

Questions about the 8 million dollar Scholastic implementation

Students not reading on grade level is an important issue for the district to tackle. Success in life to some extent is tied to one's ability to read and understand the written word. The Scholastic proposal for 8.5 million is designed to help HISD students overcome this obstacle. I attended the board meeting on May 8th and came away with several questions about the proposal. As an advocate for HISD, reading, and libraries I have the following questions regarding this proposed solution.

(1) Each of the 180 schools will receive 16,000 books according to the report given at the board meeting. The agenda description of the Scholastic purchase describes book rooms or libraries. To give you a sense of the enormity of this project, the average school library in HISD has about 10,000 books. Picture the storage issue. Will shelving need to be purchased for a central storage area in each school? Do all 180 schools have a storage room with the capacity needed? Approximately how many books are going to be housed in each classroom at a time? Will classroom storage be provided for the guided reading? Will each book be labeled with the appropriate lexile? How will the books be organized so that teachers can ensure that students are reading at the needed level and who will organize them? Who will be given the task of organizing and maintaining this collection in each school?

(2) Will the books be in place when school starts in August 2014? If not, when will they arrive? Dr. Gohl mentioned that each class would receive a customized set of books. These books will need to be ordered, shipped to each school where they will then be organized and redistributed to classrooms.

(3) A lexiled approach stipulates that a reader be given text within a range of 50 lexile measures above or 100 lexile levels below their reader lexile measure. For example, a good 2nd grade reader might be reading at the 500 Lexile level and should be guided to books between 550 and 400. Typically, how many books will be available in the classroom Scholastic library to meet the needs of that student during the year?

(4) Although the difficulty of a text is an important consideration, what about interest level? Is consideration being given to gender or genre preferences in the selections for classroom libraries? Teachers working with advanced readers still need to consider whether or not the subject matter is age appropriate. We would not want to see an advanced 2nd grade reader being given *Hunger Games* or *Twilight* even though they could understand the text. How will individual interests and age appropriateness be addressed by the Scholastic solution? Dr. Gohl mentioned the important considerations of cultural diversity, fiction, and nonfiction but not gender, genre, or interest.

(5) Are the books for these classroom libraries real books or are they books/booklets created to fill the need for text at a certain level? Some vendors sell booklet type books that have been created for the purpose of teaching students to read. Putting real books in students' hands is always preferable.

(6) HISD libraries should be part of the overall reading strategy and libraries are mentioned in the Literacy by 3 document several times. School libraries staffed by certified school librarians are listed as instructional expectations in the Literacy by 3 document at the elementary, middle school, and high school level (p. 10-12). Extended library hours and expansion of adult access to the school and library resources are also included (p.25). The role of libraries in providing information about the district online resources is outlined (p.88-89). Libraries are given the responsibility for fostering the enjoyment literacy activities and supporting and monitoring programs like Real Men Read, Jumpstart for the Record, Name that Book, and Summer Reading (p.117). Opportunities to promote out-of-school literacy events such as Poetry Slams and Library Nights are described as part of HISD's library programming (p.127).

Who will fulfill the expectations above in schools that do not have certified librarians?

Here are few more points to consider:

8.5 million is a large amount of money. Over 10 years ago, all school libraries were automated for about 12 million dollars. This price tag included automation software, conversion of book data to digital data, computers, network cabling, phone lines, and books. Most of these items are still in place serving schools. What will this 8.5 million purchase look like in ten years?

A new library collection costs about \$150,000. Each school participating in this project will receive about 1/3 of that amount.

Did you know that the HISD library automation currently provides lexile data for students and books in the library? Every year lexile scores from the Stanford are imported into the student data system. When a student checks out a book, the librarian can see the reader level and the lexile measure of the book being checked out. Many of the librarians were trained on the Lexile framework in the past (prior to 2011) and possess a working knowledge of this readability measure. The student lexile data from the Istation database could also be downloaded into the library automation system to provide more up-to-date information on a student's reading level. This capability, if utilized, should enhance the objectives of Literacy by 3.

There will always be students who wish to find their own answers, pursue unique interests, and read beyond what any classroom library could offer. Centralized school libraries are still more economical than trying to maintain mini-collections in every classroom. Some HISD schools have wonderful collections with all of the latest titles and on all lexile levels while others are frozen in time. Classroom libraries by necessity will always be a limited collection as opposed to a library collection. The books in the Scholastic classroom libraries will be lost and wear out and within five years as many as 25% will need to be replaced. I support the idea of guided reading but question the cost of this project and the number of books proposed.

I can appreciate that these decisions that come before you are not easy for you. It is my hope that sharing some of these questions will help you find the answers you need to represent the students and schools in the area you serve.