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## Open courseware gains momentum

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Open courseware could change the way students learn, proponents say.

For years, tech-savvy educators and product developers have pushed for more open educational resources in classrooms as a way not only to engage students through technology, but also to save money in a time of tighter budgets. But does using open courseware really make a difference in spending?

Texas State Representative Scott Hochberg thinks so. He sponsored a bill that provides for the adoption and use of open-source textbooks in the state, beginning Sept. 1, 2010, by creating a digital repository of textbook content that will be managed by the Texas Education Association. This move, he says, will save the state at least \$250 million a year.

"We were due to spend about \$225 million to replace the grades six through 12 literature books in the state. We can buy the content for under \$20 million," he said. "Someplace between \$20 million and \$225 million, there's a cost savings."

Hochberg said using open textbooks is not only cheaper, but also more efficient and faster when it comes time to purchase new editions.

"In the long haul, it means for us that once we buy Shakespeare we don't have to do it again when the binding wears out. It also means that if we get into a math curriculum and figure out that kids are failing at acute angles, we can patch that curriculum instantly without waiting for the next purchase of textbooks," he said.

Hochberg explained that the state is in charge of supplying books to local school districts, so while the districts might not see the cash savings in using digital textbooks, they will see an increase in materials or equipment they will be able to buy.

"It gives us an opportunity to get more for our money while saving money as well," Hochberg said.

He said Texas teachers already are using digital textbooks, though as of now there's no way for the state to know the rate at which the digital texts are being used.

"Whenever we talk about this at a meeting of teachers or at a meeting of superintendents, or just anecdotally talking to parents in the area, the number of times I hear, 'We get the books but we don't open those, all the stuff we use is on computer,' is a pretty constant drumbeat," Hochberg said.

Last July, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) published a paper, "A Kindle in Every Backpack: A proposal for eTextbooks in American Schools," which proposed that the government supply each student in the country with an electronic reading device, allowing textbooks to be cheaply distributed and updated. The move also would allow teachers to use an interactive curriculum that engages digital-age learners, the paper argued.

"This proposal is just a concept, an idea to be refined and improved with more dialogue and input," said the proposal's author, Thomas Z. Freedman, a senior fellow at the DLC who served as a member of the 2008 Obama-Biden Transition Project on the Technology, Innovation, and Government Reform Policy Working Group.

Although a rapid-scale plan initially would cost \$9 billion more than providing traditional textbooks during the first four years of implementation, wrote Freedman, school districts nationwide would save about \$700 million in the fifth year and \$500 million annually thereafter. (See "[Experts split on 'Kindle in Every Backpack.'](#)"<sup>[1]</sup>")

"While the up-front hardware cost of providing a Kindle-like device to every child would necessitate a high front-end investment, costs for eTextbooks themselves would quickly produce a savings compared with print textbooks," Freedman wrote. "If we create savings in one category, the funds can be reassigned to others, like improving teacher pay."

Neeru Khosla, one of the founders of the California-based CK-12 Foundation, which provides free online digital textbooks along with additional tools to help students conceptualize information, said she has tried to determine a concrete amount that schools save by using her textbooks.

"There are no concrete numbers, because it's a very hard thing to calculate right now. But even without the cost benefits, there are many other benefits that you get. You can put on one page your English content that you are trying to teach, and right on the next page could be the language of that child, so they could at least not be hurt by and held back by not knowing English," she said. "How do you calculate the cost savings of that benefit?"

DeLaina Tonks, director of the Open High School of Utah, said she has seen this type of non-monetary benefit in the first few months that the school has been open. Open High School is a virtual public charter school that has committed to the exclusive use of open educational resources throughout its curriculum.

"[Some students] came to Open High School because they thought it would be easy and they thought it would be flexible, and what they found is that we have a definite school culture," said Tonks, the school's director. "We've tried to replicate the high school setting in a virtual arena."

One parent of an Open High School student said she had seen vast improvement in the first few months of her son's ninth-grade year.

"Nathan is thriving in his school at Open High. [It] didn't take more than a day to get used to this new way of learning. He's getting A's! He is motivated and loves the work he's given daily," wrote

Kelley Broadbent in an eMail message to *eSchool News*. "The ... approach is a refreshing blend of very interesting topics, thoughtful discussions, 'out-of-the-box' learning approaches, zero busywork, challenging and memorable/useful assignments to complete daily, and low-stress 'exams' with a very flexible timeline."

The school opened with 125 ninth graders, and each year Open High School plans to add a grade, enrolling up to 1,500 students. Tonks said the school is continuing to gather content, building its core curriculum over the first four years, followed by Advanced Placement and other elective classes. Open High School teachers are involved with developing curriculum and are compensated for it, something that Tonks said makes it hard to realize the savings the school hopes to see from using open courseware.

"What we're looking at is 10 years down the road, when we've built a core curriculum. ... As we go on and each year we build more courses and our variety of courses we have to offer becomes larger, then we aren't going to have to pay for that instructional designer and those teachers to build the courses anymore, that will ramp down in scale," she said. "And at that point we will be able to realize some of the savings, and I don't have a good feel for how long that's going to take."

But National Association of College Stores spokesman Charles Schmidt said many times educational institutions forget about other costs that come with providing open courseware.

"Utilization of open-access course materials ... as [an] affordability initiative should fully account for all direct and indirect costs and should take into consideration any potential reduction of revenue that might otherwise be used by an institution to fund financial aid, student life activities, or other necessary campus functions," he wrote in an eMail message to *eSchool News*.

Schmidt said that open educational resource (OER) initiatives should recognize that obstacles such as economic barriers, limited technical abilities, restricted access to certain resources, various student disabilities, and differences in learning styles might prevent many students from being able to access, use, or fully benefit from digitally formatted and internet-only accessible content.

"OERs should only be considered after careful and complete evaluation and full analysis of the intended classroom use. NACS believes the evaluative process, by any institution, should include representation by the college store as subject-matter experts in the course materials area," he wrote.

Access is something that Hochberg, the Texas state representative, said is a bit of a concern when dealing with digital content.

"What we know is that an estimated 75 percent of the kids have some access to the computer, but that doesn't mean that they have internet [access]. And we have to be absolutely certain to provide that additional access," he said.

Lisa Hill, an educational technology hardware reviewer with the School Tech Talk web site, said internet use benefits not only students, but also the teachers' ability to provide rich content.

“What I have found is the increasing use of the internet by teachers to find reliable sources, and the increasing availability of free programs to assist teachers [in] developing content. Lesson plans, tutorial services, [and] how-to guides ... help steer teachers away from textbooks. Students have a wide variety of learning styles, and the internet helps bridge this gap. Books are great, but to reach students today requires a bigger bag of tools,” she said.

“It takes time to develop a curriculum, and if information is more up-to-date online, then why use the textbook?”

### **Links:**

[Texas House Bill 2488 \(PDF\)](#) [2]

[“A Kindle in Every Backpack: A proposal for eTextbooks in American Schools”](#) [3]

[CK-12 Foundation](#) [4]

[Open High School of Utah](#) [5]

[National Association of College Stores](#) [6]

[School Tech Talk](#) [7]

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URLs in this post:

[1] Experts split on ‘Kindle in Every Backpack.’: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-news/?i=59868>

[2] Texas House Bill 2488 (PDF):

<http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/81R/billtext/pdf/HB02488F.pdf>

[3] “A Kindle in Every Backpack: A proposal for eTextbooks in American Schools”:

[http://www.dlc.org/documents/DLC\\_Freedman\\_Kindle\\_0709.pdf](http://www.dlc.org/documents/DLC_Freedman_Kindle_0709.pdf)

[4] CK-12 Foundation: <http://ck12.org/flexr/>

[5] Open High School of Utah: <http://openhighschool.org/>

[6] National Association of College Stores: <http://www.nacs.org/>

[7] School Tech Talk: <http://www.schooltechtalk.com/>

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