

## COMMENTARY

# Howard: Print or electronic textbooks - why not both?

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Texas has 4.6 million children enrolled in public schools today. By 2010, the state will have more than 4.8 million public school students who are counting on us to provide them with a quality education and a chance to compete in a global economy.

Keep those numbers in mind when you read news accounts that talk about how much the state is spending on instructional materials. When 4.8 million children need textbooks, we are not talking about an insignificant expenditure, and the price tag is not the only factor magnifying the weight of this procurement.

Textbooks are expected to last for eight to 10 years, which means the English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) instructional materials used by our students do not contain the state's revised curriculum for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills test, nor are they aligned with the newly adopted college readiness standards.

In 2009, the Legislature will have the responsibility of appropriating funds from the Available School Fund (ASF) — a part of the Permanent School Fund (PSF) — to pay for new instructional materials. Like other trust funds, the PSF has suffered losses as a result of the financial climate, which will result in less money distributed through the ASF.

I appreciate the fact that the American-Statesman has examined the issue, but I was discouraged by some of the comments which implied that the state is faced with an either/or choice between textbooks and technology. It is obvious to most parents of school-age children that Texas must invest in technology, but to do so at the expense of providing updated curriculum would be a fatal mistake.

It is undeniable that today's students are geared toward a technology-centered approach to learning, and allocating more resources for the purchase of hardware and software is the best way to match the delivery of content to our children's learning preferences. However, improved delivery is not a substitute for robust and relevant curriculum. If you fund technology but not content, you have nothing.

There is also the issue of where the money comes from. A technology allotment of \$30 per student is built into the education funding formulas, and like textbooks, the ASF is the revenue source. The Legislature has the authority to increase the allotment via statute (which would make it a lasting increase) or in the appropriations bill (which would be a one-time bump for that specific budget cycle). So diverting money from the appropriation for textbooks is like robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The Legislature has a choice to make, and that choice is whether or not to support the investments in public education that are necessary to give our students every chance to succeed. Are we willing to commit additional funds for technology without sacrificing content to do so? I am confident that we as legislators will rise to the challenge in 2009, and continue funding the necessary textbooks and materials while also investing in new learning technologies to prepare students for the 21st century economy.