



Schwarzenegger's Push for Digital Textbooks

The Calif. Gov. Wants to Save Money by Dumping Printed Books for Online Texts; Is it Feasible?


By **MICHAEL B. FARRELL**

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SAN FRANCISCO - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is taking a page from high school science books in an effort to [shrink California's \\$24 billion budget gap](#).

In fact, he wants to take the entire book  and do away with it.

By next fall, [Governor Schwarzenegger](#) intends to make free, open-source [digital textbooks](#) available for high school math and science classes throughout California, a move that he says will help reduce the more than \$350 million the state spends annually on educational materials.

Some critics doubt the idea will result in any immediate cost savings  and question a plan that might require investment in technology and teacher training at a time when schools face deep budget cuts.

But if California embraces open-source materials, which are now increasingly used on college campuses, a nationwide debate over traditional textbooks is bound to follow.

In the era of the Internet, do students really need to lug around pounds of often-outdated print?

Neeru Khosla doesn't think so. Two years ago, she helped start CK-12, a Palo Alto, Calif., nonprofit group that aims to lower the cost of course materials by offering primary and secondary schools free Web-based content. Already, the organization has partnered with Virginia to provide physics texts.

Ms. Khosla says CK-12 will submit at least eight proposals to the California Digital Textbook initiative, which the governor announced last month and detailed in a press conference earlier this week. Submitted digital books still have to be approved by state education authorities before being made available to California schools.

Proponents of digital open-source texts tout the fact that when information changes, educators can make immediate adjustments. "Today, I was actually looking at my kids' textbook and Pluto was listed as one of the planets. You're not going to be able to change that until the next textbook comes out. But online you can change that information immediately," says Khosla.

By contrast, traditional print textbooks are usually approved by states on a six-year cycle.

Digital Books Would Lighten Students' Loads

"So just think about the last six years, all the things that happened," Schwarzenegger said Monday. "For instance, the Iraq war, the country's first African-American president & all of this you wouldn't have in those textbooks."

Plus, notes Khosla, online coursework can literally lighten students' load. "K-12 students are carrying half their weight in textbooks. Why?"

But there's a reason most classrooms still rely on print, counter teachers and textbook companies. Mainly, many students still don't have regular access to computers.

"It's a nice idea, but it's not going to work," says David Sanchez of the California Teachers Association. "Where are you going to get a computer for everybody? How many of these kids actually have computers at home?"

Instead, Mr. Sanchez says, he would like to see Schwarzenegger explore ways to infuse cash into a struggling school system — such as boosting tax revenues to directly support schools.

Open-Source Books Usually Have More Lenient Copyright Licenses

Khosla says all a school needs to make open-source digital textbooks available to every student is a printer. "You don't need a computer in every student's hand to do this," she says.

While not all open-source books are free, they usually have more lenient copyright licenses than do print textbooks or digital books provided by mainstream publishers. Educators can download and distribute them at will without facing additional costs. Typically, the cost of producing the text is offset by foundations or private donations.

It's too early to know what Schwarzenegger's plan will mean for traditional textbook companies, but they'll certainly chafe if California's move leads other states to look into digital replacements.

Mary Skafidas, spokeswoman for McGraw-Hill Education, notes that her publishing company has long been able to provide schools with digital content. "We're a content provider," she says. "All of our major programs [for K-12] are available digitally."

However, she says, most schools are not yet equipped to make the leap into digital content. And, unlike open-source texts, content from major educational publishers would still come with copyright and distribution limits and typically a higher price tag.

Misconception That 'Free Text Must Be Poor Quality'

Traditional textbook companies say the price of their books reflects the vast amount of work that goes into producing each text, often tailored to meet specific state standards.

But schools can receive similar quality at a lower price by using open-source books, says David Wiley, associate professor in instructional psychology and technology at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and founder of OpenContent.org.

There is a misconception that "free text must be poor quality," he says. "That's certainly not the case. There are stinker textbooks and stinker open-source textbooks."

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