



School Business Affairs

May 2008 • Volume 74, Number 5

Ending the Headaches of Textbook Management

By Don Rokusek

One of the most critical services the school district provides to ensure that students succeed academically is access to textbooks. Even with the increasing presence of Web-based curriculum resources and other technologies, the textbooks that students hold in their hands and stuff in their backpacks continue to be a vital part of classroom learning.

The beginning of each school year brings the annual challenge of ensuring that each student has the necessary textbooks. Last-minute shifts in enrollment and class schedules can upset even the best-laid plans. Staff spend hours on the phone and email tracking down available books in other schools or rushing emergency purchase orders for new books to fulfill the need. In larger districts, some schools overorder and stockpile books, unaware that other schools are scrambling for those very textbooks.

That's the price district's pay when they have no way to effectively monitor their textbook inventory across all locations. Although district purchasing systems may help process requests for new textbooks, chances are that once they've been received, the ability of school personnel to continue to manage them is limited. Paper-and-pencil or spreadsheet tracking methods are inconvenient and time-consuming, and staff members often don't want to be bothered when they have so much else on their plates. These older tracking techniques simply can't be compiled and reviewed districtwide without hundreds of hours of additional staff time.

Yet, lack of textbook management is costly. K-12 public schools spend about \$4 billion annually on textbooks and related resources. Newly adopted textbooks are typically intended to last for five to six years. Yet, districts that are not in control of their textbooks risk losing 5%-10% or more of their inventory each year—leading to additional spending for replacement textbooks. In fact, a recent study by Quality Education Data and Follett Software Company found that

textbook loss costs school districts as much as \$750 million a year!

Tracking Textbooks

Increased state and local mandates for greater accountability and the need to control rising costs are prompting many districts to adopt new processes and technology to improve textbook management. The new systems support a variety of methods for textbook distribution and collection at elementary and secondary schools. Today's textbook management applications also tap into scheduling data from student information systems to help personnel forecast textbook needs.

Each textbook is bar-coded with a unique identification number. When a textbook is checked out, checked in, warehoused, transferred, or eventually discarded, the bar code is scanned and the disposition of that book is easily recorded in the central database. At the elementary school level, the system may track the distribution of sets of classroom materials to a specific teacher. At the secondary school level, the system may track the distribution of textbooks to specific students. Either way, by assigning accountability for valuable textbook resources to an individual, you are taking steps to ensure that the materials will be available for a new group of students the following year.

In fact, students no longer need to write their names in the front of their books. Because the textbook management system records the bar-code number of each textbook and associates that bar code with the individual student or teacher, a simple scan of the bar code indicates to whom the book should be returned.

Because the student information system incorporates basic demographic information about each student into the textbook management system, including class schedule information, school personnel can forecast textbook needs based on enrollment in each class, thus minimizing excess

ordering and shortages.

Bar-coding textbooks may seem like a daunting task, but it can be done in a relatively short time. Not all textbooks need to be bar-coded right away. Some schools ease into a new textbook management system by focusing on new textbook adoptions first. Many schools use students or parent volunteers to bar-code their materials over the summer or during a school break.

After textbooks are distributed, a customized printed notice can be sent to students or parents informing them of the specific textbooks they have received, the replacement cost associated with the materials, and the materials' return date. Toward the end of the term, these notices can be updated and redistributed to remind students of their textbook obligations. Teachers receive lists that identify which students have which textbooks. When materials are collected at the end of the term, the textbooks are rescanned to clear the student's or teacher's obligation. Additional reports identify unreturned items.

Payback Time

Additional functions of the automated textbook management system allow the staff to record fines or fees for lost or damaged materials. Such a system can greatly affect whether schools can actually collect on obligations from students, parents, or even teachers. The mere fact that the district tracks the distribution and collection of textbooks can significantly reduce the number of lost materials.

However, most districts using this type of system have found that the fastest payback comes from the reduced need to purchase replacement materials. Since the system provides a districtwide view of all textbook resources, the administrative staff can locate and use excess inventory in any location rather than purchase new materials. Excess inventory can easily be recorded in the system and can be transferred from one location to another.

As enrollment changes and schools open and close throughout the district, the savings associated with using the textbook inventory across locations can pay for the investment in the system in the first year.

Success Stories

Does automated centralized textbook management actually work? Consider the experience of these districts:

- **Escambia County School District** in Pensacola, Florida, needed a way to stop the hoarding and disappearance of

textbooks in the district. The automated tracking system it adopted paid off handsomely; by early in the second year of implementation, Escambia County had saved nearly \$250,000 that would have otherwise gone for purchasing replacement texts.

- **Vancouver (Wash.) School District 37** recently adopted a centralized, Web-based system after being overwhelmed by the task of manually tracking textbooks for its 23,000 students. The money it saved by reducing textbook reorders paid for the entire cost of implementation in the very first year.
- **The South Carolina Department of Education** began implementing centralized textbook management in all of its 1,150 schools early last year. The centralized system is maintained on servers in the state department of education and distributed statewide via the Web. The primary motivation behind the statewide implementation is to ensure that all students have the textbooks they need.

Complete Solutions

If you decide to adopt a centralized, automated textbook management system, make sure to put your vendor to work. Textbook management vendors can provide more than just the software application, bar-code labels, and scanning hardware. Most vendors provide a complete solution, including project management services, software installation services, and end-user training services as part of the cost.

The vendor can also assist you in setting up the data interfaces between your student information system and your textbook management system—and can help you define your work flow and processes for using the system in your schools. Focus on using a vendor that has considerable experience in K-12 education.

Your state and county board of education, your local district school board, and your community are all counting on you to stretch your textbook budget dollars as far as you can. Take advantage of new advances in technology to end the headaches of textbook management—and to provide a greater level of services and support to your students.

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