by-night publishers sometimes failed to deliver books on time. In the Wild West and postbellum south, performance bonds had a certain plausibility. Today, however, they merely serve to restrain free enterprise by deterring smaller publishers from competing. Similarly, state sampling requirements, which require publishers to provide sample review copies, make sense in the abstract, but in practice discourage small publishers from competing in adoption states. The rationale for sampling requirements was that many people should examine a textbook before a state decides to procure it. But the number of sample copies that publishers must supply is often excessive, giving mega publishers yet another advantage and boutique publishers yet another costly hurdle. Many sample copies go unread.

In other cases, the giant el-hi publishers hook big school districts by providing a flood of free books, while smaller districts are forced to ante up the full cost of textbooks. The Georgia Inspector General and the state department of education are currently investigating Macmillan/McGraw-Hill to see if the publisher violated state law by giving away millions of dollars in free textbooks and price discounts to DeKalb County schools, home to 98,000 students. (Georgia's adoption process requires that publishers offer all schools the same price for the same textbooks.) A recent report from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found that Macmillan/McGraw-Hill gave DeKalb County schools at least \$1.7 million in free instructional materials from 1997 to 2002. One year, the publisher gave DeKalb its entire kindergarten reading program for free; subsequently the company also gave DeKalb a two-for-one deal on nearly 2,000 elementary school science kits. Meanwhile, smaller—and generally poorer—school districts had to purchase the same materials at full freight.

The practice of requiring publishers to update their textbooks regularly, or churn out new titles, plausible as it sounds, can also deter competition. The rush to keep textbooks up-to-date generates sloppiness, detracts from quality, and is expensive. As a general rule, parents don't like it when their children are using "old" textbooks. Yet the significance of an "old" textbook can vary from subject to subject. In some areas of the curriculum, (e.g., science), the current adoption cycle should probably be accelerated because being up-to-date

matters. But in more static subject areas (e.g., grammar), students might do just as well to use a textbook from the 1980s (or 1880s!) as one with a 2004 date.

Recommendation 5

- State education officials should reform the adoption process to name names—and encourage personal responsibility.

In an era when state officials tout the virtues of accountability, it makes no sense that textbook adoption still confers an element of anonymity upon those who participate in it and still employs a vote-by-committee approach. And it is inexcusable that many committee members who “review” textbooks do not actually read them. The selection of textbooks should be a transparent process, not an arcane ritual. And committee members might be less willing to play numbers games or engage in full-scale bowdlerization of texts if they had to take public responsibility for their comments, conclusions, and recommendations.

Publishers, too, could strike a blow for quality and accountability by putting an end to the paint-by-numbers textbooks now prepared by teams of writers and illustrators in development houses. A textbook that is written by everyone is ultimately written by no one—which means no one need take responsibility if it fails at its central task, which is to facilitate student learning.

Recommendation 6

- In adoption states that maintain a centralized approval process, districts, or groups of school districts, should be authorized to petition to add specific textbooks to the state-approved list.

Lawmakers should amend the process to allow districts to petition the board of education (or other responsible party) to add textbooks to the approved list that teachers have found to be effective. In 1993, for example, the Oklahoma legislature agreed to a 56-word amendment stating that, “Five or more district boards of education may petition the State Board of Education to add a textbook or a series of textbooks to the approved list selected by the State Textbook Committee. The

State Board of Education shall promulgate rules to implement the method and time frame for handling such petitions in the most expeditious manner.” If more adoption states had incorporated such provisions, local officials would be able to introduce a modicum of competition into textbook selection, and the state would benefit by being able to compare the impact of different textbooks on student performance.

Nationwide Reforms

Here we offer several additional recommendations to improve textbooks in all states, adoption or not. They represent an effort to bring the textbook sector into better alignment with the No Child Left Behind act and the premium it places on rigorous scientific research and proven instructional programs. All of these proposals are intended to alter basic incentive structures and processes, such that tomorrow’s textbooks will maintain a standard of high-quality scholarship and prose, help students acquire important knowledge and necessary skills, and stir a passion and curiosity for learning.

Recommendation 7

- State lawmakers, private foundations, and professional associations should create a textbook review industry.

Trade book authors and professors who pen university textbooks know they will be judged by their peers, and that their professional reputations rest in part on the reviews their books receive. By contrast, K-12 textbooks are seldom sold in bookstores or available in libraries, which means they are seldom reviewed by knowledgeable experts. The threat of a poor review does not function as a meaningful goad for K-12 textbook authors to do quality work. “When there is no marketplace for textbooks,” Ravitch writes, “there is no marketplace for textbook reviewing.”

Given the absence of research on the effectiveness of different textbooks, there is even greater need to build a review industry. Book reviews cannot take the place of social science experiments, but it will likely be years before researchers can compile a reliable body of experimental data on what works and what doesn’t in textbooks. In the short run, however, expert judgments—multiple judgments—by

knowledgeable reviewers could significantly strengthen buyers' capacity to select the right books. Today, just two small organizations, the New York-based American Textbook Council and the California-based Textbook League, periodically review K-12 textbooks. A few groups like the American Association for the Advancement of Science have evaluated textbooks from time to time. And the Thomas B. Fordham Institute has commissioned reviews of U.S. and world history textbooks by expert panels. But such reviews are rare. For textbook reviewing to take hold, one or more professional associations (e.g., the American Historical Association, the National Council on History Education, the Organization of American Historians, the Historical Society) will likely need to provide a format or inducements to its members. As for private foundations, Tyson-Bernstein recommends that they "support independent, critical reviews of textbooks in general circulation magazines and newspapers. . . . Foundations should nurture the development of a new American art form—a 300-500 word review, written by notable scholars or journalists, on the content and style of American textbooks."

Recommendation 8

- Fund new research centers to appraise textbook effectiveness—and substantially expand textbook research and evaluation at the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse. Federal, state, and private dollars could be used to fund pilot tests of the effectiveness of different textbooks on student achievement. Alternatively, states may want to form clearinghouses that collect data on the academic impact of textbooks and anthologies and examine the efficacy of different textbooks in meeting state standards. However, the practice of asking publishers to conduct their own field trials should be dropped.

One of the biggest difficulties in trying to pick effective textbooks is that virtually no one has scientifically evaluated their impact on academic performance. One research approach is to administer tests at the beginning and end of academic units to document the "value added" to student achievement by particular math, history, and science textbooks.

Far better would be randomized field trials that assess the effectiveness of different textbooks in “controlled” experiments, much like the experiments done to test pharmaceutical drugs, job training programs, housing vouchers, and the like. The federal What Works Clearinghouse, established in 2002, is currently evaluating interventions meant to increase K-12 math achievement. So far, it has located about 70 studies on middle school math. But only one of them meets the Clearinghouse’s standards of evidence—i.e., it employed a randomized controlled trial and did not suffer from problems of attrition or disruption. (That lone study, of a middle school math curriculum computer program, failed to show any improvement over a control group.)

This dearth of scientific studies has to be remedied if teachers, schools, or state bodies are to do a better job of selecting effective textbooks.

To date, however, most “effectiveness research” presented to textbook buyers and adoption committees consists of publisher-sponsored trials of their own instructional materials. Few surprises here: publishers typically find that their own books work well. But asking a publisher to judge its own product is like asking an author to review his own book. Some years ago, Florida required publishers to test out new books on students, report deficiencies, and revise accordingly. This “learner verification” process backfired, however, because publishers, rather than an independent source, were asked to report the results of their field trials. In fact, the publishers quickly learned to incorporate the “results” of learner verification in their sales strategies, enabling them to use field testing to give their textbooks a false aura of proven effectiveness.

Florida has swung so far in reaction that, in 2000, the legislature moved to preclude school districts and publishers from testing instructional materials during the eighteen months preceding textbook adoptions. There’s a lesson here: field trials of textbooks, like other instructional materials, are much needed. But publishers should not be responsible for them.

Recommendation 9

- Adoption state lawmakers should create a textbook “safety net” for failing schools.

Liberating teachers and schools to select their own instructional materials would be a huge step forward. Inevitably, however, questions will arise about what to do when districts or schools repeatedly fail to meet academic standards. Here, adoption states might wish to consider creating a textbook safety net tied to the provisions of No Child Left Behind. For example, the state education department could intervene to prescribe instructional materials when local districts or schools are repeatedly unable to meet academic standards. Any such intervention ought to be part of a comprehensive school or district turnaround plan as contemplated by NCLB. And to the extent that there are textbook shortages in failing schools, this lack might be redressed with modest federal or state funding as part of any state intervention plan.

Recommendation 10

- Congress should consider modestly expanding federal funding to assist states in purchasing effective instructional materials in math, science, and history—as it has with the “Reading First” program. But funds should only be provided for the purchase of materials shown to be effective in increasing student achievement.

The federal government has provided monies for teacher training, educational technology, computers, school meals, and other aspects of public education. Washington has generally steered clear of instructional materials, however.

The Reading First program is an exception. Its goal is to have all U.S. students reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Toward that end, it will spend \$5 billion over six years to support research-based reading instruction, and a portion of those funds may be expended on instructional materials. But these monies can only be used for reading programs that rigorous research has shown to be effective. As it happens, reading instruction is one of the few areas in K-12 schooling that has been extensively studied. (Reading First favors phonics programs because research has shown that such instruction is more effective in helping children who are struggling to read). Unfortunately, there is no comparable body of data in most of the math, science, and history curricula. Once scientific research establishes more clearly what does and doesn't work in these subjects,

Congress may wish to provide modest additional funding to speed the spread of effective instructional materials.

A Concluding Note: Trusting Teachers

Better-trained teachers ultimately must be a linchpin of any campaign to improve K-12 textbooks and instructional materials. Eliminating statewide adoption and devolving responsibility to teachers to pick instructional materials that best serve their students would radically reshape the American textbook industry. But just as attempts to link textbook content to academic standards can only be as effective as the standards themselves, so, too, teacher selection of textbooks can only be as good as teachers' mastery of the subjects they teach. As Ravitch has observed, the nation's schools "need science teachers who would refuse to buy textbooks that are laden with errors and politicization. We need teachers of English who have read widely and know just the piece of literature . . . that will arouse young minds. We need teachers of history who will reject textbooks that are bland, boring, and misleading."

Take a step back and ask whether the money, time, and effort now spent on creating, approving, and distributing textbooks would not be better spent preparing teachers who are knowledgeable about their subjects and willing to be innovative in their teaching. In the end, textbooks, no matter how informative, will never be as effective an instrument of learning as an excellent teacher.

Eliminating statewide textbook adoptions will strike some as extreme or perhaps naive. Yet there is reason to imagine that in a decade or two these recommendations may seem tame. If nothing else, the Internet revolution will surely alter the nature of instructional materials. The American textbook in its present form will likely not endure another generation. Now is the time for education reformers, state lawmakers, teachers, publishers, and state education officials to think about what should replace it.

1996 4th Grade NAEP Math Scores

Connecticut	232
Maine	232
Minnesota	232
North Dakota	231
Wisconsin	231
Indiana	229
Iowa	229
Massachusetts	229
Texas	229
Montana	228
Nebraska	228
New Jersey	227
Utah	227
Colorado	226
Michigan	226
Pennsylvania	226
Missouri	225
Vermont	225
Washington	225
Alaska	224
North Carolina	224
New York	223
Oregon	223
Virginia	223
West Virginia	223
Wyoming	223
Maryland	221
Kentucky	220
Rhode Island	220
Tennessee	219
Arizona	218
Nevada	218
Arkansas	216
Florida	216

Delaware	215
Georgia	215
Hawaii	215
New Mexico	214
South Carolina	213
Alabama	212
California	209
Louisiana	209
Mississippi	208
District of Col.	187
Idaho	
Illinois	
Kansas	
New Hampshire	
Ohio	
Oklahoma	
South Dakota	

Adoption states are highlighted.
 Note: Prior to 2003, not all
 states administered NAEP tests
 every year.

Accommodations not permitted

1996 8th Grade NAEP Math Scores

Iowa	284
Maine	284
Minnesota	284
North Dakota	284
Montana	283
Nebraska	283
Wisconsin	283
Connecticut	280
Vermont	279
Alaska	278
Massachusetts	278
Michigan	277
Utah	277
Colorado	276
Indiana	276
Oregon	276
Washington	276
Wyoming	275
Missouri	273
Maryland	270
New York	270
Texas	270
Virginia	270
Rhode Island	269
Arizona	268
North Carolina	268
Delaware	267
Kentucky	267
West Virginia	265
Florida	264
California	263
Tennessee	263
Arkansas	262
Georgia	262

Hawaii	262
New Mexico	262
South Carolina	261
Alabama	257
Louisiana	252
Mississippi	250
District of Col.	233
Idaho	
Illinois	
Kansas	
Nevada	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
Ohio	
Oklahoma	
Pennsylvania	
South Dakota	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations not permitted

2000 4th Grade NAEP Math Scores

Connecticut	234
Minnesota	234
Indiana	233
Massachusetts	233
Kansas	232
Vermont	232
Iowa	231
Texas	231
Maine	230
North Carolina	230
North Dakota	230
Ohio	230
Virginia	230
Michigan	229
Wyoming	229
Missouri	228
Montana	228
Utah	227
Nebraska	225
New York	225
Idaho	224
Oklahoma	224
Oregon	224
Rhode Island	224
Illinois	223
West Virginia	223
Maryland	222
Nevada	220
South Carolina	220
Tennessee	220
Arizona	219
Georgia	219
Kentucky	219
Louisiana	218

Alabama	217
Arkansas	216
Hawaii	216
California	213
New Mexico	213
Mississippi	211
District of Col.	192
Alaska	
Colorado	
Delaware	
Florida	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
Pennsylvania	
South Dakota	
Washington	
Wisconsin	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted

2000 8th Grade NAEP Math Scores

Minnesota	287
Montana	285
Kansas	283
North Dakota	282
Connecticut	281
Indiana	281
Maine	281
Ohio	281
Vermont	281
Nebraska	280
Oregon	280
Massachusetts	279
Idaho	277
Michigan	277
North Carolina	276
Wyoming	276
Illinois	275
Virginia	275
Utah	274
Texas	273
Maryland	272
Missouri	271
New York	271
Kentucky	270
Oklahoma	270
Arizona	269
Rhode Island	269
West Virginia	266
Georgia	265
Nevada	265
South Carolina	265
Alabama	264
Hawaii	262
Tennessee	262

California	260
Louisiana	259
New Mexico	259
Arkansas	257
Mississippi	254
District of Col.	235
Alaska	
Colorado	
Delaware	
Florida	
Iowa	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
Pennsylvania	
South Dakota	
Washington	
Wisconsin	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted

1998 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

Connecticut	230
New Hampshire	226
Maine	225
Montana	225
Massachusetts	223
Wisconsin	222
Kansas	221
Colorado	220
Iowa	220
Minnesota	219
Oklahoma	219
Kentucky	218
Rhode Island	218
Washington	218
Wyoming	218
Virginia	217
Michigan	216
Missouri	216
Utah	216
West Virginia	216
New York	215
Texas	214
North Carolina	213
Maryland	212
Oregon	212
Tennessee	212
Alabama	211
Arkansas	209
Georgia	209
South Carolina	209
Delaware	207
Arizona	206
Florida	206
Nevada	206

New Mexico	205
Mississippi	203
California	202
Hawaii	200
Louisiana	200
District of Col.	179
Alaska	
Idaho	
Illinois	
Indiana	
Nebraska	
New Jersey	
North Dakota	
Ohio	
Pennsylvania	
South Dakota	
Vermont	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted

1998 8th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

Maine	271
Montana	271
Connecticut	270
Massachusetts	269
Kansas	268
Oregon	266
Virginia	266
Minnesota	265
New York	265
Oklahoma	265
Wisconsin	265
Colorado	264
Rhode Island	264
Washington	264
Utah	263
Wyoming	263
Kentucky	262
Missouri	262
North Carolina	262
West Virginia	262
Maryland	261
Texas	261
Arizona	260
Nevada	258
New Mexico	258
Tennessee	258
Georgia	257
Arkansas	256
Alabama	255
Florida	255
South Carolina	255
Delaware	254
California	252
Louisiana	252

Mississippi	251
Hawaii	249
District of Col.	236
Alaska	
Idaho	
Illinois	
Indiana	
Iowa	
Michigan	
Nebraska	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
North Dakota	
Ohio	
Pennsylvania	
South Dakota	
Vermont	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted

2002 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

Massachusetts	234
Connecticut	229
Vermont	227
Maine	225
Minnesota	225
Virginia	225
Delaware	224
Montana	224
North Dakota	224
Washington	224
Iowa	223
Indiana	222
Kansas	222
Nebraska	222
New York	222
North Carolina	222
Ohio	222
Utah	222
Pennsylvania	221
Wyoming	221
Idaho	220
Missouri	220
Oregon	220
Rhode Island	220
Kentucky	219
Michigan	219
West Virginia	219
Maryland	217
Texas	217
Georgia	215
Florida	214
South Carolina	214
Tennessee	214
Arkansas	213

Oklahoma	213
Nevada	209
Hawaii	208
New Mexico	208
Alabama	207
Louisiana	207
California	206
Arizona	205
Mississippi	203
District of Col.	191
Alaska	
Colorado	
Illinois	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
South Dakota	
Wisconsin	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted

2002 8th Grade NAEP Reading Scores

Vermont	272
Massachusetts	271
Maine	270
Montana	270
Nebraska	270
Kansas	269
Virginia	269
Missouri	268
North Dakota	268
Ohio	268
Oregon	268
Washington	268
Connecticut	267
Delaware	267
Idaho	266
Indiana	265
Kentucky	265
Michigan	265
North Carolina	265
Pennsylvania	265
Wyoming	265
New York	264
West Virginia	264
Maryland	263
Utah	263
Oklahoma	262
Rhode Island	262
Texas	262
Florida	261
Arkansas	260
Tennessee	260
Georgia	258
South Carolina	258
Arizona	257

Louisiana	256
Mississippi	255
New Mexico	254
Alabama	253
Hawaii	252
Nevada	251
California	250
District of Col.	240
Alaska	
Colorado	
Illinois	
Iowa	
Minnesota	
New Hampshire	
New Jersey	
South Dakota	
Wisconsin	

Adoption states are highlighted

Accommodations permitted