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How do you fix failing schools? Textbooks may have something to do with it.



November 20, 3:00 PM
by Patrick Cobbs, [Philadelphia Education Examiner](#)

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Tykia Hicks, a student at William L. Sayre High School and member of the Philadelphia Student Union addressed the School Reform Commission Wednesday night about poor availability of text books at her school. She said she did not have textbooks for take home assignments in math, science or social studies, and she complained that the classroom copies of texts are often so badly damaged as to be unreadable.

The five-member commission perked up at Hick's remarks because books, it seems, are important. No one was more enlivened than Superintendent and CEO Dr. Arlene Ackerman.

"That's an issue that I am going to have to look into," she said to Hicks. And she explained that she had been working since assuming the top job in the district in June to make sure that every student had a textbook, at least for in-class work.

"What we asked was for each principal to tell us their text books needs and we were ordering up until school started. So I am a little frustrated that this is a continuing problem... This is truly frustrating for me."

But Sayre Principal, Gayle Daniels, seemed to tell a different tale than Hicks. "There are classroom sets for every student," she said. And further, every teacher has a sign out process so, "if they need to take books home, they have access to take them home."

Ackerman said that because the district's budget was set when she took over, going beyond class room sets was not possible for this year, though she wanted that for the future.

But there is the underlying question: what happened to last year's books? Theoretically, enough of them should be hanging around so that Hicks and others can do their homework. This is what prompted Ackerman to promise an investigation not only into what principals ordered for this school year and what the district spent, but the expenditures on texts for the last five to ten years.

"It's very frustrating. I'm very frustrated by this. If we're spending millions a year, every year then there is something wrong. Where are those books going?" she said.

One possible answer might lay in an unwritten district practice of not holding students or their parents accountable for lost or damaged texts. Ackerman seemed determined to establish some form of accountability in this area that encouraged schools to retain their books.

But whatever the solution, the financial reality for the district means it won't be a quick fix.

"It is a serious issue but I have to do this in a way that is fiscally responsible... I may have to do this in phases," Ackerman said.

Parents or students with textbook troubles should contact the district's regional superintendents and the Superintendent Parent Ombudsman at 215-400-6161.

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Patrick Cobbs

[Philadelphia Education Examiner](#)



Patrick is a long time resident of Philadelphia, an experienced journalist and writer of fiction. Among his major themes is the question, how do things get this way while everybody is looking?

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