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## Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

# Will uniform MPS reading textbooks make a difference?

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The textbooks and the workbooks and the teachers manuals and all the other materials were displayed attractively. There were mini-candy bars and cloth shopping bags for visitors to take.

America's biggest text book companies - Pearson, McGraw-Hill and Houghton-Mifflin Harcourt - each had large, handsome displays.

For three days last week, the third-floor library of the Juneau High School building was the center of looming big change in the way children in Milwaukee Public Schools are taught reading. MPS officials are selecting a new reading program.

A special committee will make a recommendation and the School Board will make the choice in the winner-takes-all curriculum selection process. The sunlit scene in the Juneau library was the part of the process where anyone could take a look and give input.

It was an amiable scene. The representatives of the publishers were friendly, talkative, knowledgeable, and quite willing to schmooze. "Great tie," one told me as I walked down the aisle. She appeared to know something about this tie that no one else had noticed in the 20 years I've owned it.

But this is a very serious matter.

Serious in terms of money - MPS expects to spend more than \$6 million to buy new reading curriculum materials for just about every class in the system - from 4-year-old kindergarten through eighth grade - to start using this fall.

Serious in terms of change - MPS is dropping all the other reading programs schools have been using, 17 of them this year, according to administrators, to go instead with just one.

And serious just because it's really serious. Where are you going in today's world if you can't read? We all know about reading in Milwaukee. The most recent grim statistics: African-American fourth-graders in Wisconsin (which means, in large part, Milwaukee) have the lowest scores of black kids in any state

in the country. In state test data released April 6, only 38% of MPS 10th-graders were rated proficient or better in reading.

The practice in MPS for years has been to let schools choose their reading programs. Now, as with other aspects of education, reading decisions are being centralized.

One of the big reasons for doing this, MPS officials say, is to reduce the negative effect of the huge amount of school switching that goes on in Milwaukee. At some schools, the number of children at the end of the year is about the same as at the start of the year. But a third to half of the children are different.

According to MPS data, only 71% of elementary and middle school kids citywide were in the same school in September 2008 that they attended in September 2007, and that's factoring out all who changed because of things such as graduating. At the high school level, the figure was 63%.

The same is true in the other streams of public education in Milwaukee, the charter schools independent of MPS and the private schools in the publicly funded voucher program. A study released last week by a national team of researchers said that in the sample of several thousand Milwaukee children at the heart of the research, only 44% of voucher students and 57% of MPS students in 2008-'09 were labeled "non-switchers" from the prior school year.

Research nationwide shows that, in broad terms, changing schools has negative effects on children's education. There are times when it needs to be done and it is beneficial, of course, but for the most part, it sets a kid back academically as well as socially.

In MPS, the negative impact is exacerbated by the likelihood that a student will find a widely different program at the new school. The idea, then, is to end that problem by selecting one reading program for all (with a few specialty schools, such as language immersion and Montessori programs, expected to be exempted).

Not everyone is sold on this. For one thing, whatever publisher wins, the curriculum will be a thorough, sophisticated and middle-of-the-road program offering both phonics and the kind of reading associated with what used to be called whole language. Catherine Thome, the MPS director of education services, calls it a "comprehensive literacy approach."

But what if you think - and some people feel very strongly about this - that a different kind of program is best? Programs such as the controversial, highly scripted Direct Instruction will be out in MPS after this year.

Jacqueline Laber, the soon-to-retire principal of Dover School in the Bay View neighborhood, is one of the critics. The school has used Direct Instruction for years with strong success.

"I honestly do not think a consistent program across the district is the answer to our problem," she said. The problem with teaching kids reading isn't the variety of programs, she said, it's carrying out whatever program a school has chosen consistently and in full.

And the problem with changing schools isn't reading programs, she said. It's so many other aspects of change - new teachers, a new social setting, and so on.

At her school, she said, mobility has declined over the years because many parents are impressed with

the quality and go to lengths to keep their children enrolled.

In other words, it's all about the quality of teaching, the quality of a school - and the quality of parenting.

Every child should be taught reading using high-quality materials and programs. Let's assume Milwaukee will be in a good position to say that is true by next fall.

Will that be enough to turn around a reading crisis that threatens the city's future?

Or does it just frame the issues that really need to be conquered - giving every kid a teacher who is great at using those materials, and giving every kid a parent who supports the child's education in a good, stable way.

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