



POLICY FOCUS

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Abolish the Curriculum Monopoly

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HIGHLIGHT

Schools nationwide rely on a few publishing companies for textbooks, assessments, and curriculum, giving those companies outsized power. Unfortunately, in the past several years, many of the most concerning trends in education have shown up in these textbooks, which entrench those trends and spread them far and wide. States and localities must evaluate textbooks closely, and not trust big-name publishers blindly.

INTRODUCTION

Education reform has picked up steam in the post-COVID era, as the failures of the educational establishment have become more, not less, pressing in the years since school closures. Two major concerns of education reform advocates have been ideology in the classroom and bad pedagogy. Both of these have contributed to poor educational outcomes, with reading scores falling to **historic lows** in 2025.

Ineffective and ideologically compromised curricula have been discussed extensively in the public sphere. Rarely discussed, however, is the problem that all too often entrenches poor curriculum in public schools: A few companies

essentially control everything that is taught in public schools across America, because they exercise outsized market control over school curriculum, including textbooks, assessments, and educational technology.

Moreover, because K-12 curriculum across the country is so heavily controlled by state boards, departments of education, and districts, teachers themselves are often confined to approved curricula that are set and purchased by administrators and policymakers. As of 2021, McGraw Hill **controlled** around 22 percent of the K-12 textbook market share. Meanwhile, around **90 percent** of U.S. K-12 schools use programs from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH), per the company's website. While there is no data available on how much of the market share

Savvas, a subsidiary of Pearson Education, has in the K-12 market, the company **reached** \$1 billion in sales in 2023.

There is nothing inherently wrong with schools across the nation using similar, or even the same, textbooks, especially seeing that some level of standardization in schooling is necessary to evaluate student performance and ensure that students across grade levels are at similar levels of competence when it comes to the same skills. That said, with declining student performance, as well as concerns over inappropriate content that is being taught in schools, it is worth evaluating the publishing industry and the mechanisms that empower it to operate essentially unchallenged.

CASE STUDY:

HOW “BALANCED LITERACY” CURRICULUM LEFT CHILDREN ILLITERATE

A now-famous example of textbooks calcifying bad ideas is seen in the debate over literacy education. In the 1990s and 2000s, many schools threw out tried-and-true phonics in favor of so-called “balanced literacy,” an approach to reading pushed by Lucy Calkins of Columbia University Teachers College. Balanced literacy relied on students identifying sight words as opposed to learning how to sound words out (as they would with a standard phonics-based approach). It ultimately proved to be ineffective in teaching children how to read, and contributed greatly to a literacy crisis—**65 percent of American fourth graders** can't read—as **documented** by education reporter Emily Hanford in the 2022 podcast, “Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went So Wrong.”

“Sold a Story” **found** that 78 out of the 83 largest school districts in the country were using the balanced literacy curriculum of the publisher Heinemann, which is a subsidiary of HMH—which suggests that smaller districts (usually influenced by the choices of the bigger ones) were using that curriculum as well. Heinemann received at least \$215 million from these districts between 2012 and 2022 alone. Schools additionally purchased assessments, interventions, and trainings from the company.

With balanced literacy now thoroughly discredited and on a steep decline in classrooms around the country, Heinemann's revenues have **fallen** 75 percent between 2019 and 2023, as educators and the public began to turn against balanced literacy. The publisher is

now even being **sued** for “deceptive and fraudulent marketing” that left children unable to read and “[peddling] a raft of products and curricula that sought to diminish and even exclude systematic and daily phonics instruction.” But this does not undo the damage caused to countless children during the years when they are most capable of learning, even for those lucky enough to have received legitimate reading support later on in education or even in adulthood.

The fact that the future of an entire generation of children was entrusted essentially to a single company and to the ideas of a single woman from a single university should be cause for concern. In this case, schools and states risked a single point of failure—and unfortunately, that point did, in fact, fail—and failed millions of American children with it.

There were, however, states that bucked the trend. In what is now dubbed the “**Mississippi Miracle**,” Mississippi was able to go from being ranked second-worst in fourth-grade reading in 2013 to joining the middle of the pack as the 21st state in reading by 2022. It accomplished this by promoting phonics (when other states weren’t) in its Literacy-Based Promotion Act of 2013, listening to factual evidence as opposed to self-proclaimed experts.

Indeed, it’s worth noting that a direct line can be drawn between the balanced literacy catastrophe and Columbia University’s Teaching Program. Unfortunately, this sheds light on the fact that teacher training programs have become spaces where poisonous ideologies have proliferated. While this is not directly related to publishing, publishers often turn to these universities for so-called expert advice (as in the case of Lucy Calkins) and further spread bad ideas. If states want to disempower this apparatus—one that has so badly failed American students—they can follow the **example of Florida**, and ensure that university teacher training programs, in order to maintain their certification, are free of ideology. States can also follow the **example of Indiana** and mandate that certified teacher preparation programs train teachers in evidence-based learning methods like phonics, so that fewer fads are able to infiltrate the system.

IDEOLOGY IN TEXTBOOKS

One of the biggest such fads in schools has been woke ideology. Consequently, it has become one of the most prominent policy issues of the 2020s, but still, the fact that the same few publishers are writing the hotly-contested curriculum is often overlooked. The American history curriculum from Savvas—which costs \$145,000 for a school district—**promotes** Black Lives Matter rhetoric, including the idea that America suffers from “systemic racism” and “disproportionate police violence.” Pearson’s

textbook, “Thinking Mathematically,” **contained**, per a reviewer in Florida, “math problems that ... suggested a correlation between racial prejudice, age and education level and that called attention to the [**debunked**] wage gap between women and men.”

Florida ultimately **rejected** “Thinking Mathematically” in 2022, as well as dozens of other textbooks, for containing woke ideology. Governor Ron DeSantis also **rejected** the College Board’s proposed A.P. African American

History curriculum in 2023, as it contained **proposed readings** that promoted intersectionality, anti-capitalism, and “building forms of queerness that reject the given realities of the government and the market,” among other ideological drivel.

DeSantis’ decision proved to be a success: The College Board actually **moderated** its curriculum, making optional topics such as Black Lives Matter. While the College Board claimed it was not responding to Florida, and had previously established these changes to the curriculum, the decision was widely viewed (including by those who **supported** critical race theory) as a capitulation to conservative critics, as well as red state laws that rejected critical race theory. The College Board is not the only academic publisher that has responded to state laws: HMH **creates** a tailored curriculum for Oklahoma due to the state’s textbook adoption process. Putting this sort of indirect pressure on companies has the potential to create a healthier educational environment for all. State agencies in **nineteen states and Washington D.C.** are tasked with determining textbooks for the state. These states might find success in following the victories of Florida and Oklahoma and holding their ground when it comes to bad content, ideological and otherwise, in textbooks.

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writes of Pearson, publishers are “free to produce the material that [they choose], even to embed the discriminatory ideas of anti-racism into all its content—but taxpayers should not have to pay for content that is based on woke orthodoxy.” Deprived of taxpayer funding for woke ideology, publishers can adapt (and reject woke ideology) or collapse.

INEFFECTIVE EDTECH

There are potential benefits to digital textbooks, especially in the case of open-source textbooks (e.g., **OpenStax**), which can cut costs for districts. But these are rarely used. Instead, the vast majority of EdTech is **costly**, with the North American market alone **valued** at \$58 billion in 2024 and expected to grow. The three biggest publishers are, of course, also in the digital market (with Savvas being entirely digital), and stand to profit greatly from not only the software they sell, but the licenses and annual subscriptions to the software that they essentially mandate their customers to purchase.

In addition to suffering from the same issues with pedagogy and ideology, EdTech is often ineffective: Columnist Jessica Grose **wrote** for the New York Times, “In my conversations with teachers, I’ve been struck by their descriptions of the cascade of tech use—that more tech is often offered as a solution to problems created by tech. For example, paid software like GoGuardian, which allows teachers to monitor every child’s screen, has been introduced to solve the problem of students goofing off on their laptops.”

It’s telling that parents in Silicon Valley, a disproportionate number of whom work in tech, **reject** technology when it comes to educating their own children. They understand tech better than anyone else, and they understand

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that developing minds need to steer clear of it. Nevertheless, **32 states** mandate digital learning plans, which can push schools further toward concentrated, ineffective curricula that often leave students distracted and zoned out on laptops and tablets, instead of engaged and focused on their teachers. This is not to say that all EdTech is inherently bad: Some of it is necessary and can be helpful (e.g., computer science classes). That said, state mandates can push schools toward using curriculum that is ultimately counterproductive, and allow a handful of companies to sell their expensive products to schools, even if the products are ultimately defective.

Private schools—such as the **tech-free Waldorf schools** preferred by Silicon Valley parents—and charter schools frequently use entirely different approaches to education than public schools, often to the betterment of their students. For instance, **classical charter schools** (which are public schools) use time-tested curriculum, especially when it comes to the humanities. This can protect against the faddishness that contemporary textbook companies resort to in order to stay relevant, make a profit, and constantly have a new product to sell. It also means that states have a tested and effective model to use in public schools—a model that is used by private and charter schools, which, on average, perform better than their public school counterparts anyway.

Often, when the concern of market power is raised in policy debates, the proposed

solutions are often trustbusting or other extreme regulatory measures. But not only can this be counterproductive and an overextension of government power, especially at the federal level; when it comes to curriculum—unlike, say, pharmaceuticals or hardware—there is a fairly low barrier to entry, so there are plenty of alternative curricula that schools could use, but frequently don't. States and districts, insofar as they choose bad curricula, often do so because of status quo bias and ignorance more than any dearth of better options.

CONCLUSION

The old adage, “No one ever got fired for using IBM,” is pertinent to big textbook publishing companies, too. Defaulting to Savvas, HMH, or McGraw Hill's curriculum is often easier for state and local education authorities than evaluating each individual curriculum and its efficacy. But taking this shortcut has created districts dependent on curriculum that ultimately does not serve students.

It is trite but true that the future of our country depends on our schools, and what is taught in them. All the solutions suggested in this paper ultimately rely on thoughtful adults in positions of authority—in government, in school districts, and, most importantly, in classrooms—carefully considering whether or not what is being taught is in the best interest of the children in their charge, rather than going with the seemingly safe option that turns out to be anything but.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Get Informed:

Learn more about the curriculum monopoly. Visit:

- [Classical Learning Test](#)
- [After Babel](#)
- [Heritage Foundation](#)

Talk to Your Friends:

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community:

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically:

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

Connect with Independent Women! Follow us on:

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ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN

Independent Women is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. Independent Women, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.