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Required Reading: The Textbook Monopoly in American Education

Control over educational policy in the United States is split between the federal, state, and local levels of government, which, under the direction of their respective constituents, are tasked with defining a system of educational standards that codify what students under their jurisdiction ought to learn. Schools then implement curriculum in response to the combination of standards specific to their region, often in conjunction with the use of privately-produced textbooks. Over time, unfortunately, the efficacy of this system has diminished severely as a handful of companies have wrested control over the majority of the textbook industry. As of 2013, just three textbook publishing conglomerates - Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt, McGraw-Hill Education, and Pearson - assert control over "more than 80% of the \$8.8 billion publishing market" internationally (Vohra 9). At surface level, the hold of these companies on the textbook industry is like any other classic monopoly, with drastically increased prices and comparably-reduced competition. Upon inspection, however, it can be shown that this oligopoly-nearing-monopoly held by the companies aforementioned has deeper repercussions, having, over the last several decades, transformed an effective private-public partnership into a nefarious machine that serves to inflict disastrous consequences on the potency of democracy in education in ways that supersede the democratic process and shift the ideological battle over what America's youth are taught from Congress to the classroom. By almost every metric, the textbook monopoly has

demonstrated itself to be both financially and academically detrimental to students and citizens alike.

Like any other monopoly, the most immediately-visible disadvantages of the textbook monopoly are financial in nature, manifesting most conspicuously in increased prices. According to the American Enterprise Institute, a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy think tank, textbook prices have increased 812% since 1978, outstripping inflation of the cost of medical services, new home prices, and the consumer price index in the same time period (Priceonomics). College students, who often need to buy textbooks themselves in addition to tuition, housing, and university costs, are generally hit the hardest by increasing textbook prices. Per the College Board, “the average student at a four-year public institution spends \$1,200 annually on books and supplies” (Allen 1). This figure adds significant burden to the current average annual cost of attending a public four-year institution of almost \$15,000 (Ma et al. 11, 20). Textbook prices are already hefty for a number of reasons, including a monopolistic lack of competition in the industry, reseller markup, and author’s royalties. None of these factors, however, are quite as impactful as the funds spent on marketing the textbooks: enabled by increased revenues from textbook sales, a worrying amount of publishers engage in ethically-questionable textbook marketing practices with professors that hurt students the most. Some publishers are known to offer thousands of dollars to professors and instructors just to *review* textbooks for potential inclusion in their coursework. The same publishers sometimes offer commissions on textbooks sold or (in what is almost outright bribery) offer kickbacks to professors for textbook adoption (Bartlett). While these deals can be lucrative to professors faced with inadequate salaries, they can be especially detrimental to students, who are forced to purchase said textbooks at the inflated price in order to pass (and in some cases, even participate in) the class. To capitalize on

textbook purchase lock-in, publishers resort to tactics such as textbook revision: many publishers release new ‘revised’ editions of existing textbooks every 2-4 years, marketing the ‘revamped’ books as new then selling them at same or greater prices (Priceonomics). While these updated versions can include new content, many textbooks, especially those written on mathematics and other technical subjects which do not warrant frequent revision, are updated solely for the purpose of revenue. In the same vein, publishers push web-based homework submission applications to professors (a theoretically beneficial proposal), but take advantage of students by requiring a special online code to access the application, often sold at unreasonable prices or only bundled with a physical textbook. With the increased revenues from textbook sales to students who have no choice in purchasing their goods as a result of such tactics, textbook publishers are able to better fund their unethical textbook-marketing practices.

These anti-student behaviors are made possible by the sheer magnitude of influence textbook publishers such as Pearson have over American education. While it operates internationally, Pearson finds most of its business in the West, with the North American market accounting for 59% of the company’s revenues and 66% of its total profits (Rushton). The conglomerate has business in the composition and publication of textbooks and the creation, distribution, and grading of teacher qualifications, student exams, and standardized tests - in fact, the British company is thought to control approximately 60% of all North American standardized testing (Reingold). The corporation also played an instrumental role in the development of curriculum for and the implementation of the vastly-controversial Common Core education standards, especially in elementary schools (Rushton). The oligopoly over and general privatization of American education that companies such as Pearson have achieved has created a single point of failure that has allowed certain parties to exert a disproportionate amount of

influence over what American students are actually taught, in ways that are detrimental to presenting a well-rounded and unbiased worldview in the national classroom.

In a nation that has become increasingly polarized over the last decades, the ideological battle for what content and worldview is taught in the classroom has become even more significant, especially in regards to religion. This disagreement has historically been resolved within the government: conservative states tend to pass legislation requiring the inclusion of religion-supported perspectives in science and history teachings in addition to federal education standards, while liberal states tend to act in the opposite. The result of this process is a common core (no pun intended) of educational standards defined at the federal level, with some adjustments at the state and local levels - a victory for democracy and dual federalism. The textbook monopoly, however, has undermined the efficacy of this process: while textbook-publishing companies were previously able to assemble a single textbook version that would be admissible and marketable in all fifty states by catering to national standards, this is no longer exactly the case. Because of the actions of a select group of regulators, textbook publishers are now forced to consider a different lowest common denominator in terms of educational standards; a change that undermines the system of our government and shifts the ideological battle of what is taught to our nation's youth - arguably the most intellectually vulnerable demographic of our population - from public politics to private industry.

This threat to American students is most strongly exemplified in the actions of the Texas State Board of Education. A unit of the Texas Education Agency, the Board is responsible for setting curriculum standards for the state, effectively dictating what content is permissible for instruction in every Texas public school. For most of the last couple decades, the state's populace has chosen to elect (in the words of former chair Don McLeroy) "solid religious

conservatives” to the fourteen-member State Board of Education (fifteen, including the appointed chair) (Chancey 325). In their tenure, this majority has acted to ensure that their view of “true American history” is taught in schools by emphasizing the link between the ideology of the Founding Fathers and Christianity and asserting that the country was “built on biblical principles” (Chancey 325-326). On one hand, some organizations and citizens (including the Texas Christian Coalition and Chuck Norris) have praised these changes for their more-faithful (pun intended) representation of the country’s founding. On the other hand, Texan educational reform groups on both sides of the spectrum (albeit to a much lesser extent on the right) have lambasted the Board’s changes for having “heavy-handed religious and ideological bias, historical inaccuracy, whitewashing of unappealing aspects of American history, [and] inattention to diversity issues” (Chancey 326-327). Regardless of one’s opinion on the issue, the Board’s actions are not inherently harmful or undemocratic - the members of the State Board of Education are elected, and the Board’s influence is only supposed to extend within the state; so by all means, whether one agrees or disagrees with the Board’s actions, the standards changes should simply be democracy at work.

However, because of the textbook monopoly, the Board’s actions have more far-reaching implications than what might initially be apparent. In the words of Dr. Mark A. Chancey, a prestigious Duke scholar working as a professor of religious studies at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, the Board’s changes to standards would “likely find its way into [textbooks] adopted across the country” considering the fact that textbook “publishers must develop textbooks that cohere with the Texas standards” in addition to those of the federal government and the other 49 states (Chancey 326). This possibility is especially likely given Texas’s relationship with textbook publishers: the Lone Star State’s deals with textbook

publishers amount to hundreds of millions of dollars (Rushton). Because of the reduced amount of textbook publishers in the North American market, and the relatedly reduced competition and amount of textbooks published in the region, textbooks published in the present day bear the increasing risk of presenting information that is not representative of the decisions and values of local governments. In a jarring upset to dual federalism, the undue influence that the textbook industry has (advertently or inadvertently) been allowed to wield has created an environment detrimental not only to academia, or only Texas, but to the country as a whole — the existence of which has become increasingly apparent. A scholarly review funded by watchdog and activist group Texas Freedom Network of 43 proposed history, geography, and government textbooks written in accordance with Texas education standards for grades 6-12 found that several of the proposed textbooks contained arguably misrepresentative portrayals of American government and history, including exaggerations of the "Judeo-Christian influence on the nation's founding," biased statements "inappropriately [portraying] Islam and Muslims negatively," failure to address "legitimate problems that exist in capitalism," and inclusion of potentially offensive "anthropological categories and racial terminology in describing African civilization" (Strauss 1). Regardless of whether or not such representations are accurate, it is clear that the Texas State Board of Education, as a result of the textbook monopoly, now possesses an unprecedented ability to influence national academic policy. It is clear that any organization, not just the Texas State Board of Education, with a sufficient stake in the private textbook publishing industry, can informally bypass the checks and balances underpinning our democratic determination of educational standards. It is clear that because of the textbook monopoly's ability to shift the ideological battleground of educational standards from the public sector to the private sector, America's system of education is now more than ever susceptible to abuse.

Like any other monopoly, the textbook monopoly creates an anti-competitive market characterized by increasing prices and diminishing quality, the success of which perpetuates the monopoly, posing pertinent financial consequences for all consumers, especially students. Unlike a typical monopoly, however, this particular near-monopoly exercises a unique capacity to shape both the beliefs and ideological future of this nation's students, and by extension, the nation itself. The monopoly's potential for the distortion and misrepresentation of the tenets of knowledge undermines the decision-making processes embedded in our democratic republic. Rarely before has such monumental influence over an area of public concern, especially one so imperative to the future and development of the United States, been concentrated in the hands of so few.

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