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**As More Schools Embrace Tablets, Do Textbooks Have a Fighting Chance?**

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Big news in the tech-ed world: The Los Angeles Unified School District—the second largest school district in the country—recently spent $30 million to deploy [35,000 iPads](http://tabtimes.com/news/education/2013/06/19/la-school-district-shuns-microsoft-spend-30-million-35000-ipads) to students. It’s part of a multi-year commitment with Apple that will eventually equip all 640,000 students with iPads.

Textbooks will be digitally delivered to iPads via an application from Pearson, a major publisher.

America’s classrooms are undeniably going through a technological revolution and at risk of plunging deeper into an obsolescence quagmire are textbooks.

As teachers and school districts embrace the use of tablets in schools, companies like Apple and Samsung continue to see the sales of their devices skyrocket. Earlier this year, Apple sold 19.5 million iPads while Samsung sold 8.8 million tablets, according to the International Data Corporation.

Educator support coupled with a large stockpile can equate to more of these devices ending up in the hands of students.

Los Angeles is the first school district of its size to make the shift. Smaller districts have made this jump, too, such as the Guilford County school district in North Carolina. Come fall, [20,000 tablets](http://myfox8.com/2013/02/06/guilford-county-schools-to-give-first-tablets-to-16-middle-schools/) will be distributed to all middle school students. Though there’s no talk of tablets replacing textbooks in Guilford County, other districts have begun the process or have abandoned them all together.

Muller Road Middle School in South Carolina has already gone [paperless](http://bit.ly/1bOwUJU). This fall, the Susquenita School District in Pennsylvania will [replace textbooks with iPads](http://cumberlink.com/news/local/susquenita-school-district-to-exchange-textbooks-for-ipads-for-grades/article_990a12a2-c63e-11e2-a012-0019bb2963f4.html)for students in grades eight through ten, and may carry over to students in grades 10 and 11, if deemed successful. And schools like Burlington High School in Massachusetts have pledged to [stop buying textbooks](http://thephoenix.com/boston/life/142238-ipads-innovate-education-in-massachusetts-schools/#ixzz2YkQ38RC7).

The question remains: do textbooks have a fighting chance or are they on the verge of extinction?

**Why Tablets Are Irresistible**

Benefits of students using tablets instead of textbooks are that they’re lighter than print textbooks, can hold hundreds of books in one place, have the ability to expand memory to hold even more information, and are cheaper than textbooks. They’re also more interactive and engaging, which is a good combination for students according to Leann Widhalm, a special education instructor at Norfolk Junior High in Nebraska.

Widhalm’s school recently received a $266,000 grant to purchase mini iPads for every student. Previously, only a small group of students had been working with the device with much success.

She said, “I see students holding down a word to get the meaning of it when before they would just go on and hope to get the definition from context.”

The devices also allow students to get up-to-the-minute information, unlike textbooks that quickly become outdated. “I can call our technology director in the evening and have her push out the latest version of material and within ten minutes my kids have a new application” on their devices, Widhalm explained.

Another factor making tablets irresistible is that with more open-source material available to educators school districts don’t necessarily need to buy textbooks. “Open source is accessible to anyone and usually free to use,” said Mike Kaspar, a STEM policy analyst for the National Education Association. “When you hop online and see a lesson on a math topic, you can use it.”

Tablets allow teachers to design, develop, and use materials they gather from online resources. It’s often time consuming for teachers but good for students. “It takes a lot of energy and effort to be able to search and develop new lessons,” said Kaspar, “but once you find materials best suited for the students, it’s easier the second go around.”

**Making The Case for Textbooks**

Critics of tablets say they are expensive, easy to break, and costly and time-consuming to fix. Theft is an issue, too, as it’s rare for a school textbook to be sought and stolen.

Textbooks also keep Wi-Fi connections from being tapped out. If schools don’t have the proper infrastructure in place tablet users risk slow or failed connectivity. The[New York City public schools](http://www.mobiledia.com/news/136174.html) , for example, barred new iPads and devices from using its Wi-Fi for just this reason. It also claims to have taken on more technology than what it could realistically handle.

And then there’s the changing nature of digital devices. Kaspar said, “That should be a concern because they’re always going to be upgraded to a newer version.”

Textbooks don’t need technology support the way tablets do. With education budgets continuing to dwindle, technology support may not exist. Or, will educators have the technology support when it’s needed—like in the middle of a classroom lesson?

Tablets also come with their own set of standards when it comes to use. Developing a policy will come in handy when addressing issues such as allowing students to take tablets home or what to do when a student breaks a tablet.

Having a [Use Policy Guide](http://tablets-textbooks.procon.org/) in place can address some of the downsides of using tablets, said Kaspar.

Textbooks publishers may see the writing on the wall because they’re devising new ways to remain relevant in today’s digital world. Pearson, for example, boasts of offering “custom print solutions,” where an educator can select content from its library.

“The educator can add his or her own introduction, charts, syllabi, case studies notes, or articles. This benefits the educator and the student because now all of the course material is in one place,” according to [Pearson’s website](http://www.pearsonlearningsolutions.com/higher-education/explore-custom-print-solutions.php).

Many publishers also offer digital versions of their textbooks, but to access the digital material, a hard copy must be purchased first, which can be costly.

**Impact on Student Achievement**

Some say that students do better with tablets because it empowers them to take charge of their own learning. Others contend that students are better able to remember content when read in textbooks.

However, Leann Widhalm, who has taught at Norfolk Junior High for 14 years, thinks tablets do help increase student achievement, especially if educators are given the training needed to use these devices in a way that directly connects with students.

“I’ve seen mini iPads sit in a box because teachers didn’t know what to do with them,” she said. “We need to be deliberate with professional development so teachers can feel confident using this technology and encourage life-long learners.”

Teachers at Norfolk Junior High were provided with training on how to use iPads a year before students received their device. The training proved extremely helpful for Widhalm, who can “four-finger” a word problem onto a smart board and students can immediately interact with the information. “Four Finger” is tablet talk for projecting information from device to large screen by using the four fingers of your hand to swipe information toward the board.

“Professional development is critical,” said Kasper. “It has to come with it because you don’t want a smart board to be just a fancy white board.”

NEA isn’t partial when it comes to this conversation. It does, however, say that optimal learning environments should neither be totally technological free, nor should they be totally online and devoid of educator and peer interaction, as stated by the Association’s digital [policy statement](http://www.nea.org/home/55434.htm), released in July.

But one thing is certain: Whether you’re a technological guru with all the latest devices or a Luddite who barely manages to keep up with a seven-year-old flip phone, good, bad, or indifferent, technology has proven itself to be a force for change—especially in America’s classrooms.