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LEGISLATURE '09 EDUCATION

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By **TERRENCE STUTZ** / The Dallas Morning News

tstutz@dallasnews.com

AUSTIN – Advocates for more technology in the classroom – and fewer textbooks – are stepping up their arguments for change this year, trying to convince Texas lawmakers that the future of electronic textbooks is now.

The technology push is getting a boost from a special House committee that warned about the consequences if Texas is stuck in the past when it comes to classroom materials. Among the reasons: the higher cost of printed books, the expense of transporting and storing them, and the fact that they can be outdated before students get them.

"Our current system just seems outdated in an economy where you can put much of this content out digitally without all those costs," said Rep. Dan Branch, the Dallas Republican who led the committee. He is preparing to file legislation that gives school districts more leverage to purchase electronic textbooks. The goal is to enable local school officials to speed up their shift to e-books through downloads to student laptops, access to online servers or use of computer disks.

'Slow evolution'

Textbook publishers say that while they offer digital versions of many of their products, the expense of computers makes books a better option for some districts.

"You can't put digital content into schools unless there are computers and laptops there to read it. That's the key – and it's happening in some districts but not in others," said Jay Diskey of the Association of American Publishers. "It's a slow evolution, and in a state like Texas, where there is a large enrollment, it is a very expensive proposition."

While there is not a great deal of research on how well students do with electronic books, one recent study from Great Britain found that young students using e-books scored higher in both group and individual tests than those using print books. A pilot program in Texas – providing laptops to all students in selected schools in two dozen districts – also has been getting positive results.

Irving is the only school district in the Dallas area participating in the Technology Immersion Pilot. The district is known as a technology leader in North Texas, having provided all its high school students with laptops for several years.

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Irving ISD is ahead of the game when it comes to technology. All district high school students have laptops. Gabriel Sanchez used one in math class last spring at the Academy of Irving ISD High School.

Alice Owen, executive director of technology for the district, said there is no doubt that the emphasis on technology has paid off with improved student achievement and performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

"Laptops have certainly been a major factor in our test score improvements," she said.

While many textbooks are available in digital format to be accessed on computers, Owen said there are still a large number of books – particularly at the elementary school level – that aren't available in electronic form.

"It makes more sense for publishers to offer their books electronically, so they can correct errors and update information every year – as opposed to printed textbooks, which are unchanged for several years," she said. "There is also so much more opportunity to enhance textbook experience."

Diskey said publishers have been moving into the digital age as quickly as other industries, and most of them offer digital as well as traditional textbooks to school districts in Texas.

One area of dispute is whether funds used for textbook purchases in the past should be used in the future to buy computers and hardware – an idea strongly opposed by publishers and the State Board of Education.

Branch said lawmakers should be open to the idea of a combined state allotment for technology and textbooks, but he maintained that "most of the funding has to be focused on content, including software."

House Public Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, supports the technology push, although he cautions that some school districts are still more comfortable – financially and educationally – with regular textbooks.

"Hopefully, we will evolve into an all-technology content delivery, but we're not there yet," he said. "It is tough to break some traditions in our schools, but we do have many districts that are ahead of the curve on technology."

Eissler, who served on the select committee with Branch, said there appear to be obvious savings by shifting away from textbooks to technology – one of the reasons he sees "big changes" coming to the textbook market.

For example, a joint venture of five higher education textbook publishers – called CourseSmart – is selling e-textbooks nationwide for prices that are on average half that of equivalent printed copies. While e-textbooks can be viewed on a laptop, another option is the Kindle reader, which allows readers to load books just as songs are loaded on an iPod.

Readiness question

Senate Education Committee Chairwoman Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, wants to be careful about how quickly the state spurs school districts to move into the digital age.

"Not everyone is ready to do 21st-century technology," she said. "Some districts are very capable of going online, while others still have a difficult time."

"I don't want to see us throw one out and replace it with the other but instead combine them and give districts the flexibility to decide when they want to use textbooks and when they would rather use technology."

Branch said he intends to give districts plenty of leeway in bringing more technology into schools.

"In certain grades, such as reading for first-graders, a textbook may be exactly the right tool. But in a computer graphics class in high school, the best tool is probably not a textbook," he said.

"The point is, we need to be looking for more efficient ways to get course content to students in a way that is most appealing to them."