

Edwardsville School District 7 curriculum process discussed

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November 13 2015 9:40 AM



District 7's Curriculum Review Process

This communication has been developed to inform parents of the current status of District 7 curriculum and instructional materials, costs of materials, the District 7 curriculum development process, and how the District has incorporated digital content into the curriculum.

The next article will outline the District's vision for Phase 2 of the Technology in the 21st Century Classroom Initiative and will be released in January 2016.

“School” experienced by most adults meant a textbook as the only source of information presented by teachers; in fact textbooks and workbooks were the only materials available to educators for decades. When the Illinois Learning Standards were released in 1997, District 7 curriculum was developed and aligned to those standards, and then textbooks were purchased to deliver the content outlined. A textbook adoption in 1999 for Language Arts and Math carried a combined cost of more than \$1.2 million.

Funds for these textbooks came from Illinois State Board of Education programs such as the Illinois Textbook Loan program, the Reading Improvement Block Grant, and two major, one-time competitive grants totaling over \$1 million in Language Arts and Mathematics.

Over the next few years, these funding sources evaporated and were no longer available to school districts, reducing one of the textbook funding sources for District 7 by approximately \$300,000 annually or \$1.5 million over the last five years. At the same time textbook funding was drastically reduced, a growing need developed for additional instructional resources to stay current with updated content and research-based strategies.

The ensuing financial crisis at the state and local levels impacted school district budgets throughout Illinois since it began in 2008. Nowhere has the impact been more obvious than in districts' inability to purchase new textbooks and instructional materials.

The Cost of Curriculum and Instructional Materials

Each year, the District supplies students and teachers with the tools they need to start the school year. The Textbook Fee charged to students at registration is designed to defray the cost of these supplies and materials, which include textbook replacement or rebinds, workbooks, art supplies, science consumables, math manipulatives, software licenses, and paper.

Instructional material costs associated with the start of a school year for over 7,500 students this year totaled \$580,000. This amount does NOT include new textbooks or curriculum adoptions. After fee waivers, 2015-2016 textbook fees collected are expected to total \$508,000, or \$72,000 less than expended on start-up supplies and materials.

The District 7 Curriculum Development Process

While parents have expressed concern that the use of outdated textbooks is synonymous with student learning stagnating at the copyright date of the book in use, this is not the case in District 7.

In District 7, committees of teachers develop a written blueprint that outlines specific skills and concepts that are taught in a subject from kindergarten through twelfth grade. This blueprint is the curriculum, which is designed to stand alone. Instructional materials are then chosen to deliver that curriculum.

While in most districts textbooks provide the foundation of a subject area, in District 7 they are not the sole source of content for the courses taught, regardless of the grade level. In order to ensure that students receive the most up-to-date content, supplemental digital resources are a necessity. These resources may include downloadable books, video libraries, and interactive manipulatives, in addition to the incorporation of quality lessons from nationally accredited organizations.

In fact, this approach is preferable to a textbook-only plan as textbooks are expensive and quickly outdated in certain subject areas.

While the District has retained aging textbooks out of financial necessity, curriculum committees have continued to update the curriculum blueprint for each subject area as new standards were released. Through this process, committees have identified digital content and online resources to expand the range of instructional tools available to the teacher at a fraction of the cost of new textbooks. Using this hybrid approach, which is common in school districts throughout the country, a US History book published in 2000 can continue to be utilized as long as it is supplemented with information that covers the gap from publication date to the current time. This is one of the strongest advantages of the use of the hybrid approach.

In 2012, District 7 launched the Technology in the 21st Century Classroom Initiative, which was funded through community-wide donations. This initiative provided each of the District's nearly 500 classrooms with an interactive white board system, which was paired with subscriptions to Discovery Education (an electronic library of instructional videos and documents). This enables all District 7 teachers to access a wealth of electronic resources at a time when a 1:1 or Bring Your Own Device initiative was not financially feasible.

This direction has proven to be a sound one as many districts who rushed into purchases of devices such as the Chromebook, iPad or Kindle found that they presented their own

set of challenges. Inadequate bandwidth, lack of planning for professional development costs, and replacement costs quickly made these initiatives unsustainable in many districts.

Incorporating Digital Content

The textbook industry continues to undergo a transformation that ranges from printed textbooks to digital content, as well as a variety of hybrid approaches. These advances make it likely that this transformation will continue for years to come.

The first digital textbooks were specific to certain devices (I-pad, Kindle, Nook), and publishers were limited to only those devices. The end result was the choices for adoptions were limited to a single publisher and device, further reducing selection of the best instructional materials by District 7 curriculum committees.

While textbook companies will assure school districts that they offer digital content using a variety of platforms, a closer analysis shows that there are still significant limitations in today's digital textbooks:

- K-12 digital textbooks are still most often PDF versions of the traditional textbook sold for the same price (approximately \$65-\$95 per book)
- Digital textbooks are not updated as new information becomes available but instead districts are required to purchase a new edition in order to obtain updated content
- Digital textbooks are sold in one or six-year licenses which expire, a major concern as school districts would be required to repurchase textbooks whether or not they would be financially able to do so at a future time

Waiting for improvements in digital textbooks has proven to be worthwhile as the cost of bandwidth has decreased, security systems that control devices used within the school building have been developed, and the cost of learning management systems have become more affordable to K-12 districts.

District 7's curriculum development process will continue to build courses with quality instructional materials, including digital content to ensure that students are working with the most up-to-date information possible.

The Classroom Today

In the last several years, the hybrid approach has emerged across the United States as many large districts cope with financial demands of providing technology and digital content as well as textbook replacement.

K-12 leaders and company officials said, “While some districts have leapt aggressively into tech adoption...many school systems clearly favor a hybrid approach, in which students and teachers use both print and digital resources.” (Education Week, April 2014).

Over the years, steps have been taken to increase the use of electronic resources (hardware and software) in the classroom, including interactive white boards, document cameras, the E-Library, Discovery Education, Reading a-z, and an electronic curriculum guide for classroom teachers. District 7’s curriculum development process will continue to support a hybrid model that encompasses both print and digital materials.

Parents and teachers want the flexibility of digital content; however, they also expect school districts to ensure that content can be readily accessed (sufficient bandwidth and WIFI), that students are protected from total internet access, that electronic resources are organized by course or subject (learning management system), and that all students will have access to the same materials, with or without home internet access.

The District has taken a creative approach to acquiring resources for implementing the curriculum.

Our plan ensures that the technology brought into classrooms is well-supported by infrastructure and presented by teachers who understand how the integration of technology can improve the instructional process. Despite the financial constraints the District has operated under the last several years, the District continues to prepare our students to compete in a global society.