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REQUIRED READING: HOW TEXTBOOK ADOPTION IN 3 STATES INFLUENCES THE NATION'S K-12 POPULATION



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Editor's note: This article is part of a collaboration between APM Research Lab and the **Ten Across** initiative, housed at Arizona State University.

by **EMILY SCHMIDT** | June 2, 2022

In April, the Florida Department of Education initially **rejected 41% of all K-12 mathematics textbooks** submitted for state adoption approval — the most in Florida’s history.

The dismissal of the 54 textbooks — including 71% of K-5 math materials — stems from several claims: references to Critical Race Theory (CRT), inclusions of Common Core and “unsolicited” inclusions of Social Emotional Learning.

The public push to provide evidential examples of the above reasons for rejection made **national headlines**, as the state’s Department of Education did not initially release any specifics. Later, it published four visual examples from the rejected textbooks.

Experts suggest that decisions like these, often made by those overseeing public school curricula in a small number of highly populated states, have an outsized influence on what children are learning throughout the country. Thus, we checked into the number and types of books being rejected by key states in recent years.

The process of textbook adoption

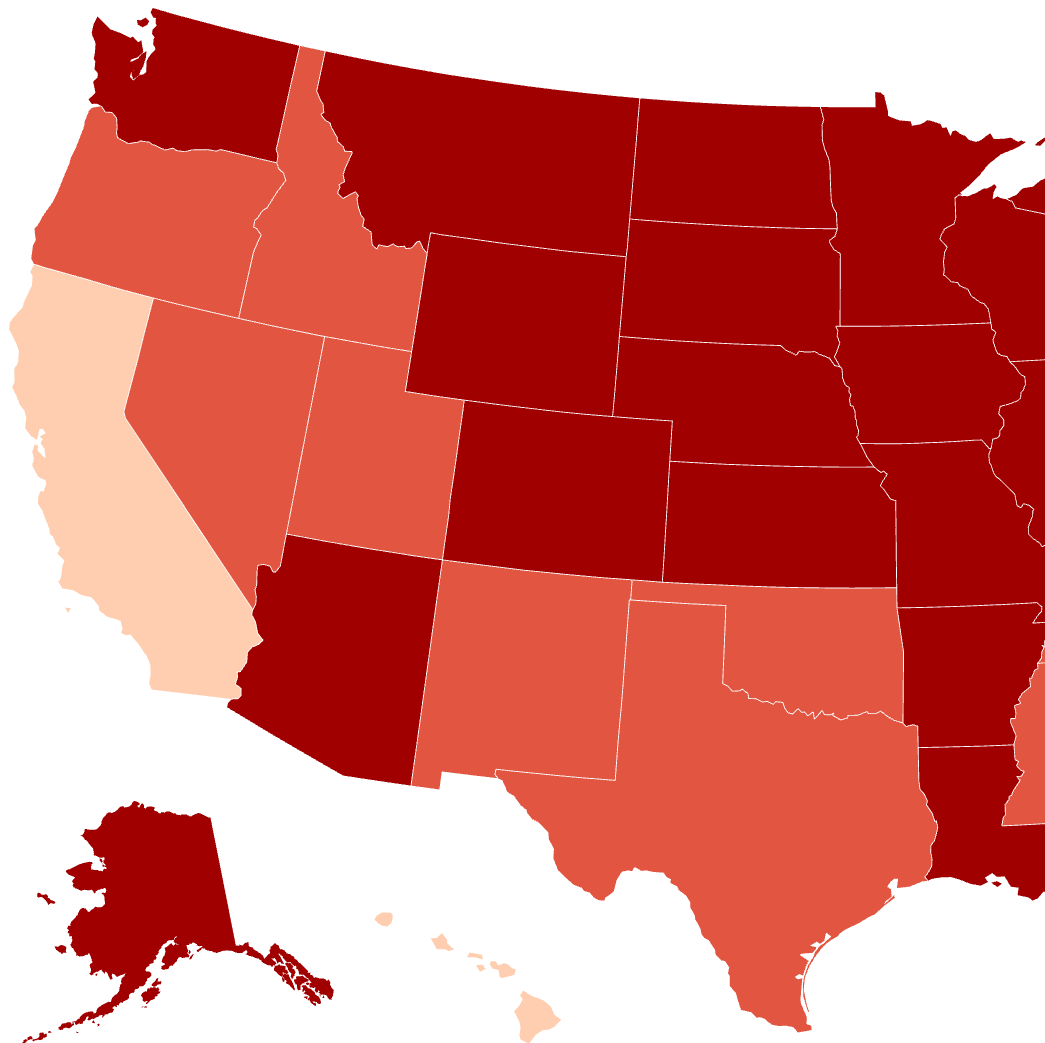
Textbook adoption policies vary considerably by state. According to the **Education Commission of the States**, 19 states and Washington D.C. prescribe textbooks at the state agency level, while the remaining states leave it to local

education agency level (such as a school district). Some states also include other instructional and curriculum materials in their statutes addressing textbook adoption.

Textbook Adoption Policy by State

Local level textbook adoption policy leaves decisions to a local education agency (i.e. school district). State level textbook adoption policy leaves decisions to a state agency (i.e. state board of education).

Local State State and Local



California has a statewide adoption policy at the elementary level. Secondary textbooks are chosen by local governing boards. The state of Hawaii comprises a single school district.

State boards of education usually vote on the final textbook and instructional material adoption, but smaller committees

may conduct the in-depth review and recommendation of the materials.

In **Texas**, for example, the commissioner of education appoints state review panel members from nominations submitted by state board members, academic experts, educators, parents or educational organizations.

Historically, California and Texas have driven the K-12 publishing industry, and now Florida is also influencing the market. According to the **Association of American Publishers**, from March 2020 to March 2021, California, Florida and Texas bought \$3.9 million, \$8.5 million and \$2.3 million worth of pedagogical materials, respectively. The total expenditure of these states accounted for about one-quarter of pre-K-12 resource revenue for publishers that year.

“Given the high concentration of students in Texas and California, textbook makers know...they need to create books that are going to be approved by those large states.” said **Dr. Max Altman**, director of research and policy at the Southern Education Foundation.

Altman said that requests for changes and outright rejections based on the inclusion of certain concepts are what make California, Florida and Texas so influential.

“This small group of people who approve textbooks within a couple of states have a very, very large effect on what students across the bottom of the United States and really across the country as a whole are able to learn,” he said.

California

California, as is often the case, is unique. Its State Board of Education (SBE) adopts textbooks and instructional materials for grades K-8 but leaves recommendations up to school districts for grades 9-12. Like other states, California follows an adoption schedule where certain subjects are evaluated each year for the recommendation of new materials.

California Textbook Adoption

The California State Board of Education adopts instructional materials for grades K-8. Local school districts have the power to adopt instructional materials for grades 9-12.

Year	Subject	Total	Adopted	Rejected
2017	History/Social Science	12	10	2
2018	Science	34	29	5
2021	Visual and Performing Arts	5	3	2
2022	World	11	10	1

Over the last four adoption cycles, California has adopted over 80% of materials in history, science, visual and

performing arts and world languages. The 2018 science adoption cycle had by far the most adoptions at 29 out of 34, which included **textbooks** from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, McGraw-Hill and Pearson.

In 2017, the SBE adopted 10 of 12 history and social science textbooks after an **eight-hour public hearing**. About 500 Hindus, Indian Americans and advocates for the LGBTQ+ community pleaded for fair historical representations in K-8 textbooks.

It was the first year that textbooks were adopted under California's **FAIR Education Act**, which outlines how people of different backgrounds, religions, genders, sexual orientations and disabilities should be portrayed fairly and inclusively in the state's social studies curriculum.

Dr. Michael Kirst, the longest-serving President of California's State Board of Education, said he has realized there is no perfect way to accommodate the state's 1,000 school districts. Thus, he believes the textbook adoption process should be highly transparent.

“California is too varied and too large and too complex and too diverse for the state to require districts to use our recommended textbooks,” he said. “It needs to be a public process for democracy and for legitimacy.”

Texas

Second in K-12 population, Texas has a traditional state adoption policy like Florida. The Texas Education Agency counts all instructional materials, including textbooks, in their adoption data, unlike California. In 2017, 558 materials were submitted to approval, but only 50% were approved and 11% were rejected. The remaining materials were withdrawn from the process.

Texas Textbook & Instructional Materials Adoption

The Texas State Board of Education adopts new instructional materials for grades pre-K-12 annually.

Year	Subject	Total	Adopted	Rejected
2017	Foreign Languages; Health Education; Mathematics; Various Elective Courses	558	280	63
2018	Social Studies	3	1	2
2019	English and Spanish Language Arts; Social Studies	291	178	73
2020	English Language Arts	88	59	0
2021	English and Spanish Language Arts	28	25	0

In 2019, over 25% of English and Spanish language arts and handwriting materials were rejected. This year, 50% of health and physical education materials were rejected and only 10% were adopted.

The Texas State Board of Education **approved one set of health materials** for middle and high school students after the publisher made requested content changes — removing references to gender fluidity and emphasizing abstinence over contraception.

Florida

As noted above, the Florida Department of Education rejected a record number of textbooks in their initial round of reviewal this spring, including a majority of K-5 mathematics textbooks submitted for review.

Florida Rejection of Mathematics Textbooks, 2022

The Florida Department of Education did not initially include 54 of the 132 (41%) submitted textbooks on the state’s adopted list.

Reason for Rejection	Total	Percentage
Incorporate prohibited topics or unsolicited strategies, including CRT	28	21%
Do not properly align to B.E.S.T Standards	12	9%
Do not properly align to B.E.S.T. Standards and incorporate prohibited	14	11%

Like Texas, Florida cited very specific reasons for rejecting math textbooks, but these fell under three general categories — the greatest number for incorporating prohibited topics or unsolicited strategies.

In a **press release statement**, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said, “It seems that some publishers attempted to slap a coat of paint on an old house built on the foundation of Common Core, and indoctrinating concepts like race essentialism, especially, bizarrely, for elementary school students.”

The future of textbook adoption

Experts say the future of textbook adoption is somewhat nebulous.

Over 50 years ago, Kirst said California adopted a single textbook for each subject, printed the books on a state printing press, and sent them out to school districts.

Questions and issues of textbook content have become more complex and frequent over the years. He cited phonics in reading and memorization versus problem solving in math as examples.

Professor Emily Gold Waldman, who focuses on education law at Pace University, said there are many unsettled questions about the extent to which the First Amendment limits a school district’s abilities to make decisions about textbooks and other instructional materials.

“The Supreme Court case law isn't even totally clear on the extent to which students have a First Amendment right to

[the] exposure [of] ideas depending on what curricular choices are made,” she said.

Altman, on the other hand, shares equal hope and concern. He indicated confidence that society will continue to recognize the ways in which governing bodies, like departments of education and school boards, keep students from learning correct information. But he said it is a very slow process that continues to harm students of all colors every day.

“If you are presenting [students] with an only partially clear picture of the world in which they exist, you are harming them because they do not know or understand what that world actually looks like, and importantly, where it comes from.”

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