

## 1<sup>st</sup>-Graders: "Booked" on Phonics

Stephen C. Bronack, Ph.D.

Editor's Choice

November 29, 1999

A battle is brewing in Texas between state education officials and textbook publishers over the content of the 1<sup>st</sup> grade readers offered by some of the most established textbook companies in the country. An article by Kathleen Manzo in a recent edition of Education Week (<http://www.edweek.org>) chronicles the struggle over the amount of "decodable" text found in new additions of the readers-- "decoding" is an important component process of phonics-based instruction in elementary reading programs in many American elementary schools.

About two years ago, the state school board in Texas decided that phonics was paramount to effective reading instruction. Since Texas is one of the largest textbook purchasing states in the U.S.--a \$91 million market-- textbook publishing companies were listening. What they heard was a state board of education that made it clear that Texas would only be interested in readers in which *most* of the words were phonics-friendly--that is, readers that contain words students can decode by sounding the word out. When publishers asked education officials in Texas to operationally define the word "most," they were told that at least 51% of the words should be "decodable." Over the next year-and-a-half, publishers worked to create readers that met the criteria. As the current school year started, at least five companies appeared to have achieved the new mandate.

However, during their September meeting, the state school board had an apparent change-of-heart and re-defined "most" from 51% to 80% with a 10-5 vote. This sent publishers into a tailspin. Publishers are now scurrying to construct supplements to new textbook offerings that will bring them up to standard. An evaluation by the Texas Education Agency found that **none** of the textbooks offered by any of the publishers in their current manifestation meets the 80% requirement--including the five publishers that *did* produce textbooks that met the original 51% criterion.

So, why should *you* care...if you don't live or teach in Texas?

Because, when it comes to textbooks in American schools, Texas is a very important state. What is happening in Texas will more than likely have an impact on first-graders in *your* town and in schools nation-wide. There are many in education who believe that textbooks are the most important factor when considering what teachers teach and what students learn in K-12 schools. There is no denying the omnipresence of "the text" in each classroom. Along with desks, blackboards, and pencil sharpeners, few other classroom staples are as prevalent as "the textbook"--and the textbook is the only one of these that contains *content*. This is, perhaps, the most important reason we need to be aware of what happens in Texas.

With a market as big as Texas, publishers are generally more inclined to meet the needs of the Texas state board more explicitly than others (with the general exception of California, and

occasionally New York). Therefore, the textbooks that *your* state buys are likely to look very similar to the ones sold to either Texas or California. In the case at hand, it seems very likely that *your* next set of readers for your first grade class will contain a significant number of phonetic words. The end result of this move by the Texas state board of education is not simply a decision about what flavor of readers kids in Dallas and San Antonio get. Instead, the end result is likely to be more far-reaching--with phonics instruction grabbing hold of many 1<sup>st</sup> grade classrooms across the country (**note:** this is not to say that phonics instruction is not already very popular, nor that phonics instruction has no merit when it comes to early reading instruction--clearly, it is and it does).

There is an additional effect, as well. Publishers estimate the revisions to the current crop of 1<sup>st</sup> grade readers--which will have to be made by early January for publishers to remain on Texas' "state-approved" list--will cost them more than \$25 million. It is important to note, as stated in Education Week, that caps on textbook costs established by the state make it unlikely that Texas will absorb the additional cost. Therefore, it is likely that this decision will have some financial impact on schools, as well--that is, if it remains in place. On the surface, it appears that Texas' decision was inappropriate, at best, and quite possibly illegal. Look for the publishing companies to challenge the board's decision in court. In the meantime, we'll be keeping our eye on Texas!