

Bookless? State should act slowly in moving to computers only

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The campaign slogan used to be "a chicken in every pot." As Texas public schools gear up for a sea change in how students learn, the new slogan might very well be "a laptop in every backpack."

As the result of legislation passed in the past session, the mass-market hardcover textbook could go the way of VCRs and television antennas. Schools by the 2010-11 school year could begin switching to instructional content provided online, what are known as open-source textbooks. One of the major backers of this major change is state Rep. Scott Hochberg, D-Houston. He says the state could save hundreds of millions of dollars it now spends replacing lost or damaged hardcover textbooks each year.

Yes, but ...

There is just something different about reading online versus reading a book. While students certainly should be taught to avail themselves of the vast resources offered by the Internet, and computers are a wonderful learning tool, we hate to see the end of the textbook. It's just one more nail in the coffin of ink on paper.

Already, today's children read less than previous generations as electronic gadgets compete for their time. Relying solely on electronic textbooks means students will move even further away from developing the tactile pleasures of turning the pages of a book — any book — and rely solely on a blinking screen to learn about the world. We are skeptical that is a good thing.

Further, ensuring there are enough laptops to serve every student in the state of Texas is an expensive proposition. Without laptops, students are stuck only being able to read — and learn — at classroom computers, unless the family owns a personal computer. Many do, of course, but poorer families are unlikely to have the money to spend on a computer and an online connection. Then there is the issue of computer obsolescence, which may prove to be even more expensive than replacing textbooks.

We don't want to appear to be Luddites because we are excited about new technologies and the learning opportunities they can offer students. But we do believe there is a real value in teaching children how to read and learn with real books printed on real paper, as well as with computers. We just hope textbooks don't go the way of the slide rule, at least anytime soon.