

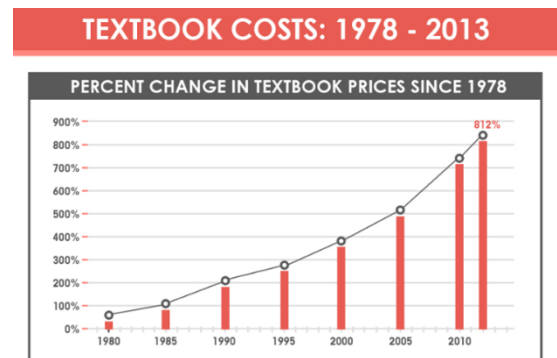
The Hidden Layers of the Textbook Industry

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Textbooks. Along with being pelted in the face with a dodgeball in gym and having soggy tater tots for lunch, textbooks are a cornerstone of American education. Textbooks offer a way for students to further their understanding of a certain topic in an organized fashion. Professionals from certain fields are trusted to feed information to students to help them perform well on end-of-year exams. Recent reports, however, have suggested that there are layers within the textbook industry that go beyond what the eye can see.

The Facts:

It is no secret that textbook prices have skyrocketed within the past few years. The average American public school district spends \$250 on textbooks per student every year. At Williamsville East High School, there are approximately 1,000 students. According to this statistic, the Williamsville Central School District spends about \$250,000 a year for textbooks on one high school alone. A study performed by Chris Zook at the Applied Educational Systems found that textbook prices have increased over 800% within 35 years. Such an increase in prices is 4 times faster than the American inflation rate since 2006.



Source: Chris Zook, Applied Educational Systems

After these statistics were revealed, suspicions began to rise in regards to the ethicality of textbooks and their publishing companies. Textbooks have been known for their absurdly high prices and their ability to make a student's back sore, but there is more behind-the-scenes activity relating to textbooks than their obvious burdens.

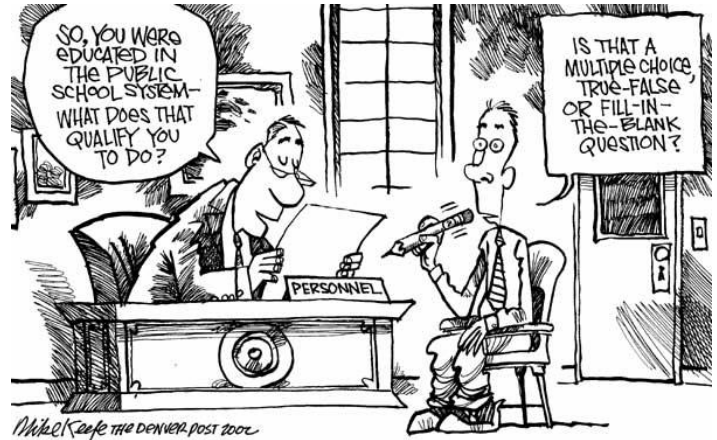
There are five major textbook publishing companies: Pearson Education, McGraw Hill Education, Scholastic, Cengage Learning, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. These companies control 80% of the textbook industry.

Publishers Weekly found that Pearson Education was the world's largest publisher by revenue in 2017. Scholastic was ranked ninth, McGraw Hill was ranked tenth, Cengage Learning was ranked thirteenth, and Houghton Mifflin was ranked fourteenth.

The oligopoly that these textbook corporations hold on the industry is not without repercussions. This captive market inevitably results in higher prices for consumers and fewer legitimate options for consumers to choose from. The privatization of education, driven by companies like Pearson Education, undermines the view of education as an essential public good. A *Huffington Post* article by Alan Singer says, "In the United States and the global-North, Pearson efficacy means marketing much maligned high-stakes tests that push rather than assess curriculum and learning and serve to promote other Pearson products." Such statements argue that big

textbook companies are acting only in their self-interest, with no regard to the students and educators who utilize their products.

The clutch these large companies hold makes it difficult to stimulate competition within the industry. To combat this, lawmakers could create legislation to regulate the oligopoly. This, however, is easier said than done.



Source: Mark Keefe, *Denver Post*, 2002

The Washington Post reported that an analysis performed by the Center for Media and Democracy found that Pearson Education, Educational Testing Service, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and McGraw-Hill “collectively spent more than \$20 million lobbying in states and on Capitol Hill from 2009 to 2014.” These companies are lobbying for pro-standardized test policies. Such policies would force students throughout the country to take standardized tests provided by the same companies that dominate the textbook industry. Politicians will earn more money from these lobbyists, powerful companies like Pearson Education will earn more money from nationally administered tests, and students and teachers will have to prepare for more end-of-year exams.

Upon reading these facts, it may start to appear as if schools are marionette dolls controlled by the hands of powerful textbook companies.

The Task:

To address the issue of textbooks and the firm grasp big textbook corporations have over the industry, I decided to interview teachers at Williamsville East High School to receive their thoughts on the issue.

By interviewing nine teachers from different departments, I hoped to find answers to the following questions¹:

- 1) How frequently are these textbooks used?
- 2) How accurate are our textbooks?
- 3) Who chose this particular textbook?
- 4) Is there a wide enough variety of textbook types?
- 5) Are these textbooks reasonably priced? Does the high cost of textbooks place less affluent schools at a disadvantage to perform well?
- 6) Is there any sort of bonus provided by textbooks companies like Pearson when their products are bought in large amounts?
- 7) Is the course based on the textbook? Are tests and end of year exams based off of the material covered in the textbook?

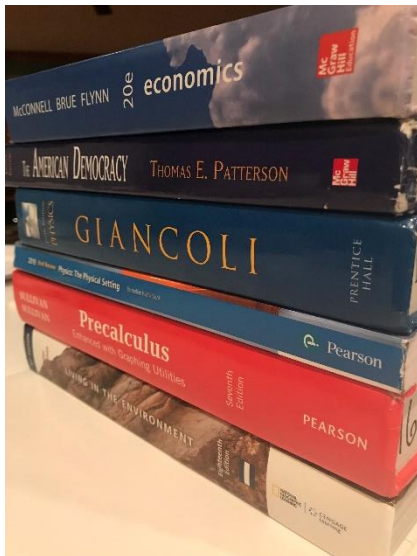
¹ Please note: more questions were asked throughout these interviews but are not mentioned in this article in order to provide for a more concise article.

- 8) Are big textbook companies like McGraw Hill and Pearson taking advantage of our education system to make more profit?
- 9) Do textbooks give the education students deserve? Are these textbooks effective in helping students gain an education?

The Interviews:

In response to the first question, answers varied drastically. On the one hand, one of the AP Government and Politics teachers, Dr. Redmond, and one of the AP United States History teachers, Mr. Nogowski, said that they use their textbooks minimally. Although reading certain chapters from the textbook may be assigned for homework, it is only to ensure that students will be getting additional material to study for exams. On the other hand, one of the math teachers, Ms. Sweeney, said she uses their math textbook fairly frequently. She ranked her use of the book as a seven out of ten.

The second question was answered consistently. All of the teachers interviewed stated that the textbooks are very accurate. Although there may be some errors in an answer key or some idea may not be developed completely, the teachers rated the textbooks to be at least a six out of ten in terms of accuracy.



A Typical Textbook Load for Students at Williamsville East High School: (From Top to Bottom) McGraw Hill Education, McGraw Hill Education, Prentice Hall (a Subsidiary of Pearson Education), Pearson Education, Pearson Education, Cengage Learning.

Respected professionals are asked to write the textbooks for their field. For example, the AP US History textbook that Williamsville East uses, The American Pageant, was written by David M. Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen. Both historians studied at prestigious universities and have received Pulitzer Prizes in history. Although there has been some controversy regarding the accuracy of textbooks (like the time when a McGraw Hill textbook called slaves, “workers”), the textbooks here at Williamsville East are accurate.

Like the second question, the third question was met with similar answers. Teachers at Williamsville East or within the Williamsville Central School District come together to choose which textbook to use when teaching a particular course. Social studies teacher Ms. Kantz said that the teachers choose a textbook after reviewing all available options.

The question, “Is there a wide enough variety of textbook types?” was met with “no”.

Different teachers, however, had different opinions regarding the lack of textbook variety. Some teachers said that they wish more reliable options were readily available to choose from. On the other hand, Ms. Fey-Daly, who teaches Global I, AP European History, and Women’s History, believes that the lack of too many textbooks types allows for an even learning base. She said that “it is important to

have one or two consistent sources of information.” If students are all provided with textbooks that offer similar information, it becomes easier to compare information.

When asked if these textbooks are reasonably priced, teachers answered with a simple “no”. One teacher even said that the “cost of textbooks is ridiculous.” Different teachers had contrasting views as to whether this placed poorer schools at a disadvantage to perform well.

Mr. Nogowski said that such high prices do not place certain schools at a disadvantage because “you don’t need the textbooks.” The key to learning, he said, is having a student who is truly motivated to learn the material. Even if students are given all of the materials they need to perform well, some students will not utilize their resources. It is a “you can bring a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink” analogy.

On the other hand, Ms. Weitz said, “If [textbook companies] can manipulate the system for people to teach exactly what their product represents and have a final exam based upon their entire product, yeah it’s a disadvantage.”

Dr. Redmond had a similar view, saying that high textbook costs “definitely” place some schools at a disadvantage. He said, “Even for an affluent district like this, we’re working with a book from 2008.” For certain subjects like government, the material changes at a rapid pace. Examples provided by textbooks may have been relevant at the time of its publication, but are less relevant for students reading from the textbook ten years after it was published. Schools that cannot afford new textbooks may end up using outdated materials that are harder for students to learn from.

To answer question six, Mr. Nogowski said that when textbooks are bought in large quantities, textbook companies provide teachers with free ancillaries. These ancillaries may come in the form of teacher editions of textbooks. The more textbooks bought, the more ancillaries provided. Discounts, however, are not part of the equation.

Textbooks are based on the course taught. Ms. Sweeney said, “We determine our curriculum first, and then we pick a textbook that most fits that.” Different teachers provided similar responses. Ms. Fey-Daly said, “[The course] should never be based on the textbook. It’s based on the curriculum, and by that I mean an agreed set of content, either by the state, the AP board, or the district.”

A teacher said that one of the major “selling points” of textbooks is that the material covered in the book aligns with the AP course set by the College Board. This is why some books have “AP Edition” written on them.

Out of the questions asked to teachers, question eight (Are big textbook companies like McGraw Hill and Pearson taking advantage of our education system to make more profit?) was the most “contentious.” Some teachers chose not to respond. Another teacher responded with “oh hell yeah.” Dr. Redmond said that “There is a lot of money to be made, and there’s not a ton of competition.” He continued by saying that big textbook companies have “really cornered the market” and know that students need these materials.

Ms. Sweeney said that college students bear a much larger burden as a result of large textbook companies. Even though a textbook may be the “newest edition”, it is essentially the same book as previous editions. She said that at the college level, “[Textbook companies] make an addition and charge hundreds of dollars for it. Here [at Williamsville East High School], we don’t have that problem because we keep our textbooks for over ten years.”

The last question was unanimous: although textbooks may help a student review, teachers are the force that gives students the effective education they deserve. One teacher said, “In my elective classes, I don’t use textbooks, and the students do fine.” For most AP classes, textbooks serve as a “safety net” for students, because no teacher is sure of what will be tested on AP exams.

The Conclusions:

- 1) Textbooks, while mostly accurate, can have information that becomes outdated rapidly. Subjects like government are difficult to be continuously updated, so it may become harder for students to learn from older textbooks.
- 2) Even if students are given textbooks, there is a high likelihood that they will remain unused. Different courses seem to use textbooks at different levels. Some courses do not rely on textbooks at all.
- 3) Even though textbooks are good, teachers are better.

Textbooks are used throughout the nation and throughout the world. The United States has an education system dedicated to giving its students a thorough learning experience. Textbooks are a normal presence in schools and are the most obvious way of creating a standardized learning system.

As a famous saying once said, “With great power comes great responsibility.” The United States’ education system carries the power to shape the learning experience of every student in the country. The textbook companies that control the industry have gained increasing profits over the past few decades, and school districts, (ultimately, we the public) must pay the price.

Combatting the problem of the textbook oligopoly will prove itself to be challenging. Many people would scoff at the idea of “textbook reform” when the nation is facing a seemingly endless stream of polarizing issues.

Students are educated to become future leaders. If big corporations can infiltrate our education system, what does that say about our society?

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