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Posted on Tue, Dec. 2, 2008

\$124M spent : Where are schools' books?

By MENSAM M. DEAN Philadelphia Daily News deanm@phillynews.com 215-854-5949

THE Philadelphia School District has a severe textbook shortage despite having spent \$124 million on books since the 2004-05 school year, the Daily News has learned.

In many cases, teachers have one set of books for five classes, so students must share and can't take books home to study.

"In my English 4 class, we had a grand total of two textbooks," said Dahrell Carriker, a junior at Sayre High. "There aren't any underneath our desks, there are none on the shelves."

At West Philadelphia High, the situation isn't much better.

"I don't get to take none of my books home," said freshman Aleema Williams, 16.

"My English teacher said she don't trust us with the books because we might damage them - 'cause they're already messed up - plus there's not enough."

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who started her job in June, is troubled by the book situation.

"With the amount of dollars that we are investing, every child should have a book," she said recently.

The district's central administration has spent \$94 million on textbooks in the last five years and given the remaining \$30 million to schools to spend, according to Ackerman, who provided the figures in response to a Daily News inquiry.

She said the district must do a better job of tracking the books that it purchases and is, in fact, working towards implementing a book distribution-and-tracking system by this spring when books are to be purchased for next fall.

Ackerman said she did not know the full scope of the problem, but she contended that students losing or damaging books contributes to the shortage.

She said that she will soon begin holding principals, teachers and students accountable for books.

"This is crazy and I am so frustrated and upset about it," Ackerman said. "I'm not going to continue to let the system bleed money around textbooks."

Students - at least those who want to study - are upset, also. They know their plight is not the norm in Pennsylvania, nor in the rest of the United States.

At a South Bronx, N.Y., high school last month, three West Philadelphia High students saw this when they learned how the other half lives - and studies.

The Philly students, members of Philadelphia Student Union, an activist group, toured the Urban Assembly School for Careers in Sports because it is small and successful.

They were impressed by many things, including that the Bronx school - though in a low-income community - has enough textbooks for students to use in class and at home.

West Philadelphia High, an aging brick compound at 47th and Walnut streets, is so shy of books, said the students who visited the Bronx, that they plan to put on a fashion show in March to raise book money.

"I'm envious towards them 'cause they got all the books that they need and they like being in school and they got all



RACHEL PLAYE / Staff photographer

West Philly High junior Sadea Canty has been forced to help plan a fashion show to raise funds to buy books for the school's students.

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the different things that we don't got," senior Mason Tyer, 17, said of the Bronx students.

"I only get to take my biology book home because there are only 10 people in that class," said junior Sadae Canty, 17. "But the rest of the classes, you don't take nothing home because it's only one set."

Not-by-the-book homework

Though students returned to school Sept. 4, it was only this month that the book situation got the undivided attention of the school district's leadership.

Students, again from Philadelphia Student Union, signed up to speak about the issue during the Nov. 19 meeting of the School Reform Commission.

"We've been waiting patiently but our patience is running out," Tykia Hicks, a ninth-grader from Sayre High School, told the officials. "PSU has fought long and hard, and we respectfully demand our books and materials."

Ackerman said she thought there were enough books so all students would at least have them in class - if not to take home. That meager expectation is all the district's tight budget can afford this year, said Ackerman, who pledged to work toward having enough books next year for students to take home.

In the meantime, a growing number of students and teachers have begun grumbling that the district's book shortage is directly linked to the high failure rate at dozens of district schools, especially at the middle- and high-school levels.

"How do you give homework when a kid can't refer to a textbook?" asked Keith Newman, a district teacher for 14 years, who teaches ninth-grade science and social studies at Morrison Elementary, in Olney.

Newman, 52, should know. His four science classes use a textbook called, "Inside the Restless Earth." It's a good book, in Newman's estimation. But he has only 44 books for 107 students.

"We have to enable students to have resources at home every night," Newman said. "We have to do that. Asking kids to study and succeed without a book at home is like asking a mechanic to repair your car without tools."

Carriker, the junior from Sayre, contacted the *Daily News* shortly after a September melee between Philadelphia police and Sayre students resulted in the arrest of 20 teens.

He said that the trouble that day resulted, in part, from students' frustration about conditions at the West Philadelphia school, including the lack of basic resources such as textbooks.

Rodney Bolden, a senior at Fels High School, is all too aware of the book problem, too. He hopes to be accepted to either Temple or Delaware State University next year, but knows that he will have to get there without full access to his textbooks.

"It's having a hard impact on me because I got homework tonight and I needed a textbook but I don't have one, just a notebook," he said during a recent interview.

Alphonzo Baban, 17, a senior at Strawberry Mansion High School, said that students in his English 4 class must share books in class and also are not permitted to take books home.

"I'm just used to it now, I wouldn't even think about asking [to take a book home] because I know the response," he said.

Baban, who this fall has had to tackle the Old English of *Beowulf*, feels tackled himself by his school's shortage of books.

"I just started thinking about my school, questioning my school instead of questioning me," he said, "because if I don't have everything that I need, how am I going to get my work done?"

It's difficult to shut the book on textbook shortages, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, a Washington nonprofit that advocates for the nation's largest urban school systems.

"The solutions are not inexpensive: not allowing books to be taken home, which is not good educationally," he said, "or overpurchasing books to cover the fact that a certain percentage will be lost."

You lose it, you buy it?

Ackerman said that the book shortage problem is at least twofold: The central administration has no way to keep track of books once they have been distributed to schools, while the long-standing policy that requires students to pay for lost and damaged books is not being enforced.

"I think we have no real textbook-management system, and I knew that coming in," she said.

"We don't know what happens once books get to the school. They just order books each year. . . . There's no tracking system to let us know what happened with the books we have ordered."

To get a handle on things, the district has been researching the use of a distribution-and-tracking system for textbooks, and recently the procurement department identified a company to handle the implementation of such a system, spokesman Vincent Thompson said.

He declined to release the name of the company because no contract has been formally presented to the School Reform Commission, which must grant its approval.

As for holding students accountable for lost and damaged books, Ackerman said that the time for such action has come.

Since 1999, the district has had a textbook policy which clearly spells out the consequences for failing to return books. The policy, however, is all but ignored by principals and teachers, Ackerman said.

The policy states that students can be charged for the cost, be made to perform services for schools, have a report card withheld or lose privileges such as the right to participate in sports, the prom, graduation or other extracurricular activities if they lose or damage books.

"I have to have a way to hold principals accountable, principals will need a way to hold teachers accountable and teachers will have to hold students accountable," Ackerman said.

"But this business of just letting this go hit or miss is unacceptable. That money could be spent on other programs." *

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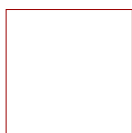
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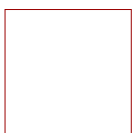
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- Posted by **dragon6** 04:27 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

Sounds like Philadelphia public school students value their books about as much as they value their teachers, their buildings, and SEPTA riders. We need more magnet schools for the kids who want to learn from families who value education. Convert the rest into prisons.
- Posted by **aliveandwell** 05:12 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

Did I read this right? Dr. Ackerman really wants to hold students accountable for something, anything? It's about time!!!
- Posted by **Philly Guy** 05:26 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

"I don't get to take none of my books home," . For a 16 year old "student" to be using this type of English, one needs to wonder where the "teachers" have been and what they have been teaching.
- Posted by **Wino** 05:45 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

The only thing that would have been more embarrassing about the poor grammar in these quotes would have been if they were asked to write them out and printed directly in the column. Then we would get a glimpse of how deep the divide in our education system really is today. This is a generation who grew up listening to Allen Iverson's quotes, and he led the league in double (and sometimes triple) negatives.
- Posted by **aliveandwell** 05:52 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

Philly Guy, the period goes inside the quotation mark... I guess we need to wonder why your written skills are so deficient. You're a teacher basher but don't have the smarts to back up your accusation. One needs to wonder about you. You're so quick to blame the "teachers." Who shall we blame for your snobbery and illiteracy?
- Posted by **gdw** 06:26 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

It appears that the School District is spending a great deal of money for very little. \$124 million should buy a lot more. There are 267,000 students in the district.
- Posted by **thecrow** 06:44 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

So this is how a city falls apart at the seams. We have a bunch of uneducated and disrespectful youth stalking around city neighborhoods causing havoc and destruction mainly as the result of broken homes, lack of an at least an dignified education, and television shows like Jerry Springer and Maury Povich. When I went to school we were made, drilled into believing in respect and honor regarding our school and materials. We had to for one to cover our text books with wrapping, usually with sturdy brown shopping bags to protect them from wear and tear or face detention or some loss of priveledge. Again this was two fold, protect the school districts investment in the student, and the student respects the textbook as an investment into their future. This city lacks leadership and respect in all fields. Grade: F. Arlene is making a boatload of cash, what is she really doing for Philadelphias schools.
- Posted by **stew11** 07:00 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

Time for the state to take complete control of the school system and see who is stealing all the money, start with the salary and benefit plan Ackerman has.
- Posted by **Philly Guy** 07:02 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

aliveandwell I am the victim of the same incompetent teachers union as the rest of the city. Fortunately, my children are able to attend private schools where the teaching staff and administrators are actually compensated and promoted for competence and achievements rather than for just showing up. I'll try to do better for you though.
- Posted by **brendancalling** 07:50 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

This is the same arlene ackerman who cancelled the winter 2009 teaching fellows, and then discovered she was missing 133 teachers. Oooops.
- Posted by **drummerwinslow** 08:00 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

Also, PhillyGuy, "For a 16 year old 'student' to be using" is incorrect. It should be, "For a 16-year-old student to use." Talk about the proverbial pot and kettle. . .
- Posted by **186441840** 08:07 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

This article should be forwarded to Mayor Nutter and crew who plan to close libraries in poor and suffering neighborhoods. If a student doesn't have a textbook and there is no library near by to go to, less they take SEPTA (which the school district wants to end the school transpasses because of violence on SEPTA). Our youth are suffering and it's not getting better.
- Posted by **drummerwinslow** 08:11 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

PhillyGuy, hopefully, your children will matriculate and become public school teachers. Then, they can show everyone how it's done. It's probably not a good idea to criticize someone until you've walked a mile in his shoes.
- Posted by **cmjc7477** 08:13 AM, 12/02/2008 [Sign in to report abuse](#)

This do not surprise me none this been going since the late 80's early 90's they need to get their act together or these children will not have good life.

- Posted by **Philly Guy** 08:18 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

ahhhh ... the "teachers" obviously do better on the board than they do in the classroom. My apologies to all.
- Posted by **186441840** 08:21 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

Has the school district considered using the web to post class information. Additionally, the school district may consider text that are available in PDF format that can be read, downloaded and printed from the Internet. What will happen to all the books in the libraries that are closing? Based on what the Nutter Administration has said the books should be in pretty good condition since residents in those areas don't really have high usage of the libraries.
- Posted by **ncatina** 08:22 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

I agree that the direct quotes from the students interviewed for this article is lacking, at best. It's a poor reflection of the parents, school, school district and city. Despite that, I am glad the students recognize the problem for lax textbook availability and are taking the initiative to correct the problem by conducting fundraisers for materials. To that end, there needs to be a thorough audit at the district level regarding monies collected from TAX PAYERS that should have supplied the books in the first place. There is absolutely NO EXCUSE why, THREE MONTHS INTO A SCHOOL YEAR, someone is just now getting a clue of a textbook supply shortage! One proposal to ensure the return of textbooks at the end of each school year is magnetic barcoding, and having it then linked to the individual students. Each school requires students to have an ID; a card that is likely has magnetic storage components complete with his or her information, which would include any books linked to the student. Equip every book with a magnetic strip embedded into the spine, have a scanner take record of each book as they are handed out to students at the beginning of the year, a central computer for each respective school to record the scan and, by year's end, scan the books upon return. No book? Send the bill to the parents with payment remitted to the school district. This is an excellent means of inventory control for the schools and the district, of raising the bar of accountability of the students for materials, improved learning away from school and having improved spending controls at all levels of the district.
- Posted by **babiesmakinbabies** 08:30 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

Fixing the schools is the first step in improving any city. If you fix the schools, you stop the middle class young families from moving to the suburbs. Property values increase, tax revenue increases...
- Posted by **Beefy_Issues** 08:49 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

I think it's disgusting how quick grown adults are to judge and put down teenagers on this site. They only know what they have been shown including indifferent teachers/parents/social structure. Instead of putting them down try lifting one up.
- Posted by **mindstorms** 08:54 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

How many times are we going to hear that the school district is going to make sure every student has the textbooks necessary for a proper education? It is not like the present leadership is the first to be "outraged" by the lack of textbooks. This happens over and over again no matter who is in charge.
- Posted by **tonyS** 09:00 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

It's about accountability: the kids get books, then lose or destroy them, and nothing happens. Make 'em pay a refundable deposit when the books are returned in good shape at the end of the semester.
- Posted by **mikedee** 09:31 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

"I don't get to take none of my books home," said freshman Aleema Williams, 16. "My English teacher said she don't trust us with the books because we might damage them - 'cause they're already messed up - plus there's not enough." yeah....get this kid a book. He needs it.
- Posted by **pa79th** 09:59 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

Why doesn't the School District ask for donations from Representative Mark Cohen's taxpayer-funded private library?
- Posted by **maude** 10:01 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

.... I'm with you, Philly Guy. The teachers like to complain and complain. If it's that bad --- join the rest of us schlubs who don't have the guarantee of job security/tenure.
- Posted by **exphilly** 10:03 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

Year after year it's the same thing with the Philadelphia School System. And Ms. Ackerman, forget her. She is a repeat of the past dozen or so superintendents that do nothing. You can't give a high school student a \$100 textbook, you'll never get it back! And that's what's happening. The school district has to act more like a business, and start coming into the real world. Things cost money, education is expensive. If you destroy or lose a book, you pay for it.
- Posted by **The Truth 1972** 10:07 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

I am sure Obama will take care of this. After all isn't he in town today?
- Posted by **poorcarole** 10:12 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

a close friend of mine who taught in north philadelphia and now teaches at a penrose school in southwest told me for years that her students do most of their work on handout sheets because the books must be collected before and after class as the books are used for multiple classes. largely due to the fact that students do not care for or even return the books. she gets little or no cooperation from the students parents and when she personally went out and approached cooperations for help (which most were happy to give) like markers,folders and even scarves and gloves they never brought them back to school. its sad really. it all starts at home.....
- Posted by **littleonions** 10:17 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

Philly Guy, you have embarrassed yourself enough. Time to be quiet. Look, this board is a place for informal speech. The students quoted in the article, probably verbatim, but you never know with newspapers, were speaking informally also. They were in fact speaking in the inner city idiom. I think that the reporter meant to show that they are doing so because of the lack of textbooks. I would add that they are doing so because this is their vernacular. Standard English is a second language for them. I do hold some teachers responsible for slipping into that vernacular themselves, in order to "communicate" on their students' level. Frankly, I disagree with that method entirely. If you want students to acquire standard speech, you model it all the time. But you cannot blame all the illiteracy on teachers after the student has spent his whole life using and writing that language in his home environment. Some kids have reported being slapped for "sounding white."
- Posted by **Jack Klompus** 10:19 AM, 12/02/2008 Sign in to report abuse

I love the teacher bashing here. I would challenge anyone who scoffs at teachers to go in and try to do the job for one day.

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Posted by **littleonions** 10:28 AM, 12/02/2008

Now about the books. It is long overdue for the superintendent to make students accountable for the books they receive for home study. The problem, as with all ideas about accountability, is enforcement. When something is "free" the receiver does not value it as much as when it is bought. Of course, private schools charge for books which the student gets to keep, so it is on them if they lose or destroy them. The public schools can only loan out the books with the hope that they will be used appropriately and returned in at least the condition in which they were handed out. I agree that some penalties should be imposed on those who do not return the books or return them damaged. But the responsibility for that should not fall on the teacher alone. It will be just another excuse to abuse the teacher. Teaching students to respect their materials does begin at home, and should be reinforced in school from grade one. Students who do have respect for learning do not need to be watched. Others who do not deserve the label "student" need watching. It is a difficult problem. I agree with the concept of magnet schools for real students. But we cannot give up on the miscreants. Just keep an eye on them.

Posted by **retiredteacher** 10:30 AM, 12/02/2008

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The state is running the school district. They took over several years ago. The principals, the parents and the students need to held responsible for the book problem. If a student 'losses' a book he can get another one if someone fusses enough. We used to be able to not issue books to students who had not turned in a previous book. Dr Hornbeck thought that was unfair.

Posted by **Tacklebury** 10:48 AM, 12/02/2008

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My guess is they distributed the books but the previous students either stole them or took them home and never brought them back. It's so simple people! Come on!

Posted by **MrFunny** 11:13 AM, 12/02/2008

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I taught in Philly for 6 years. 90% of the students could care less. They will sit and rip out pages of books right in front of you.

Posted by **MCD1969** 11:24 AM, 12/02/2008

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Where I went to school, in Europe, parents buy all school books for their children. Why does the school have to pay for that? First day at school, no books-no class, if you don't go to school, your parents get fined. Very effective.

Posted by **sunnyblondie21** 11:26 AM, 12/02/2008

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CHANGES NEED TO BE MADE NOW, the finger pointing can happen later. These kids don't have books to take home? And some wonder why the kids in Philly schools do soooooo poorly. Yes, in part their are some with our without books who are going to end up dysfunctional and a victim of the streets, but there are PLENTY of students in those schools who want to learn, who value a book and recognize you need the book to do homework. Ackermans response for having books for next school year is OUTRAGEOUS. So, we let those in the school this year just do without. This City is a shthole to say the lease -we can do ANYTHING right, can we? Maybe it will be swallowed up in a dark hole and cease to exist soon.

Posted by **littleonions** 11:30 AM, 12/02/2008

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Mr. Funny, it really does depend on where you teach. One reason students who accidentally lose or damage a book have a hard time paying for them is simply the cost. There are ways to get around sending home \$100 textbooks. Some companies for example can publish is smaller units in say science for example. In other words, a book on one topic like cell theory. These would be a quarter of the price of a large all inclusive text. The student would not be responsible for the full price of a text. Also, older texts could be marked down in price because of usage. There are creative ways to get around the cost of the books. Instead of hard back novels, the students can borrow paper backs. Yes, they are flimsy but they are about a third of the price. Keeping libraries open is essential, so students can access the Internet for homework. Students can be issued free book covers to protect their books. There can also be a positive reinforcement for those who do take care of their materials, like say, movie passes or some other incentive - like say admission to a special club or even an AP course. I like the refundable deposit idea as well. Working off the cost of a book is another good idea. As long as the students do not think that textbooks are disposable. But all this takes a lot of oversight. If a teacher has over 100 students, it is difficult for that teacher to spend time policing the books problem along with all the other duties imposed on him. And PLEASE do not suggest that more top down management from the state will do the trick. They cannot manage themselves.

Posted by **dartvader** 11:31 AM, 12/02/2008

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It would probably be cheaper to give every kid a laptop with a tracking device that is loaded with licensed content - or just print it. I went to a school where everybody got a text book, but you broke your back carrying them around just to read a chapter here or there.

Posted by **Yankee Air Pirate 12** 11:53 AM, 12/02/2008

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aliveandwell-Thanks,I learned something today.Or relearned,whatever.

Posted by **Jack Daniels on the rocks** 12:01 PM, 12/02/2008

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It does not help that the books probably cost around \$100-150 a piece. Well thats what I paid when I was in college for a textbook. I am sure that these great textbook publishers do not give the city a discount when purchasing or they do and the money is kicked backed to the school administrators as a bonus instead of using it to purchase more books. Also I am sure there are copiers and someone at the school not doing anything who can copy the chapter and print it for the students to use and bring home. I know its not a textbook but at least its something.

Posted by **sleepy** 12:16 PM, 12/02/2008

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Government at its finest-next, health care and your retirement!! Good Luck!!

Posted by **Phlyer21** 12:19 PM, 12/02/2008

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What are the students complaining about? Not like anyone with names like Sadea, Dahrell and Aleema would even want or know how to read a book. Those kinds of names on job applications get thrown right in the trash. Try Sarah, Daniel or Alexis next time parents!

Posted by **Toot44** 12:28 PM, 12/02/2008

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Hold principals, teachers and students accountable? Sounds good, but if students are irresponsible, lose or destroy books, how is the teacher going to be held accountable? They should not have to be police or collecting the cost of the books. Teachers (my daughter was one before becoming a Dean) have enough to do to keep order in the classroom, counsel students whose parents don't care, teach students who didn't sleep the night before because the parent/s were on drugs, intoxicated and beating up on the family, not home, or for whatever other reason, didn't eat before coming to school due to parent/s spending \$\$ or food stamps on drugs/alcohol or whatever else. The list goes on and on. However, my daughter has told me she sets classroom expectations the first week, demands respect or pay the consequences and respect is returned in kind. When teaching she had very few classroom problems because students knew from the git-go that 'Miss don't play.' Even though no longer in the classroom, students from her former and current schools stay in contact to update her on their life and continuing educational endeavors, and to ask for advice.*** IMHO, the city needs to BREAK UP THE DISTRICT INTO SEVERAL SMALLER DISTRICTS, thereby making it easier to distribute the \$\$ equitably directly to schools and mandate accountability. Where do the \$\$ go? *** Where I grew up, we had smaller

