



# Health Education Textbook Adoption in Texas: A Lesson in Politics and Morality

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## ABSTRACT

*Textbooks are often a core element of curricula and delivery of classroom instruction and have long been a source of controversy. The textbook adoption process has become less about content and more about political/cultural pressure. Special-interest groups from the right and left exert enormous influence on textbook content through bias and “sensitivity” guidelines and “review” processes. Textbooks are now often judged not by their style, content, or effectiveness, but by the way they live up to such guidelines. Texas is the second largest textbook market in the country, behind only California. This paper examines the controversies behind, and the lessons to be learned from, the textbook adoption process in Texas. Recent history has demonstrated that health textbook content decisions are often not based in science or pedagogical best practices. Health educators must be proactive in recognizing this trend and work at the state and local levels to ensure that students have access to scientifically accurate, age-appropriate information that can help prepare them for life in the twenty-first century.*

## INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are often a core element of curricula and delivery of classroom instruction. It is important that health educators, administrators, parents, and the public at large have an understanding of how textbooks are written and, ultimately, how they end up in classrooms.

Textbook content has long been a source of controversy. Whether the subject is science, history, or health education, what students read in school has become a source of heated debate, censorship, and moral and political posturing. At the core of these problems is the question of whether textbooks should represent reality or how we wish the world were.

Since textbooks are a core part of curricula, one might assume that they are conceived, researched, written, and published as important contributions to advancing knowledge. In fact, most of these books

fall far short of their key role in the educational process.<sup>1</sup>

For example, censorship has been a staple of textbook publishing since the Civil War. During Reconstruction, former Confederate states issued guidelines for school materials that reflected their version of the Civil War. It was felt that such guidelines were necessary because most publishing houses of the time had their headquarters in the North. Northern publishers complied, publishing separate textbooks for schools in the South and North. For decades, Southern textbooks referred to the Civil War as “the War for Southern Independence” or the “War between the States.” Interestingly, nearly 150 years later, most centralized textbook adoption states—that is, states with a centralized process rather than vs. “local” control by local school districts—are still located in the South and West.<sup>2</sup>

Most people are not aware of specific

content in textbooks and appear to show little concern for what is included. The majority of people believe textbooks used in public schools are up-to-date, accurate, and useful.<sup>3</sup> The conventional wisdom is that scholars synthesize and distill centuries of information into learned and well-written texts, which publishers first review for accuracy and currency, then field-test to see whether the books successfully engage students and increase student achievement.<sup>2</sup>

The reality is that textbooks are put together by teams of writers from “develop-

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ment houses” known in the elementary–high school publishing world as “chop shops.” Publishers often focus on clearing textbooks of any references that adoption panels in Texas and California might object to, while at the same time scrambling to add state-endorsed keywords, phrases, and visual aids to ensure their spots on the adoption lists of those states. In adoption states, teachers generally do not pick textbooks; if they do, the book is from a short list of survivors of the adoption process. Nationally, only about one in four teachers state that they select the textbooks used in their own classrooms.<sup>2</sup>

Self-censoring by publishers is a common practice because there are a small number of pressure groups that are passionately committed to making certain that their particular interests are represented in the textbooks. These groups—which represent conservative, liberal, environmental, business, and other special interests—can have a tremendous influence on textbook selection, particularly in the states where textbook adoption is a centralized process.<sup>3</sup>

In general, the adoption process has become less about content and more about political/cultural pressure. Special-interest groups from the right and left exert enormous influence on textbook content through bias and “sensitivity” guidelines and “review” processes. Textbooks are now often judged not by their style, content, or effectiveness, but by the way they live up to such guidelines. As a result, the adoption process encourages careless reviews of textbooks written by anonymous development houses, according to paint-by-numbers formulas. The process has also created a textbook cartel controlled by just a few companies. Smaller publishing houses do not have the resources to make repeated editing changes brought on by adoption hearings.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, four publishers—McGraw-Hill, Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt, and Pearson—control 70 percent of the industry.<sup>4</sup>

Groups that try to influence content often work in stages. First, private “reviewers” are recruited to analyze materials. These groups then submit lists of “errors” directly to the publishers. Orchestrated testimony

(pro/con) is then presented at public hearings. During the process, individual board members are lobbied and encouraged to vote to reject books that contain “objectionable” material. If books are approved that still contain said material, attempts are then made to influence purchasing decisions at the local school district level.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty-eight states are known as “open territory” states, in that they allow districts to select any textbook they like.<sup>6</sup> Texas is one of the other 22 states that conduct a statewide adoption process.<sup>6,7</sup> In 2004, health education textbooks were scheduled for adoption in Texas.

### TEXTBOOK ADOPTION PROCESS IN TEXAS

Texas is the second largest textbook market in the country, behind only California. Textbooks adopted in these two states are also offered in other states. Therefore, when it comes to textbook adoption in Texas, the stakes are high for publishers. Of the \$4.3 billion spent annually on elementary–high school textbooks, Texas was expected to account for \$570 million in 2005.<sup>8</sup> The state’s textbook adoption process is the province of the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE). The SBOE is the only elected state board in Texas, and its fifteen members serve four-year terms in these unpaid positions.

The Texas constitution requires that the SBOE set aside sufficient money to provide free textbooks for children attending public schools in the state. The Texas legislature appropriates funds to be expended on instructional materials.<sup>5</sup>

The Texas Education Code (TEC) provides for adoption of two separate lists of instructional materials. The “conforming” list consists of instructional materials submitted that meet manufacturing standards adopted by the SBOE, include content covering each element of essential knowledge and skills, and are free of factual errors. The “nonconforming” list consists of instructional materials submitted that meet manufacturing standards adopted by the SBOE, contain material covering

at least half, but not all, of the elements of essential knowledge and skills, and are free of factual errors. Both conforming and nonconforming instructional materials may be purchased by the state for school districts and open-enrollment charter schools.<sup>7</sup>

Bids for new instructional materials from the publishing industry are solicited by means of a proclamation issued by the SBOE. The proclamation identifies subject areas scheduled for review in a given year and contains content requirements (called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) for each respective content area.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the state textbook review panels are charged with evaluating instructional materials to determine coverage of TEKS and to identify any factual errors. These panels consist of educators, parents, experts in a chosen field, business leaders, etc., and are appointed by the SBOE. At the close of the review period, panel members submit textbook evaluations to the commissioner of education. Based on these evaluations, the commissioner prepares a preliminary report recommending that instructional materials be placed on the conforming or nonconforming list, or be rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Texas residents are allowed to file written comments regarding instructional material submitted for adoption. In addition, a public hearing is held before the SBOE approximately two months before the scheduled adoption.<sup>7</sup>

After consideration of evaluations submitted by state review panel members, information provided by publishers, and staff recommendations, the commissioner of education submits a final report to the SBOE recommending final dispensation of the instructional materials. A report detailing any factual errors to be corrected in instructional materials prior to delivery to school districts is also presented.<sup>7</sup>

Following the commissioner’s final report, the SBOE takes the first of two votes to approve or reject the submitted textbooks. The second, confirming vote, is taken at the next scheduled meeting of the board.<sup>7</sup>

Although individual school districts are



not technically required to select books from the conforming list, they must do so if they wish to receive state funding.<sup>7</sup> The reality is that districts universally seek state funding for textbooks, making the conforming list the de facto “approved” list.

## HISTORY OF TEXTBOOK ADOPTION IN TEXAS

Due to the political nature of the SBOE in Texas, textbook adoption has long been a divisive issue. In fact, one of the earliest national textbook review groups, the Educational Research Analysts (founded by Norma and Mel Gabler), is located in Texas. The Gablers, along with other groups such as the Moral Majority, Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, etc., have pressured state boards of education and local school districts to remove books that they consider objectionable. Such groups have long targeted books that discuss abortion, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, contraception, homosexuality, suicide, drug use, and any portrayals of dissension within the family. For example, these groups believe that books dealing with dissension in the family could teach children to be disobedient and thereby damage families. In addition, they have sought to bar any books that fail to distinguish between right and wrong, arguing that the teaching of “situational ethics” should be opposed.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1993 health textbook adoption process in Texas, pressure groups were again at work to restrict information in schoolbooks. The American Family Association presented the SBOE with a “review” of health education textbooks in which 900 “corrections” were suggested. For example, one suggestion was to remove a picture of a working mother leaving her house to go to work.<sup>9(p99)</sup> It was requested that that picture be removed and that “homemaking be added to a list of careers for women” because “it (homemaking) is essential to the development of children.” Another requested correction was to reduce the size of a penis in a drawing in the reproductive anatomy section of a book.<sup>9(p174)</sup> Eventually, 300 of these corrections were made. One publisher, Holt,

Rinehart, and Winston, refused to make the changes and withdrew from the process.

Because similar situations had occurred in editing science and history textbooks, the Texas legislature took action in 1994. It was common for individual board members to make their own corrections based on personal ideology instead of science. Therefore, the legislature passed a law restricting the power of the SBOE in editing textbook content. The board’s legal authority to reject textbooks is now limited to three conditions. In order to be legally rejected by the SBOE, it must be proven that books either:

- contain factual errors,
- do not meet binding requirements, or
- do not meet the TEKS in the respective content area.<sup>8,10</sup>

The legislative intent was to prevent individual board members from dictating textbook content. It was anticipated that this law would result in less contentious public debates on textbook content. Ultimately, publishers would be provided with clear guidelines to follow rather than trying to satisfy the various pressure groups and board members who disapproved of elements of certain textbooks.

## 2004 HEALTH TEXTBOOK ADOPTION PROCESS

Due to the politically charged nature of past textbook adoption hearings, publishers self-censored themselves in the health education textbooks they prepared for the adoption process in 2004. For example, abstinence-until-marriage sexuality education was presented as the only option in all of the books except one. The *Essentials of Health and Wellness* text by Thomson/Delmar Learning made a single reference to condoms,<sup>11</sup> but none of the other books contained any references to any contraceptive method. The publishers attempted to avoid any controversy related to sexuality education by not providing any information about contraception or prophylactics that could prevent sexually transmitted infections. For example, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston’s *Lifetime Health* listed “getting plenty of rest” as a pregnancy and STI/STD

prevention strategy.<sup>12</sup>

It appeared to many that the publishers had not complied with Texas law that required textbooks to cover the TEKS. Specifically, the TEKS 7I for health education clearly states

“Students shall analyze the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of barrier protection and other contraceptive methods including the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), keeping in mind the effectiveness of remaining abstinent until marriage.”<sup>13</sup>

The publishers’ countered that (a) the specific TEKS in question is covered in the teacher’s edition of the textbooks, and (b) more complete sexuality education information could be found in the student supplements. These supplements were not submitted for review but are available for school districts to order as determined on a local basis.

Legal opinions were sought from the Texas Education Agency. Two key elements were ruled on. First, materials must be submitted for review by publishers to “count” in meeting the TEKS. As a result, student supplements did not meet adoption rules. Second, it was determined that material covered in the teacher’s edition of the textbooks met the TEKS requirement. As a result, none of the books have to include any information regarding contraception as long as the teacher’s editions contain such information.

Another issue to be settled was the question of what “meeting the TEKS” actually means. For example, does a book have to reference the TEKS a specific number of times, or does a single mention satisfy legislative intent? Also, does merely restating a TEKS in the text meet the mandate? The legal ruling was that a single mention of the TEKS did satisfy legislative intent, even if the mention was a restatement of the TEKS.

Finally, there seemed to be no clear definition or example of “factual errors” vs. “personal opinion” of various SBOE members. One member requested several changes in textbook content that did not re-

**Table 1. Proposed Changes to Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Health Textbooks by Teri Leo, Texas SBOE Member**

Teachers' Editions, Grades 6–8	
Currently Reads	Proposed Change
"If you discuss the issue of homosexuality in class, discuss it respectfully. Be aware that someone in your class may be homosexual or related to someone who is homosexual, or have a friend who is homosexual."	"If you discuss homosexuality in class, be aware that Texas law rejects homosexual 'marriage.' Students can therefore maintain that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not moral equivalents, without being charged with 'hate speech.'"
Student Edition, Grade 8	
Currently Reads	Proposed Change
"Another part of adolescence is the beginning of romantic attraction to others."	"Another part of adolescence may be romantic attraction to the opposite sex."
Student Edition, Grade 7	
Currently Reads	Proposed Change
"The sex hormones your body produces may make you interested in relationships with others. Friendships and dating relationships help you prepare for adult relationships."	"Your body's sex hormones may make you interested in romantic relationships with the opposite sex. Friendships and dating can help you prepare for stable marital commitment."
Student Edition, Grade 6	
Currently Reads	Proposed Change
"The new couple and all of their children form a blended family."	"The new husband and wife and all of their children form a blended family."
Note: None of the specific changes were made, but compromise was reached by listing "husbands and wives" at the first mention of marriage in the text. Source: All quotes from Embry, J. Textbook approval hits bump. <i>Austin American-Statesman</i> , November 5, 2004; A1, A11.	

flect factual error, but her personal opinions. For example, she requested that publishers remove "asexual stealth terms that challenge traditional marriage." Specifically, she asked that the term "husband and wife" replace any reference to "marriage partners," and that "attracted to others" be replaced with "attracted to the opposite sex."<sup>14</sup> A listing of other requested changes can be found in Table 1.

Other attempts were made to list both "protected" and "unprotected" intercourse

as "high risk" sexual behaviors in a contraceptive chart in teachers' editions. Due to the intervention and influence of one SBOE member, this editing change was not made.

The end result was that all books were approved with minor editing changes. Teacher's editions and student supplement materials contained more comprehensive discussions of pregnancy and STD/STI prevention. Only one book mentioned condoms, while abstinence was the only

other strategy given to prevent pregnancy and STI/STD transmission.

### LESSONS LEARNED

A number of lessons were learned in the textbook adoption process of 2004. First, centralized adoption processes create problems. In Texas, a small number of elected/appointed officials can determine textbook content. Pressure groups need only influence a small number of individuals to control content. In a noncentralized process, each



individual school board would have to be lobbied to influence adoption decisions.<sup>3</sup>

Second, educators must be proactive in addressing the textbook adoption process. Too often, special-interest groups gear up well in advance of adoption cycles and begin pressuring publishers long before health educators are even aware that textbook content might be limited. Waiting until adoption hearings to raise questions about content is often too late. It is very expensive for publishers to make substantive changes in content, and such requests often fall on deaf ears.

Third, casting blame on the publishers, though justified in some cases, is not an effective strategy. Because of the potential for large financial profits, the publishers are often easy targets for criticism. It should be noted that textbook publishers are in the business of selling textbooks, not making social commentary. They will print what is required in each respective state and will develop content that is acceptable to the education officials in these states. Publishers need to hear from parents, educators, and other concerned citizens that they will be supported if they develop books containing complete, age-appropriate information. Those who wish to restrict and manipulate information regularly contact publishers during the development process and make clear their political will. Those who wish to counteract such influence should do the same.

Fourth, concerned educators and others must become familiar with the politics in their state. If school board members are elected in your state, for example, be proactive in knowing their stance on issues such as contraceptive information, textbook content, and so forth. It is important to research candidates and support those who value complete and scientifically accurate information in textbooks.

Fifth, it is vital to contact and develop relationships with as many state board members as possible. These elected officials need to hear from health educators and other interested groups on a regular basis. It is often a futile strategy to contact board

members only when there is a crisis. Make certain these individuals know your position on key issues and offer to serve as a “technical advisor” on health education issues, including the very important textbook review committees. It is quite often the case that board members have little to no training in health education and would appreciate the feedback of a professional health educator, nurse, school administrator, etc.

Sixth, one should not assume that professional associations can or will help. Such associations are often hampered by bureaucratic factors and cannot act with the necessary speed to speak out on textbook-related issues. In addition, many associations may want to sidestep potential controversy by not speaking out at all. For example, the Texas Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance—the largest state HPER group in the United States<sup>4</sup>—refused to testify or make any public statement during the 2004 textbook debate.

Seventh, health educators need to associate with groups representing other professional disciplines, especially those that have had similar experiences with censorship. The fields of science and history, for example, have often faced efforts to influence textbook content,<sup>3</sup> and health educators would be wise to learn from and share experiences with these groups. In addition, these groups can provide advocacy support when health education information is threatened, and health educators can reciprocate when other content areas are targeted.

Finally, it is important for health educators to work to influence policy and purchasing decisions at the local school district level. As in many states, the official position of the Texas Education Code favors “local control.” Local control means that local school district officials have autonomy to make curricular and other decisions without interference from state education officials. Therefore, even though “conforming” textbooks adopted by the SBOE may be limited in content, there is nothing prohibiting schools from supplementing these textbooks. Local school district officials need to be informed of the availability of textbook supplements that

contain more comprehensive discussions of sexuality and other topics that may be limited in their current textbook. In addition, teachers/nurses need staff development training to conduct various instructional strategies instead of relying on the textbook as the sole source of information.

## SUMMARY

The controversy in sexuality education content and instructional strategies used to teach sexuality is not new. With the advent of the abstinence-only sexuality education movement in the United States, the focus has sharpened even more. Many abstinence-only advocates believe that there should be no textbook presentation of contraceptive methods except for discussions of failure rates. Yet, for many abstinence-based sexuality educators, the belief that abstinence should be presented as the first and best choice for unmarried adolescents does not preclude the addition of age-appropriate, comprehensive discussions of contraception.

Recent history has demonstrated that health textbook content decisions are often not based in science or best practices in pedagogical science. Health educators must be proactive in recognizing this trend and work at the state and local levels to ensure that students have access to scientifically accurate, age-appropriate information that can help prepare them for life in the twenty-first century.

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