

Excerpt from the August 28, 2003 transcript of the Lou Dobbs show on CNN  
complete transcript at: <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0308/28/ldt.00.html>

DOBBS: This week, we are focusing through our series of special reports on American education, "Making the Grade." Tonight, we take a look at school textbooks, which some educators say are too often boring, sanitized, and in some cases absolutely downright wrong.

Casey Wian reports from Los Angeles.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

CASEY WIAN, CNNfn CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): As eighth grade history teacher Brent Heath (ph) prepares for the new school year, you won't find textbooks in his classroom. Instead, he uses historical fiction, the Internet, the Library of Congress, even music to teach students.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's the exact same content. It's being taught in a different way.

WIAN: Hundreds of teachers nationwide use his methods. Jack Farrell (ph) still has textbooks in his high school English classes, but he doesn't like the slick, state-approved books he must use.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Because it's attractive to the eye the way TV might be, the way the Internet might be, you think the student's going to be pulled into it. But in point of fact it's very hard to negotiate logically. Text boxes, graphical organizers lots of ways that the thinking is laid out for the students and controlled for them. But if you look at this, this is a book in the real world.

WIAN: Too often, teachers say, the real world is absent from school textbooks, from racial quotas on illustrations, to sanitizing rough language in literary classics. Critics say textbooks designed to not offend also don't do much to inform. WILLIAM BENNETTA, PRES., THE TEXTBOOK LEAGUE: The books get dumber and dumber. Dumber in what they say and dumber in the sense of delivering less and less content.

WIAN: Bennetta publishes a newsletter exposing textbook mistakes.

BENNETTA: The Chinese were weaving silk and making beautiful artifacts when most Europeans were living in caves and wearing animal skins. That's what this book says. It was easy to find out that Europeans were weaving textiles somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 years before any Chinese ever wore any silk.

WIAN (on camera): The content of textbooks is often influenced by forces that have little to do with educational merit. Special interest groups from both the left and the right exert tremendous pressure on states, school districts, and textbook publishers.

(voice-over): Publishers say they're just meeting the demands of big customers like California, Texas and other states with formal approval processes that dictate content.

STEVE DRIESLER, ASSN. OF AMERICAN PUBLISHERS: Textbooks in our public schools are provided free of charge to all students. That means they're purchased with taxpayer dollars. And so the process is open for citizen input, and that's both a blessing and in some instances perhaps a curse.

WIAN: Especially for districts or private schools that want more choice. The Catholic schools textbook project this year introduced an alternative to history books that ignore religious influences.

MICHAEL VAN HECKE, CATHOLIC SCHOOLS TEXTBOOK PROJECT: Whether you're secular or Catholic or Jewish, Muslim, it doesn't matter. The history is history. And let's tell the story.

WIAN: Casey Wian, CNN, Newbury Park, California.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

DOBBS: Diane Ravitch says textbook censorship is alive and well in this country, and her book, "The Language Police," -- Diane says censorship is a result of the publishers' desire to make money the political pressure to avoid that awful word, controversy, and to protect students from so-called offensive material.

Diane Ravitch joins us tonight. Good to have you here.

DIANE RAVITCH, AUTHOR, "THE LANGUAGE POLICE" Well, the -- thanks, Lou. It's great to be here.

I thought that was a great lead-in because it really demonstrated the issues, which is two states have a huge amount of power, Texas and California. They buy textbooks for the entire state, and the textbook publishers -- and I'm not casting blame at them -- kowtow to these two states, and whenever there are textbook hearings, the groups come out of the woodworks. They're from the left, they're from the right, and they all want the textbooks censored to avoid offensiveness.

DOBBS: There's another issue here, too. How many -- how many companies are publishing textbooks primarily in this country?

RAVITCH: Well, there are four big companies that have about 75 percent of the market. It's a huge market. It's a \$4 billion market. And this very process of the states buying the textbooks has caused competition to dry up. It's caused huge mergers.

DOBBS: What we're watching here, it appears, is the homogenization of textbooks. You could travel to various school districts throughout the country 30 years ago and find a rich diversity of textbooks in the school systems. Now, with four companies producing them, the idea of competition within that is a silly concept.

RAVITCH: Well, you know, what's interesting, Lou, is that some of -- all of these companies produce more than one line of textbooks. It's a little bit like having all competing cereals but all from one company. So that when you look at the textbooks that come from four different companies they all look like peas in a pod. There's no real difference between the textbooks of company A, B, C, or D.

DOBBS: The idea of offensive to students to the point that references to God are eliminated, the suggestion that there is no such thing as interracial marriage in these textbooks. What in the world is going on?

RAVITCH: What happens is that when there are hearings, as there regularly are in Texas and California, the right-wingers come out, the left-wingers come out, the feminists come out, the people who say I represent, you know, obscure groups...

DOBBS: Every special interest in the country.

RAVITCH: Right. Every special interest. And the states say to the publishers, You know, you've got to get that out of the textbook. So they have been, for the past 25 or 30 years, sanitizing the books, removing controversy, but puffing them up with all of these graphics. And the teacher in your lead-in said very well that the books are gorgeous but the kids don't want to read them.

DOBBS: Very pretty, but what's in it?

The four publishers that dominate the market, how many of them are American companies?

RAVITCH: McGraw-Hill is the big American company. Recently, there was a French company, Vivendi, that owned a huge number of American -- of American publishing houses, and they just sold their interest in the textbook industry out. So we might yet again have two big American publishing companies. But right now there's just one, McGraw-Hill.

DOBBS: Out of the four controlling 75 percent, only one of them at this point, depending on what Vivendi does, is an American company. RAVITCH: That's correct.

DOBBS: And what is the solution here? Teachers -- we've looked at all aspects of the issues because people seem to forget -- they keep talking about pedagogy, and there's all sorts of big words and abstractions here. But effectively it's coming down to where the teacher meets his or her student in the classroom. What in the world are going to do to provide accurate textbooks, textbooks that reflect the life that these children will be leading?

RAVITCH: I think we have a real distortion in the marketplace right now, and that distortion is caused by the state governments buying the books. It's a little bit like the state government telling you what movies to see or what TV channel you should have on all the time.

I think the states should get out of there and allow a real marketplace to emerge where small publishers have a chance to compete, and teachers should be encouraged to use things other than textbooks. I think all of the really great teachers that I've met are using real novels, real historians' work...

DOBBS: Classics.

RAVITCH: ...and -- classics. And they use the textbook as a reference work. And I think we just have to change the

marketplace itself by eliminating state adoption of textbooks. That's the point where political negotiations begin and groups come in and say we don't want evolution in the science books. We don't want this representation in the history books. And when you realize that your history books and your science books and your literature books are not the result of experts sitting down and making it a wise decision, but of political pressure groups coming to the state textbook hearings, this is wrong.

DOBBS: There's much wrong here. And the sad part is there are so many people, great people, trying to do the right thing for these students. But people have simply got to wake up.

RAVITCH: Absolutely.

DOBBS: Diane Ravitch, thanks very much for being with us.

RAVITCH: Thank you, Lou.

DOBBS: Look forward to seeing you soon.