

ON THE OTHER HAND

Uniformity in textbooks the wrong approach

On the Oct. 16 Op Ed page, Michael Decker concluded that very few students are learning, and put the blame on profiteering by "philistines" in the publishing industry and rampant individualism by teachers ordering educational materials. I agree with much of Decker's account of what is happening in our schools, but I strongly disagree with his implied conclusion — that all students citywide should use the same textbook for a given subject.

It's true that millions of dollars of taxpayers' money is being spent on educational materials; that publishing companies are making millions from large school systems like Boston; that many teachers are often free to order from long lists of approved materials; and that there is a mind-boggling array of textbooks, workbooks, paperbacks, filmstrips, kits, educational games, and other paraphernalia in our schools. It's also true that many students aren't doing as well as students in the good old days. But is the latter a result of heavy spending on diverse educational materials?

Decker bemoans the fact that eighth-grade history teachers in Boston can choose from 136 titles. Let's say that some committee downtown decided on one text and required him and every other eighth-grade history teacher to use it. What if he despised the committee's choice? In teaching, one person's meat is another's poison, and you just don't teach well with materials you professionally disagree with or dislike. Students in every part of the city are different and teachers are different; given this diversity, there is no better judge of

learning materials than the teacher, provided the teacher has good educational leadership from above — but more of that in a moment. Any central office selection of materials would promote mediocrity and stifle excellence.

There are some specific things that can be done to solve the very real problems that Decker has so usefully raised:

— Teachers should get several years of use out of the materials they order.

— There should be a citywide newsletter advertising unwanted batches of books in each school and promoting transfers and exchanges.

— Administrators should keep teachers from ordering blind from flashy catalogues and slick salespeople, insisting on a test-drive or an ironclad testimonial.

— Teachers should have access to well-stocked curriculum centers where they can handle and examine all the materials on the market and read testimonials from other teachers.

— The school system should take care of the problem of vendors who refuse to do business with the Boston schools by paying all its bills forthwith; if the mayor is responsible for holding up the money, he should release it.

— Teachers within each school should be given a fair share of the instructional materials budget (which, incidentally, is a good deal less than the \$40 figure cited by Decker; office expenses and general supplies are included in that amount); each teacher's share should be scaled to the number of students he or she sees each week.

— The constant mobility of teachers from school to school should be stopped

so they will be in one place long enough to use the materials they ordered.

— Every school should have an administrator whose only job is to support teachers in their classrooms, help them with methods and materials, and work with them on curriculum goals.

— Most important, the central office should, after consulting with teachers, spell out clear, detailed and realistic goals for each subject at each grade level, and then hold teachers accountable for their students meeting those goals. As long as everyone is pulling towards the same goals, with a well-planned flow from grade to grade, it is a plus for teachers to be using different materials; there is more than one way to teach a child.

When I started teaching 10 years ago, finding materials that worked with urban students was almost impossible; the market was flooded with low-interest, high-vocabulary textbooks which ignored minorities, put down women, and bored kids to destruction. It's not surprising that so many of those books got "lost," and that so many teachers gave up sending textbooks home with their students at night.

But now there is a large selection of high-interest material on the market which stands a chance of hooking reluctant TV-addled students into learning if it is used well by teachers. This is not a time for censorship and drab uniformity; it's a time for teachers to be held to city-wide goals, yes, but it's also a time for professional educators to be able to make intelligent decisions based on the needs of their students.

KIM MARSHALL

Boston