



Selecting Textbooks and Other Curriculum Support Materials for Christian Schools

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|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Contents | Why Textbook Selection Is Important | 3 |
| | Selection Criteria | 3 |
| | The Selection Process | 6 |
| | Conclusion | 7 |

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Why Textbook Selection Is Important

The curriculum is at the core of any school's mission; it's what the school teaches. Once the school administration and faculty have organized the scope and sequence of the curriculum, the teachers will then devise tactics, or methods, by which to teach the curriculum to the students.

Some mistakenly think that the curriculum is just another word for textbooks. But more precisely, curriculum is the *strategy*, the content that the school wants the teacher to teach; the materials and methods that the teacher uses are *tactics* chosen as the most effective and efficient ways to teach the curriculum. The materials typically include textbooks and other physical objects (e.g., wall charts, workbooks, lab manuals) or electronic resources (e.g., web sites), often referred to as supplementary materials.

In most American classrooms, the textbooks are at the heart of the teaching methods, but they support the curriculum; they do not constitute it. The teacher makes the decisions about what material in the textbook to emphasize, what to de-emphasize, and what to skip completely. These decisions are guided by the scope and sequence of the curriculum that the administration and faculty have already determined.

A textbook that does not support that curriculum is thus counterproductive to the school's goals. It will not only deviate from the content of the curriculum but will probably interfere with the students' ability to learn the curriculum well. Those responsible for textbook selection must therefore choose carefully, considering a number of factors that help them assess a given textbook's appropriateness for the task. For a typical Christian school, the following criteria will help those evaluating potential textbooks.

Selection Criteria

The materials should agree closely with the curriculum.

Scope and Sequence

Of course, the textbook should be in line with the existing scope and sequence. If the school is teaching Biology at tenth grade and the textbook is designed for ninth grade, that may or may not be a problem for the students. But if the sequence in which the elementary math skills are introduced leads to presentation of skills for which the students have not been properly prepared, only confusion and frustration will result.

In theory, buying a single publisher's curriculum will yield a more unified scope and sequence. This does not always work out in practice, however, as some publishers allow market demands to override the cohesiveness of their overall scope and sequence. In any case, the school's scope and sequence, not the publisher's, should drive the purchasing decision. There is wisdom, however, in adopting a series at a time (e.g., elementary math, secondary English grammar) since the progress from grade to grade would likely be smoother.

Critical Thinking

If the school's curriculum emphasizes critical thinking beyond simple memorization and recitation—and it should¹—then the materials should reinforce that emphasis. Controversies should be presented with a view to analysis and not just memorization of who said what. Study questions, quizzes, and tests should probe for more than factual recall.

Materials in all subjects should make use of charts, graphs, and other methods of presenting data visually to develop in students the ability to see trends and draw valid conclusions from the data. In a society that is moving increasing toward graphics

¹ For further discussion of the importance of critical thinking, see <http://www.bjupress.com/about/critical-thinking.php> and <http://www.bjupress.com/resources/articles/t2t/performance-vs-thinking.php>.

and away from text, such skills will be increasingly important.

In science classes especially, the materials should support hands-on, active learning and laboratory experiences.

Philosophy and Worldview

If the textbook disagrees with, or even argues against, the philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum, it will be inefficient for the teacher and ineffective for the student.

The teacher will have to take class time to correct the inaccurate information, to counter the textbook's arguments, and to supplement it with arguments for the school's position. There are times, of course, where students should and will read opposing viewpoints in order to enhance their critical-thinking and evaluative skills, to understand an opposing view, and to strengthen their ability to defend their own. But if the textbook is in general opposition to the curriculum, the battle is never-ending, and an unnecessarily high percentage of the class time will be spent on correction rather than actual instruction.

An obvious example of this problem is the use of evolutionary textbooks in a science class; while it is certainly necessary for students to understand the evolutionary worldview accurately, the typical evolutionary book's general underrepresentation and misrepresentation of biblical creationism will require considerable time and effort for the teacher to counter. A similar example is the discussion of sexual morality. All books will take a position on the morality of various types of sexual activity, even if their position is that the subject is not a question of morality. It is particularly important that adolescents be given appropriately comprehensive and accurate information about sexual issues, including STDs within a clear moral context.²

Insufficient agreement between the textbook and the curriculum is also ineffective for the student. Especially for younger students, whose critical-thinking skills are not yet well developed, competing assertions from multiple authority figures are unnecessarily confusing and even morally unhealthy. To the young student, a textbook is as authoritative as a teacher or even a parent, and such authority figures should be in general agreement

² Of course, this is easier when the parents and the school are in agreement on these questions.

about at least the core values with which the parents and the school are trying to imbue him. Even older students, who can be expected to exercise critical thinking more adeptly, struggle unnecessarily when the basic thesis of the textbook contradicts the basic thesis of their parents or teachers. Those who do not face that struggle still face inefficiencies by having to deal with more sources of information as they study for tests and other assessments.

The materials should present the relevant curricular content completely and accurately.

Comprehensiveness

It is obviously more efficient, and usually less expensive, to work with one textbook than with many. Both teacher and student benefit when the textbook covers all that the curriculum demands.

Accuracy

Factual

Accuracy is obviously necessary, but it's more complicated than it may appear at first. Of course the school should expect the textbooks to get the basic facts right; every few months we hear of more examples of egregious historical or scientific errors in major textbooks, and those are of course unacceptable.³ If the teacher cannot trust the assertions of a U.S. history book, or the answer in a math teacher's edition, he will be frustrated unnecessarily.

Philosophical

But beyond the simple facts, the textbook should represent all parties on controversies accurately. It should state their positions as the proponents themselves would state them, and it should avoid ridicule, caricature, or oversimplification. In particular, because the Bible teaches that all humans are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27) and that they continue to bear this image even as unrepentant sinners (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9), materials should present ethnic and cultural differences respectfully and even appreciatively, of course within biblical limits.⁴ (e.g., polygamy can and should be

³ For a particularly well-known example of widespread and egregious errors in middle-school physical science textbooks, see the 2001 Packard Foundation study headed by Dr. Peter Hubisz at <http://www.science-house.org/middleschool/reviews/textreview.html>.

⁴ For a further discussion of a biblical approach to the controversy surrounding multiculturalism, see "Cultural Diversity in the Christian Classroom" at <http://www>.

addressed as falling short of God's ideal for marriage [Matt. 19:3–9; 1 Tim. 3:2].) Similarly, women should be spoken of respectfully, in accordance with Ephesians 5:25–33, whether the school's position is complementarian or egalitarian. The disabled should be described respectfully and compassionately, in accordance with a biblical view of providence and the love of God for His image.

Timeliness

In subject areas that are rapidly changing, such as science and history, the materials should be reasonably up to date. A U.S. history book that ends with Nixon, or even with Clinton, is not going to prepare the students to interact with the key issues of their day. Evaluators should note that the copyright date of the book is not necessarily evidence that the book is current; many publishers change the graphics on the cover and then assign a new copyright date, hoping that the adopters will not notice that the actual content has not changed. And the blame for this phenomenon goes deeper than the publishers' profit motive:

Educators have fallen into the trap of equating new books with better books, [of] mistaking style for substance. And faced with a market that puts a premium on newness, artwork, and copyright date, the textbook industry seems to have been forced into a hectic textbook revision cycle in which improvement in instructional quality takes a poor second place to more superficial changes.⁵

If the school is committed to instructing students in the use of technology, the textbook should incorporate technology instruction as appropriate. (For example, math books beyond a certain grade level could incorporate calculator exercises at increasing levels of complexity.) Of course, teachers can incorporate technology use into the course's assignment structure, but to the degree that the textbook can provide ideas for such assignments, the teacher can give her attention to other matters.

print-epro.net/freeport/604/T2T/March08/]

⁵ Arthur Woodward and Kathleen Carter Nagel, "Old Wine in New Bottles: An Analysis of Changes in Elementary Social Studies Textbooks from Old to New Edition," *Book Research Quarterly* 3 (Winter 1987-88), 22.

The materials should be appropriate for the age level.

The content of the material should be at a reading level, difficulty level, and maturity level appropriate for the students. Older students, of course, will deal with more mature and complex content than younger students.⁶

The materials should present the content in a way that is interesting and engaging, even creative as appropriate. As much as lieth in them, students should enjoy reading the book.

The materials should provide exercises across a range of ability levels so that assignments can be better tailored to individual student needs. This is particularly important in math, but it is useful in all subjects.

The materials should have a demonstrated track record of success.

Ideally, the textbook should carry the recommendation of other educators that you know and trust. It should be used in schools that demonstrate quality instruction and that graduate well-educated, godly students.⁷

In the case of new texts, obviously, it is not as simple as just looking for other users; there may not yet be any other users of that edition, or at least any that the evaluator knows and trusts. If he wants his materials to be current, as an earlier criterion recommends, he's going to have to recognize other indicators of quality. If the textbook is simply a later edition of an existing text, then he can evaluate the track record of the earlier editions and the changes in the newer edition. If it's a completely new text, he can at least examine the publisher's track record, especially in the academic discipline of the new text.⁸

⁶ For useful guidance on the question of objectionable content, see "Objectionable Elements," chapter 4 in Ronald A. Horton, ed., *Christian Education: Its Mandate and Mission* (Greenville: BJU Press, 1992). The chapter is available online at <http://www.bjupress.com/resources/christian-school/solutions/objectionable-elements.php>.

⁷ Some publishers conduct field testing on their materials during the production phase to demonstrate the books' effectiveness. While such studies could be valid, it's typically difficult for the evaluator to know how thorough and careful the field testing was. Actual purchasers and users of the materials, especially those in schools similar to the evaluator's, are the best recommenders.

⁸ One thing to keep in mind for extremely new texts is that

The materials should be of high quality.

This criterion has to do especially with physical quality. Educational quality, of course, is indicated by the track record discussed in the previous criterion.

There are a number of elements to physical quality:

- Substantial, durable binding, whether the cover is soft or hard
- Substantial paper, that will not easily tear and through which the ink does not bleed
- Engaging page layout, with enough white space to make the page attractive
- A readable typeface and point size
- High-quality photographs, well composed, of sufficient resolution, with good registration (not blurry due to imprecision in the printing process)
- Appropriate use of color for the age level
- Appropriate breadth of supplementary materials, which can both save the teacher time and improve the educational experience for the student⁹
- Reasonable cost

The Selection Process***Timing***

The school administration should determine how frequently materials should be evaluated. Many schools set up a regular evaluation schedule, perhaps evaluating one elementary grade and one secondary grade per year, for a 6-year cycle, or one subject area per year, for a 6- to 8-year cycle.¹⁰ Having a regular schedule makes the process more predictable and often evens out the work load among the evaluators.

the supplementary materials may not yet be available from the publisher.

⁹ Many teachers prefer to have the publisher provide tests for use with the textbook. This is certainly helpful for new teachers or for experienced teachers using a new textbook. But publishers' tests have at least two disadvantages: 1) they do not assess knowledge of any curricular material not in the textbook, and 2) they effectively encourage teachers to teach to the test. Assessment should be more thorough than this, and it should *evaluate* the instruction, not *drive* it.

¹⁰ As noted above, timely revision is more important in some subjects than in others. Also noted above, adopting a subject at a time, rather than a grade at a time, can give more cohesiveness to the scope and sequence.

Many schools find it helpful to request evaluation copies early in the fall and to do most of the evaluating during middle of the school year, including Christmas break. Evaluators can follow up with publishers, asking further questions for clarification in the spring, in time for ordering during the summer for the following year.

Materials

The administrator or his designated representative can collect evaluation copies of textbooks as the schedule warrants. Those books can then be distributed to the evaluators. Some publishers prefer not to provide multiple evaluation copies; in those cases, the evaluators can just cycle the different textbooks among themselves.

Personnel

Most schools find it helpful to have multiple evaluators involved in the selection process. Since pure democracy is highly inefficient, someone needs to be in charge and responsible for the final decision. But the process should include input from many people, ideally including administrators, experienced faculty, and parents. It wouldn't be unheard of to solicit student input as well. The committee may wish to notify all the parents what books are being evaluated during the current year and solicit feedback regarding their children's experiences with the current selection.

Procedure

The administration should encourage the evaluators to take the time to work through the evaluation process carefully. It could do this by lowering faculty workloads for evaluators or perhaps by paying evaluators extra for their important contribution to the school's mission.¹¹

The evaluators should agree on a list of criteria on which to evaluate the textbooks. (The school might help the process along by providing rubrics to help standardize the process.) They should then narrow

¹¹ Interestingly, in California's statewide public school textbook adoption process, evaluators are not paid. California and Texas are the two most significant textbook adoption systems, due to the size of their student populations. Susan Watts-Taffe, "Textbook Selection and Respect for Diversity in the United States," paper presented at the World Bank Seminar on Education, Social Cohesion, and Diversity, Washington, DC, June 9, 2005, 5. Available online at <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/232529/Watts.pdf>. Watts-Taffe recommends paying the evaluators.

the field to 2 or 3 of the best texts and clearly delineate the strengths and weaknesses of each. Ideally, the committee should come to unanimous agreement on the best selection based on those strengths and weaknesses. It is particularly important that the classroom teacher, who will be primarily responsible for using the text, be in agreement with the decision.

Conclusion

Delivering a focused, cohesive, polished education package to the student does not happen by accident.

The textbooks are the student's most intimate and extensive connection to the curriculum. If the school wishes to reach its goal, it must ensure that its textbooks are of the best quality and consistently reinforce the worldview of the parents and school administration. The time and effort required to do a careful job are well worth it.

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