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Experts split on 'Kindle in Every Backpack'

Suggestion that government give every kid a Kindle has many educators questioning benefits, costs, and logistics

By Maya T. Prabhu, Assistant Editor

Primary Topic Channel: [Tech Leadership](#)

Education experts are split after a recent proposal published by some influential members of the Democratic Party suggested the government provide electronic reading devices to every student in the United States.

The New Democratic Leadership Council's (DLC) paper, "A Kindle in Every Backpack: A proposal for eTextbooks in American Schools," published July 14, states that government should supply each student in the country with an electronic reading device, allowing textbooks to be cheaply distributed and updated. It also would allow teachers to tailor an interactive curriculum that engages digital age learners.

"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 presidential Obama-Biden Transition Project on the Technology, Innovation, and Government Reform Policy Working Group.

Although a rapid-scale plan would initially cost \$9 billion more than providing traditional textbooks during the first four years of implementation, writes Freedman, school districts would save \$700 million in the fifth year and \$500 million annually in the years immediately following.

"While the upfront 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," he writes. "If we create savings in one category, the funds can be reassigned to others, like improving teacher pay."

Freedman added that innovation and advancements in eReader technology would drive the cost of the devices and eBooks down over time, continuing to save money for years after replacing traditional textbooks.

But Peter Von Stackelberg, foresight expert at Social Technologies and adjunct professor at the State University of New York College of Technology at Alfred, said the odds of the Kindle DX completely replacing books are slim.

"Paper-based information delivery systems--aka books, magazines, and newspapers--have a number of features that have been successfully used for centuries. Books are an effective method for displaying text and images in a wide variety of lighting conditions at relatively low cost...Annotation and highlighting of selected information is done easily with pencils, pens, and highlighters," he said. "The user interface is simple and effective."

Replacing textbooks and materials with eReaders can cause other problems in the name of saving money, said Corinne A. Gregory, president and founder of SocialSmarts, a schools-based program that integrates social skills, character, and values into core curricula.

"If [the proposal] is trying to lower the cost of textbooks and materials, then you have to consider some other potential problems, such as instead of losing one text book, what happens if a child loses--or has stolen--[his or her] Kindle? Who will bear the cost of the replacement? The students and parents? The schools?" she asked.

"Purportedly, having an electronic reader will be beneficial to students, giving them another technology avenue for education. However -- when the studies continue to show that our kids' brains are negatively affected by too much 'electronic time,' and [are] being overwhelmed by multi-tasking -- is requiring them to now read and do all their schoolwork electronically a good thing?" Gregory continued.

According to the DLC proposal, current estimates show that \$109 per student is spent for traditional textbooks and more than \$6 billion is spent annually on textbooks across the education system.

"For the money we're spending, we should expect a top-notch product. Instead, we send students off to school with woefully out-of-date materials," Freedman writes. "An eTextbook can be updated across the country as soon as the new [text] is written...Textbook authors and publishers can update specific parts of texts without having to undertake a whole new print run."

Using a digital textbook system would let districts, schools, and individual teachers pick and choose the best materials for their students, Freedman said.

But that control by publishers could cause problems down the line, said E. William Horne, who manages the security solutions group of William Warren Consulting, a company that specializes in providing secure, cost-effective solutions to businesses and professionals who want more effective and flexible solutions to data-processing challenges. He argues that censorship could become routine.

"Even if the Kindle device is 'owned' by the government, the problem remains [that] publishers will be able...to censor controversial works to make sales. With paper books, it's not economically viable to print separate version[s]. With eBooks, it's easy," he said. "This means that any book a local school department--any local school department--doesn't like will be offered in several version[s], each tailored to the tastes of the local bureaucrats in question."

On the other hand, lightening a student's load -- both physically and financially -- could be a plus: Miami Dade Community College adjunct faculty member and advisor Isabel L. Fernandez said after purchasing a Kindle for personal use, the first thing she thought was how the eReader could be used by students to carry their textbooks.

"Aside from the obvious advantages of an eReader versus textbooks from a physical burden perspective, the cost of printed textbooks is impacted," she said. "Many students don't buy textbooks because they simply can't afford them. I'm all for finding ways to put textbooks into students' hands."

Freedman argues that providing eReaders to students nationwide will combat disparities in learning experiences.

"It's a sad reality that economically deprived schools and districts generally lag in educational success," he said. "We're only going to be the best educated country in the world when we provide an adequate education to every child, and that means a plan that puts eTextbooks in everyone's hands. If there is no coherent plan to share this new technology, wealthier school districts will, once again, reap most of the immediate benefits."

However, Jing Lei, assistant professor of instructional design, development, and evaluation with Syracuse University's school of education, said she doesn't think a nationwide push to put eReaders in students' hands is the best approach. To effect the greatest amount of improvement, she said, the initiative should focus on low-income and disadvantaged school districts.

". . . For students from wealthy families, they have technology resources in the school. They have textbooks. And when they go home, even when they cannot bring textbooks home, they have a lot of books to read; they have other resources. They can play, they can learn," Lei said.

"But for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they have textbooks in the school, but when they go home, they do not have as many learning opportunities as students from wealthy backgrounds. I think that's where a program like this can make the most difference. For a lot of schools, especially schools that have many technology resources already, adding one more Kindle to every student's backpack is not going to make much difference," she said.

Freedman argues that putting an eReader tool in every backpack will improve education while lowering its cost.

"We fail our students when we ask them to learn advanced skills with dated, inflexible textbooks. Instead of sending our children to school every day with the textbook equivalent of an abacus, we need to provide them with up-to-date tools already available to American consumers," he said.

Freedman acknowledges that eReaders won't solve all the challenges facing education.

"Kindle-like devices alone can't solve the problem, but they can be an integral part of the overall solution. If our schools are going to be better, then we need to provide cost-effective instructional materials that reduce pressure on budgets and improve the tools our children use to learn," he said.

Links:

[A Kindle in Every Backpack: A Proposal for eTextbooks in American Schools](#)

["Kindle pilot is discriminatory, advocates charge"](#)

["Cheaper eBook reader challenges Kindle"](#)

["New Kindle is textbook friendly"](#)

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