

Aging textbooks fail Illinois kids

Throughout the state, schoolchildren are using books that are falling apart and badly out-of-date

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Across Illinois, students are resorting to duct tape and rubber bands to hold together decrepit textbooks. Other books are so woefully out-of-date they don't teach fundamentals such as the fall of Soviet communism, a three-month Tribune investigation has found.

A survey of 50 districts of varying wealth and size shows public schools are failing to provide the most basic tool of learning: a current book in good condition.

Nearly 80 percent of districts surveyed are using textbooks in a main academic area that are out-of-date--at least 8 years old. About 22 percent of districts have books at least 15 years old.

Some schools have too few books to go around, forcing students to share and limiting teachers' ability to assign homework.

Shortages and old books, however, hardly register in Springfield, where lawmakers decide how much to spend on books.

Jesse Ruiz, chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education, which advises lawmakers on the budget, said he didn't hear any complaints about textbooks in hearings earlier this year.

But Maureen Waters, a teacher at Richards Career Academy High School on the South Side, told the Tribune that her contemporary history class uses a 1988 text that ends with the Reagan presidency.

She turned to cyberspace for help. "Desperate for textbooks," she pleaded online to potential donors.

In Winthrop Harbor, near the Wisconsin border, some 6th graders get

rubber bands along with their ragged social studies books.

And in Lincoln Park High School's most prestigious program, the first assignment for some students is to duct-tape the broken spines of their biology and history books. One algebra book is older than the teens themselves.

Among Tribune findings:

Book prices continue to increase, but state funding for textbooks has been flat to declining since 2000-01 and often doesn't buy even one text per child. Local districts, many struggling with deficits, must pick up the rest of the tab, but officials say teacher salaries and other needs take priority over books.

Parents are being squeezed to buy their children's books, a practice unheard of in most states. In fact, Illinois collects more revenue from book fees and sales in public schools than any other state, federal data show. Some districts also mark up books sold to students by as much as 25 percent, a practice that is raising concerns among state officials.

Like blackboards and chalk, textbooks long have been an academic staple, and educators agree that they are here to stay even though laptop computers and electronic books are popular in some classrooms.

Schools nationwide typically try to replace books every five to eight years to keep up with new developments and changing standards for schoolchildren, said Stephen Driesler, an executive at the Association of American Publishers.

For example, math curricula changed dramatically through the mid-

1990s, resulting in a big shift in textbook content, said John Carter, a textbook author and director of mathematics at Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire. Today's books have more focus on data analysis and probability.

Illinois put new learning standards in place in 1998, detailing what children must know to pass tests in math, reading, science and other subjects. Under federal No Child Left Behind reforms, schools face sanctions if too many children flunk state tests.

Some books predate ISAT needs

In Downstate Sparta, an impoverished district near the Missouri border, the 7th-grade math books have a copyright date of 1991, well before the standards took effect. Some books have been repaired so often that words have been trimmed off the pages.

"You can't do the problems anymore," said Gary Ebers, a district teacher for 33 years. "If we replaced them with anything, we'd have twice as much of a chance of being successful" on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test.

Nearly 65 percent of students in the district passed the ISAT last school year, a slightly lower rate than the state average.

In 2007-08, science tests, along with reading and math, will be used to judge whether schools meet federal standards.

But in Cook County's Burbank District 111, elementary students still use the 10-year-old textbook that

tripped them up during a field trip to the Adler Planetarium last fall.

Asked how many moons Jupiter has, the children answered 16--the number in their 1996 book. But based on recent discoveries, the correct answer is more than 60.

Burbank Assistant Supt. Randel Josserand said the district has not agreed on a new science curriculum, one reason for the delay in replacing the books. When he arrived two years ago, he also found that the schedule for replacing textbooks had been stretched to every 10 years because the district's priority was equipping a new junior high. The replacement schedule is now every five years.

The Tribune found textbooks taking a back seat to other priorities in other districts as well, especially in those struggling with deficits. State financial data show that 56 percent of districts spent more than they took in last school year.

In Winthrop Harbor, a working-class community in Lake County, citizens have rejected tax increases repeatedly, prompting the district to slash \$45,000 from its textbook budget in 2002, among other cuts.

Rubber bands were distributed at the beginning of the year to keep some books together.

Sixth grader Ryder Belzer's 6-year-old social studies book is split in half. One night earlier this school year, he said, he couldn't find the pages he needed for his homework. He found the loose pages in his locker the next morning.

Classmate Paul Kouros' book is missing its cover. When he held it up, all the pages fell out.

"The school has no caring for the students," Paul said, kneeling to pick them up.

In the state capital, Springfield District 186 had to stretch out its book-replacement schedule from six to nine years when it got into financial trouble in 2001-02 and made \$10 million in budget cuts. When cash ran out to buy some science materials, parents came to the rescue with an idea to sell 1 million doughnuts.

They sold 250,000 "Mel-O-Creams," enough to buy \$1,500 science kits and donate cash to several schools.

Salaries are taking priority

With money tight, the massive Chicago Public Schools system's top priority is paying teacher salaries, budget director Pedro Martinez said. The district distributes about \$75 million per year to about 600 schools for textbooks but has not increased that budget substantially for several years, he said.

Schools buy their own books, and the central office is not always aware of problems because it does not scrutinize book spending and inventory at each school, Martinez said.

At Richards, history teacher Waters said some students don't have their own books to take home. What's worse, some texts are nearly 20 years old.

"The kicker is the class is contemporary history--and we don't even have the fall of the Soviet Union," she said.

She turned to philanthropic Web site DonorsChoose.org, which is geared to granting teachers' needs. Waters' page is titled: Desperate for Textbooks.

"Can you imagine teaching a history class without textbooks? ... My students are hardworking, but I feel that their educational needs are being neglected," she states on the site.

She asked for 30 copies of "The Americans" at a cost of \$2,952. So far, 6 percent of the order has been funded.

Across the nation, state lawmakers budget billions for public school expenses every year, including textbooks. Most of the big population states, including Illinois, set aside a specific pot of money for books.

That's not to say there haven't been problems, as states across the country battle deficits.

A 2002 survey by the Association of American Publishers and the National Education Association showed that one out of six teachers surveyed did not have enough books for every child.

In California, a 2000 lawsuit over book shortages and other inequities led to new requirements to ensure children have texts to take home.

Although states such as California and Texas fund textbooks predominantly with state tax dollars, Illinois

depends more on local property taxes, as it does for most public education expenses.

But with voters rejecting local tax increases, districts rely on parents to pay for books, through fees that help cover book purchases or book sales to students.

Even with parents chipping in, Illinois doesn't spend as much on textbooks per student as other states such as Florida, New Jersey and New York, publishing industry data show.

Illinois allocates only enough to buy books for one grade span every three years--K to 4th; 5th to 8th; and then 9th to 12th. Lawmakers budgeted \$30.2 million in 2000-01 but cut that to \$29.1 million in 2002-03, where it has remained, state records show.

At the same time, book prices have gone up by at least 5 percent to 6 percent every year, educators and publishers say. Illinois allocated \$38.97 per child this year for 5th- through 8th-grade books. But most of the books ordered, in reading, social studies and science, cost between \$51 and \$86, the Illinois State Board of Education said.

Educators say the problems have escaped attention in part because parents assume children have current books.

Though parents often will inquire about a child's teacher, "I don't think I've ever had a parent ask me, 'What textbook is my child using,'" said Katherine Ruh, a former principal and now an administrator in Cook County's East Maine District 63.

The Tribune uncovered the problems by surveying 50 districts across geographic regions about the age and condition of books in the four main academic areas: English, math, social studies and science.

The newspaper also interviewed more than 100 educators, curriculum experts, students, parents and other officials around the nation. Eight years is the benchmark for when books become outdated, based on those interviews.

In all, 39 of 50 districts had books in at least one core subject that were eight years or older, and outdated books were common even in affluent areas.

Affluent districts not immune

In DuPage's middle- to upper-middle-class Glen Ellyn District 41, some junior high students still use 14-year-old math textbooks. In wealthy Oak Brook, Butler District 53 has some 10-year-old pre-algebra books. Both districts have ordered new books for the fall.

In some cases, the Tribune received conflicting reports.

Elise Croteau-Chonka, 15, a freshman in the International Baccalaureate program at Chicago's Lincoln Park High School, has an algebra-trigonometry book with a 1990 copyright date and a ripped spine.

She said she spent the first part of her classes this year duct-taping her 1998 biology book and 1997 European history book.

School Principal Bessie Karvelas told the Tribune that textbooks "as a rule are under 10 years old," at her school.

"Here at Lincoln Park, we replenish and replace the books whenever they are needed," she said. Later, she acknowledged that the 1990 algebra book exists but that it isn't used all year.

Karvelas said she was aware that books are not always in "excellent" condition at the school but blamed the problem on the quality of the binding on very large and heavy books.

Elise's mother, Clarisse Croteau-Chonka, a private curriculum developer, still said she thinks her daughter is getting a good education because books are not the only teaching tool in a classroom.

But she was appalled when she found out her daughter's books had to be taped.

The age of the science textbooks also worried her. "Biology has changed enormously in eight years," she said.

Although the Tribune investigation focused on textbooks in the core subjects, it found that books in other areas such as health, business, foreign language and vocational studies also were being neglected.

For example, agriculture business books go back to 1968 at North Clay Community High School in tiny Louisville in Downstate Clay County, where farming is key.

Faced with outdated books, teachers often resort to creating makeshift texts from material on the Internet and other sources, but that requires a copying machine and paper, materials not always plentiful.

At Jensen Scholastic Academy on Chicago's West Side, 7th-grade teacher Kristina Demma said she has to teach with three different math books in the same class, one of them with a 1991 copyright. Her 1990 grammar books are falling apart.

But copying updated materials is a challenge, she said, because teachers received only enough copying paper this school year to last for two months, and the copy machines rarely work.

The Tribune also found that tape has become a valuable commodity in schools with worn books.

Said one superintendent, Terry O'Brien: "Duct tape is our friend; it's our Band-Aid." He heads Lake County's Grass Lake District 36 in Antioch, which was in severe financial trouble before voters passed a tax increase in April 2005.

In Gallatin County's District 7, bordering Kentucky, middle school clerk Linda Patton acts as an in-house book repairer.

"This is part of my daily duties," she said one recent afternoon while applying clear packing tape to a social studies book.

The oldest book in the district, a 5th-grade English book, dates to 1987.

"We should have better books than this," complained 6th grader Andrew Cox, 12, who picked up his book, "Our World's Story." The spine is coming apart.

Scribbled in a childish scrawl inside are the words: "Bless the teacher, bless the cook, bless the person who burns this book."

Ancient history Students in one high school on Chicago's South Side use a 1988 edition of "United States History."

IN THIS BOOK:

-Ronald Reagan is president. (There have been three presidents since then.)

-The Soviet Union is a big U.S. rival. (The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.)

-Computer advances are heralded, including the fact that Time magazine named the machine its "Man of the Year" in 1982. (There is no mention of the Internet.)

What parents should look for in textbooks:

Check your child's backpack. Are there books in at least the main academic subjects--English, math, social studies and science?

Check the copyright dates. If the books are eight years or older, they are considered outdated by many educators and curriculum experts.

Check the condition of the books. Are pages falling out or missing? Are the spines broken or damaged? If the books look rebound, are words on the pages chopped off?

If your child doesn't have books, ask why. Does the school have only enough books for children to share? Does the teacher use an approach that does not require a traditional textbook, such as "hands-on" activities in science? Ask for details.

Ask the district administration and school board why old or worn books have not been replaced.

Coming Monday: Parents feeling the pinch of high textbook prices.

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