Protecting Your Textbook Investment - Saving Money for the School Budget

Converting a Pen and Paper Method of Textbook Distribution and Collection into an Automated Management Solution that Ensures Accountability

Textbooks are a substantial investment for any district. With an average of 6 textbooks per student at a cost of $70 per book and an annual loss of 8%, a district with a population of 4,500 students will spend approximately $151,000 for replacements.

Accountability is essential. Schools will be unable to hold students accountable for returning textbooks or paying the replacement costs if key information is missing. Without an automated solution, someone's time must be spent trying to determine who was issued a textbook, who damaged a book, and how many textbooks are needed. As a result, textbooks are reordered unnecessarily creating a surplus, and money is lost.

The following case study shows how one school district implemented an automated textbook management system and saved approximately $250,000 within a school year.

Manual Method of Tracking Textbooks

Madison City Schools, a young school district located in Madison, Alabama, is composed of 11 schools and a central office, with 600 teachers and 8,600 students. The number of textbooks prior to implementing an automated solution was approximately 59,000.

Before acquiring a textbook management software solution, students' names and textbook titles were recorded on paper, indicating that they received their textbooks. These papers were then given to the assistant principal, who sent the paper to the central office where it was added to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. During the school year, textbooks were reordered because administrators had no way of knowing the number of copies available at other schools in the district. Mid-year replacement costs ranged from $20,000-$40,000. There were no barcodes on the textbooks; therefore, a student could turn in anyone's book at the end of the year. At that time, a manual inventory was performed.

Implementation of Booktracks®

Madison City Schools decided to automate their distribution process with Booktracks, completely Web-based textbook management software developed by Book Systems, Inc. Group meetings were held to determine the strategy for tracking textbooks, to train personnel who would use the software, and to facilitate a smooth transition to an automated system.

The goal was to hold everyone accountable who had "ownership" of the textbooks throughout the school year, including administrators responsible for requesting extra textbooks or identifying a surplus, teachers who distributed and collected textbooks from students, and especially the students who were responsible for returning books or paying the replacement cost.

Madison City chose to self-host their software and purchased a new server to run the Booktracks system. Barcode labels and scanners were also purchased for use at each school.

Once the decisions about hardware were complete, a step-by-step implementation process was begun to record the title, ISBN and count the number of copies. Barcodes and label protectors were attached to each textbook. This process was completed when each student's name, grade, school, address, and other information from the district's student information system were loaded into Booktracks.

Administrators chose to use a self check module so teachers could quickly and easily check out textbooks to the students. Several scanners were shared by teachers who had classrooms close together. Any textbooks or students that did not have a record in the database were noted on forms that were then given to the assistant principal, who had permission to add records.

Form Letters were distributed to the parents, listing all the textbooks their children had checked out, including the title and cost of each textbook and a signature line for both student and parent to sign.

During the year, reports provided by the software helped administrators determine if more textbooks were needed at each school. As schools with a surplus loaned textbooks to other schools in need, they were able to use features within Booktracks to track the books as they moved from location to location.

Cost Savings with Booktracks

Madison City Schools saved approximately $250,000 within the first year by using Booktracks to track textbook distribution. For the entire year, they spent less than 1% for replacement orders. Students returned their textbooks and teachers could compare the textbooks they had available against the number of students enrolled for their classes.

Eric Sollman of WAFF 48 NEWS interviewed two of the key school leaders involved with implementing Booktracks for Madison City Schools. The report, aired in July 2010, described how this tool has helped Madison City save money at a time when schools are facing budget cuts and teacher layoffs. Knowing what an expense the schools had without holding students accountable, Superintendent Dr. Dee Fowler described the situation before implementing the textbook software and spoke of the key goal Booktracks is now accomplishing for them: "We know who lost a textbook, how much that textbook cost, and now we're expecting to receive payment back for those."

Textbook Coordinator Bob Lipinski was also interviewed. He talked about the task he had to tackle as coordinator: "… one of the things [Dr. Fowler] repeated was we spend way too much money on textbooks. He called me in … and basically told me to fix it." He concluded that changing to tracking textbooks with Booktracks cut "$250,000" of their spending. "It's actually more if you compound that over a few years," he added.

Overall, the project was beneficial to both Madison City Schools and to Book Systems. While the school system made all parties accountable for the textbooks and saved money, Book Systems was also able to learn more about how this product works in a real-world situation, thus enabling the company to improve the implementation process and the software.

By observing Madison City Schools, Book Systems' Development Team was able to add enhancements to the software, such as an entity feature, and revise current features to better serve the unique needs and situations of any school system. Book Systems' Project Management Team identified the need for the customers to have a committee in place prior to implementation that understands how the software works. The Data Management Team was able to tweak their strategy for getting the Booktracks database ready for practical use in the school system, and new z39.50 databases were created to provide the data needed when loading textbook records into Booktracks. Support personnel also gained experience serving teachers and administrators as they sought to teach and help the customer get the most out of the software in a timely manner.

What to Look for When Considering Textbook Automation

Automating textbook management is a key time- and money-saving tool for any school or school system. The following list includes several key issues schools should consider when looking for a textbook management solution:

- The system is a 100% browser-based application (no client software required).
- The system has a way for the textbook coordinator to establish a default set of permissions that can be assigned to individuals in a particular worker group.
- The system allows the textbook coordinator to assign loan periods and fine amounts for various groups of students and types of items.
- The system includes a z39.50 textbook database for quick cataloging via ISBN without requiring additional cost or software.
- The system allows an authorized operator to add, modify, and/or delete bibliographic records.
- The system is able to batch import student information.
- The system allows an authorized operator to add, modify, and/or delete student records.
- The system allows an authorized operator to print smart and/or dumb barcodes for all students and textbooks.
- The system allows for importing course data.
- The system supports checking in, checking out, assessing fines, and paying or waiving fines.
- The system offers a variety of check out and check in methods, such as single, batch, and self check.
- The system allows the coordinator to assign a teacher or a classroom to the textbook record during cataloging or circulation.
- The system provides an alternate circulation tool in case the Internet is down. This tool is able to synchronize the circulation information when the system is back on-line.
- The system allows authorized operators to request additional copies of a textbook they need from the textbook coordinator and receive e-mail updates.
- The system allows an operator to specify lost or damaged textbooks.
- The system permits tracking and reporting on the condition of textbooks.
- The system provides the textbook coordinator the ability to create customized reports tailored to fit the needs of the school or district.
- The system allows for complete inventory of the collection, as well as specific inventory reports (lost, missing, etc.).

- The system lets the textbook coordinator reassign the location of the textbook using a loan feature.
- The system allows the coordinator to reclassify and/or change ownership of the textbooks.

Why Automate with Booktracks?

Schools will benefit from investing in a software package that can meet their specific needs for tracking textbooks and will often see a quick return on their investment. With the high cost of textbooks and the budget shortfalls that many schools face, textbook distribution and collection must be handled in a manner that allows you to track and recapture funds for lost or damaged textbooks. Automation allows schools to keep track of where textbooks are and who is responsible for them at all times. Knowing exactly which textbooks every student checked out ensures that students are responsible for either returning the correct books or paying for lost books. Consequently, with textbook management in hand, money can be spent in other, more meaningful ways, and teachers and administrators can focus their valuable time on educating and supporting their students.