

Defining Quality Standards: A Textbook Example

"Whoever defines the word defines the world."

--John Locke

By Terri Leo



Texas families expect the state to ensure that quality textbooks are a vital part of our children's education. For most of the past decade, however, the Texas State Board of Education has been stymied in its ability to set responsible standards for the textbooks that the Board is required by law to adopt.

Without SBOE authority to establish general textbook content standards, books with viewpoint discrimination, bias, a negative portrayal of the free enterprise system and U.S. citizenship, and extremely objectionable or inappropriate content can be and have been approved. As a result, books may be adopted which are in violation of the spirit and intent of the Legislature's wishes as set forth in state law.

The problem comes from what many education leaders believe to be a faulty interpretation of legislation revising the election code in 1995. Then-Attorney General Dan Morales opined that the Texas Education Code does not allow the SBOE to reject a book that includes group stereotyping, blatantly offensive language or illustrations, or sensational violence. The ruling in effect removed the general textbook content standards from state statutes and denied the SBOE power to eliminate certain books that many members believed to be unfit for use in our schools.

From 1969 until their elimination in 1995, the SBOE had authority over textbooks with rules adopted by both Republicans and Democrats that allowed them to reject books that violated these standards. The SBOE is now told by the Texas Education Agency lawyers and liberal-leaning groups that the content of books does not matter.

These people focus their attention only on whether the book includes a mention of each of the Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills (TEKS) and not on whether the wording of the textbook follows the well-accepted content standards. Without SBOE authority to establish general textbook content standards, editors and publishers are unaccountable and allowed to pursue personal agendas. When the final decisions on textbook content are made by unelected bureaucrats at the TEA and in the publishing industry instead of by elected Board members representing local citizens, Texas's values of decency, fairness, accuracy, and common sense can easily be ignored.

This shift in policy has resulted in many disastrous results. One book approved in Texas, for example, was the subject of national ridicule and was condemned on the floor of the U.S. Senate by Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV). Dubbed the "Texas rain-forest algebra book," it received an "F" grade on a report card produced by Mathematically Correct, a group of independent math scholars who reviewed math books adopted in Texas. The book watered down algebra by including such things as chili recipes, ancient myths, a photograph of Maya Angelou and Bill Clinton (this was supposed to demonstrate parallelism in sentence structure), and questions which asked students what roles zoos play in society. No algebra is even mentioned until page 100.

The publisher states that the algebra book's focus is to "get students to communicate their thinking about problem solving and to work on different approaches, rather than focusing on getting the right answers." The book says the teacher's role "is to be a facilitator who supports students. Questions should be posed to stimulate thought rather than get an answer." Under the previous system, the SBOE was able to insist that publishers correct outrageous and offensive content.

Without SBOE content standards, political agendas masquerading as science have been smuggled into classrooms. Books marred with inaccuracies, omissions, and errors have been approved as well.

Teachers depend on sound textbooks to guide classroom instruction. Research shows that student learning and high achievement is directly related to quality textbooks. Texans want textbooks that not only meet TEKS criteria but that meet the quality standards that parents expect and students deserve. It is vitally important that Texas Attorney Greg Abbott reverse the 1995 ruling and that he clarify the SBOE's authority to determine textbook content standards. The people of Texas have elected the SBOE to oversee textbook content, and the Legislature has mandated that the SBOE do so.

"Words are the most powerful drugs used by mankind," said Rudyard Kipling. Content is the most important part of a good textbook.

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