

California's Textbook Adoption Process: Is It Meeting Our Students' Needs?

Since California adopted its academic standards in the late 1990's, the state's process for adopting instructional materials has become more complex and has severely limited the number of selections school districts have to choose from to meet their students' educational needs.

The California Constitution requires the State Board of Education (SBE) to adopt textbooks for use in grades 1-8 throughout the state. Additionally, under current state law, the SBE is required to adopt a minimum of five basic instructional materials for use in grades K-8 in specified subject areas. This leaves the local school boards with the ability to adopt instructional materials for use in grades 9-12. However, the SBE has regularly adopted fewer than the five selections required by law, leaving schools districts with an even more limited choice.

The SBE is required by statute to adopt materials in mathematics, science, social science, language arts and bilingual and/or bicultural subjects at least twice during every 6-year period. For any other subjects that the SBE elects to adopt the requirement is at least twice in 8 years. State law also permits the SBE to conduct "follow-up" adoptions in addition to the regular schedule adoptions, but the costs of these adoption proceedings are to be absorbed and offset by fees charged to the publishers that wish to participate in the additional adoption process.

State law also establishes the Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commission. This commission evaluates instructional materials submitted for adoption by publishers and manufacturers and advises the SBE on the adoption of K-8 instructional materials and for K-12 curriculum frameworks. School districts that wish to purchase instructional materials that are not on the SBE approved list are often frustrated by the waiver process that many argue has been inconsistently applied and is constantly changing.

Student test scores and assessments illustrate a continuing decline in student performance in the areas of mathematics and science. To better meet the needs of California's students, it is critical to address the severe limitations of the SBE's adoption process and the inconsistency in the application of the current waiver process.

The SBE's current adoption process for instructional materials restricts a school district's ability by limiting the choices of instructional materials a district may utilize. Additionally, the state adoption criteria lack the necessary flexibility for school districts to combine resources from a variety of sources to sufficiently cover the content standards and curriculum frameworks.

Few would argue against the fact that local school boards are in the advantaged position when it comes to ascertaining the specific needs of their students. Therefore, the practical solution would allow local school districts to be able to determine and recommend what materials would best provide quality instruction for the student population.