Abstract

This researched-based paper provides a step-by-step process that can be utilized by any district that wants to select and adopt high-quality textbooks for effective student learning. While textbooks have been around since the foundation of schools, they still serve as the basic
resources for teachers and students in classrooms all around the world. However, not every textbook contains the necessary material and content that is critical for student achievement. With this in mind, every district needs a protocol for selecting and purchasing textbooks that is up-to-date, correctly aligned with state standards, influences teaching methods, and helps to determine the pacing or organization of the course. Textbooks that address the needs and promote the growth of students are an important part of every curriculum.

Selecting High-Quality Textbooks

In a school era where federal mandates, such as NCLB and state achievement tests, drive our school systems, schools districts need to understand the forces that influence students and teachers on a daily basis. Whether it is students being pushed to the limit in order to pass a test and show their educational growth from the past year or a teacher creatively designing lessons to meet the different learning styles of his or her students, a school’s curriculum serves as the basis for student learning. How students master this curriculum can be accomplished in various ways, but without textbooks, teachers are left with numerous instructional materials that lack clear
direction or parameters. Textbooks also can be seen as a primary tool that provides objectives, activities, resources, and evaluation methods to ensure student learning. Even though curriculums influence textbooks and textbooks don’t influence curriculum, an effective textbook for any course cannot be underestimated. Selecting quality textbooks can be a complex and long process, but if administrators, teachers, students, and community members all work together on this process, the end result can show vast improvements in many curricular areas. Altman (2006) explained that it is important to develop specific, objective criteria across multiple dimensions to satisfy departmental concerns, individual course objectives, and students’ abilities. When considering valid criteria for selecting high-quality textbooks for a district, there are four key dimensions that need to be carried-out to their entirety for successful achievement. The four dimensions of planning, selecting, adopting, and implementation must all be regarded as significant if a district wants to purchase textbooks that are going to provide a framework for optimal student learning.

Planning

The first component of selecting the correct textbook for a particular subject relates to planning. During the planning stage, a purpose for selecting new textbooks needs to established, participants involved in selection must be determined, a budget must be set, and the impact that these textbooks are going to have on the students must be understood (Long, Lint, & Lahmann, 2006). The purpose must be set from the beginning because this will be the anchor that establishes the reasons for searching for new textbooks. What problems are you trying to solve by getting new textbooks? Are students earning low-test scores, are the textbooks becoming outdated, or are the texts not aligned with state standards? For example, in my school district, our social studies textbooks are not aligned with the state standards. While the textbooks are only four years old, new textbooks need to be purchased because the older ones were chosen before the school adopted the state standards into the curriculum. Once the purpose is set, the
people who are going to be involved in evaluating and selecting textbooks must be considered. According to Dr. Terry Bergeson (2005), the state superintendent of public instruction in Washington, “The whole faculty, with non-staff members of the leadership team (e.g. parents, community members, and students) should participate in planning and selecting.” I believe this statement to be true because the more people who have input in the selection, the better the chance will be that the textbooks represent and accommodate a wide variety of learners’ needs and concerns. Even engaging students in the process has its benefits. In relation to students, Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) point out, “That having students negotiate curriculum enables them to gain ownership of their knowledge and it empowers them.” The participants who are selected must have defined roles throughout the process. One way to complete this is to divide administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members into different committees or teams. As these committees are divided, possibly by the leading administrator, he or she should understand a few fundamental components of group dynamics. Bergeson (2005) states that the creator of the committees needs to take committee demographics, the skills of the members, and the individual characteristics of the members into consideration as committees are formulated. This will allow committees to be managed efficiently where discrepancies are reduced as common objectives are created and followed accordingly. The teachers within the committees must also include the different types of teachers, such as regular education, special education, and gifted education teachers. One group, possibly community members or administrators, could be in charge of evaluating the textbooks on bias and diversity. Another group, comprised of teachers, could match the content to curriculum and decide if the texts are accurate and organized for students. Students could check for readability, decide if the material is motivating/interesting, or decide if the book is user-friendly based on the graphics and resources that are contained in the texts (Smaldino, Russell, Heinich, & Molenda, 2005).

Another vital part in the planning and preparation process is shaping a budget. For instance, are teachers going to be relieved with substitutes from their classroom teaching to evaluate these textbooks? How much money is allocated by the school district for the purchase
of textbooks? Are there going to be any initial adoption costs applied from the publishers for providing the materials? These questions are all essential when starting to decide how much money will be required for effective textbook analysis.

The last portion of the planning process is to have a full understanding of how these textbooks are going to impact the students. Central points to think about deal with the material and topics themselves in these textbooks. The textbooks must serve as a primary tool where students are being engaged and there is evidence that the topics presented promote critical thinking skills. Even influential educational theorist, Benjamin Bloom (1957), understood the necessity of students’ cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. These same ideals of developing students that were addressed by Bloom nearly half a century ago, still hold significance in shaping students into master learners of the content in textbooks. As students are complex and dynamic individuals, textbooks also must speak to the different qualities of students in hopes that the “whole child” is being impacted and developed into a lifelong learner.

Selection

The process of planning is designed as a dimension that allows an easier transition for actual selection of textbooks to be examined. Points of emphasis in the selection dimension include developing a screening procedure to eliminate inadequate textbooks and create a consensus process where the parties involved can agree on a final recommendation for adoption of a textbook (Long, Lint, & Lahmann, 2006). The selection process is one of the more critical elements in finding the right textbook. First, the planning committees need to decide what set of criteria they want to use to evaluate these textbooks. This can be completed in a few ways. For example, surveys and questionnaires can be utilized to narrow down the areas of concentration. School employees can conduct research on best practices and recent methods, to discover what procedures successful schools are adopting. Then once this data is gathered, a list of criteria for evaluation, such as a rubric, can be discussed and agreed upon by the committees. Research according to Birkholtz and Wessels (2001), says that by developing a rubric to evaluate, consistency can be seen across all spectrums. Altman (2006) says that when specific criteria for
selection is used, “reported advantages include “buy-in” by faculty.” Regardless of the actual tool that is adopted for textbook assessment, there are many commonalities that exist when comparing the actual content of what a high-quality textbook must contain. Although many schools can have anywhere from ten to twenty-five different criteria to assess the textbooks, five main areas can give the evaluator enough information for a thorough evaluation. These aspects include content (e.g., topics, depth and timeliness of coverage, rigor, diversity), pedagogy (e.g., layout, writing style, appropriateness for different learning styles, organization, review points, glossary, relation of visual elements to text), student ancillaries (e.g., workbooks, practice tests, CD-ROM, Web sites), instructor ancillaries (e.g., manual, test bank, videos, Web sites, interdisciplinary activities, differentiating instructional methods), and appropriate curriculum standards that are addressed (Altman, 2006).

The second step for selection where a consensus process needs to be implemented should consist of questions that evaluate the results. These questions may include statements, such as do the instructional materials provide evidence of program effectiveness, does the textbook reflect current research, and is the content consistent with state standards (Simmons & Kame’enui, 2005)? Then as the committees meet, they must agree and compromise their results. The ending of this stage must conclude with recommendations for one to three textbooks in order to proceed to the third step of textbook adoption.

Adoption

Effective textbook adoption can also be accomplished by effective leadership practices and by having professional staff members accepting the responsibility for doing what is best for students (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Horsley, 2006). While this statement encompassed the process of effective adoption of a textbook, it is also imperative to remember that when a district adopts a textbook, it is going to have an impact on students for the next five to ten years. The participants engulfed in this process are in need of valuable leadership and dedicated committees
Selecting High-Quality Textbooks

if the best textbook for a certain class is to be adopted. As the one to three textbooks have been selected up to this point, it is now time for the selection committee to choose one textbook. Two final selection methods can be options for districts that still want more input. First, the selection committee should research and find out what other districts are using this textbook and what are their opinions of the book. This may be accomplished as easy as just asking the textbook representative of other schools that have adopted the textbook or by actively calling or emailing schools in order to achieve the desired results. This input from other schools can be vital as some textbooks are already in the hands of other students. Next, a method that is rarely used, but can be effective, is having students rate the books, since they are going to be the ones using them. Altman (2006) showed that some publishers would loan books and ancillary materials to students at no cost. This is an excellent way to see if the textbooks are really going to be useful for all students. Students outside of the committees get to have a “sneak peek” at the textbooks as they aid in determining if the textbooks meet all of the desired goals. Teachers can use the textbooks for one or two lessons and then have the students rate the books after they have their first hand accounts with the textbooks. If these methods are utilized, the selection committee should then be ready to prepare a recommendation to the school board for final approval of one textbook.

Implementation

If the school board approves of the selected textbook, then the final stage can be put into place. The stage of implementation can also be referred to as the “all or nothing” stage. This stage is the test to observe if all of the meetings where the planning and researching, selecting, and adopting of the textbooks was all worth the efforts. As with any new item, instructions for correct use must be enacted to ensure the successful implementation. Before the textbooks are handed to the students, all teachers (regular, special, and gifted) must be versed in the
appropriate strategies from the textbook that can meet the students’ needs in their classrooms. This requirement may be met in a staff development day or in a couple of after school meetings, where publisher representatives can train teachers in the correct procedures for application. While applying the text to the classroom is a beginning step to learn, it is also critical to consider how the teachers are to monitor students, adjust lesson plans, and evaluate students on the basis of the textbooks. Barker and Matveeva (2006) found that, “while every textbook is not a perfect fit, instructors need to identify areas where a textbook might be a suitable complement to the instructor’s background or where there may be possible problems.” In that statement, lies possibly the most important reason for the existence of a textbook. Teachers are not to use textbooks for the sole reason of everyday lesson planning, but should use textbooks as a supplementary tool for learning. For instance, if a teacher lacks experience in any certain area of the curriculum or if valuable content in the textbook can be added to meet the goals of the lesson, then the textbook should be utilized to its fullest potential. Finally, once a teacher masters and has sound knowledge of the adopted textbook for implementation, it is time to hand the student his or her most valuable resource for the entire school year.

Conclusion

The variety of textbook selection modules can be multiple when one considers how many schools of thought concerning curriculum have emerged throughout the history of education. However, if a school wants to place serious and valuable time into researching a complete policy, then the process that was described above is an exceptional place to start. The dimensions of planning, selecting, adopting, and implementing a textbook can have much weight on being confident in deciding on an acceptable textbook. When adopting that right textbook for students, there can never be too much thought that goes into finding the right fit for your district. In fact, the following sentence may have said it best. The investment in identifying a core program that aligns with research and fits the needs of learners in your school will reap long-term benefits for children (Simmons & Kame’enui, 2005). The process of including an assortment of school and non-school employees in the process can allow everyone to buy into
Selecting High-Quality Textbooks

the process right from the start. This permits everyone to take ownership in education, where a consensus can be reached and a reduction in dissatisfaction can be kept to a minimal amount. As curriculums are responsible for driving textbook selection, the particular pedagogical tools and ancillaries that textbooks offer can add great meaning and understanding of a school’s curriculum. When considering such a task as this, a detailed, inclusive, and established process can save time, money, and resources for any school district. Whether you are an administrator, educator, student, parent, or community member, everyone can have a role in finding the textbook where students receive indispensable information that can lead them to obtaining a high-quality education.

References


* Catalyst, 3*(2), 1-4.


