

Students at some HISD schools lack textbooks for homework

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Homework can be particularly tough for students these days, but not for the reason you might think.

The hard part? They don't have textbooks.

Numerous principals in the Houston Independent School District don't allow students to take home textbooks unless their parents come to campus once a year to sign out the material.

Three months into the school year, some students say they are struggling to do homework without textbooks. For working parents or those without cars, arranging a special trip to campus can be difficult.

The principals say the rule - which they break in special circumstances - is an attempt to get parents more involved and to accept responsibility for the books. Lost books cost schools tens of thousands of dollars a year.

Christian Ortega, a freshman at [Westbury High School](#), said his mom works at a hospital and hasn't had time to pick up his textbooks, so he walks to a friend's house when he has algebra homework.

"I've had to borrow someone else's book. It's kind of difficult," he said.

Maria Escobar, another Westbury freshman, said textbooks aren't necessary for homework in all classes, but she needs her algebra book to complete problems and her biology book to take notes.

"My mom had to take a half-day off work just to get my books," she said.

Clarifying the rules

Westbury High School Principal [Tim Wainright](#) said he asks parents to pick up the books as a way to bring them inside the building for a positive reason. He said he has granted exceptions if parents call.

After hearing some students still don't have books, Wainright sent a message to teachers this week to clarify the rules.

"We want everybody to have a book to study," he said. "Final exams are very close, and we want our students to be successful."

James Douglas, the executive vice president of [Texas Southern University](#), said he alerted HISD Superintendent [Terry Grier](#) to the issue more than two years ago.

Douglas said he's troubled not only that students can't take home books, but that some don't even get homework.

"It just baffles me that educators cannot see how criminal it is to take that learning experience away from students," he said.

"We get a great deal of our students from HISD," he added. "When faculty members give them homework assignments, they don't even know where to go. It's something that's foreign to them."

Grier is concerned

Grier, at a school board meeting in November, told trustees he was concerned students couldn't take home textbooks. The decision traditionally has been left to principals, but Grier said he would talk to administrators about ensuring children get books.

"What do you do for the parent who's not engaged enough to come or who's maybe working two or three jobs or who doesn't speak English?" Grier said. "This is about teaching children responsibility."

Some campuses in Galena Park ISD also require parents to sign out textbooks, according to a district spokesman, but other large school systems in the area - including Cypress-Fairbanks, Alief and Pasadena - say students may take home books without strings attached.

HISD doesn't keep track of schools' textbook policies, but the middle school office recently surveyed campuses and found that about half check out the books to parents.

Last year, HISD schools lost \$2.1 million worth of textbooks. The district has to foot the bill if the students don't pay.

Yates High School Principal [Marla McNeal-Sheppard](#) said missing textbooks have cost the campus up to \$30,000 - as students move and don't return them - so she requires parents to check them out.

She said teachers generally don't assign homework from textbooks, and if students need help, they can turn to the Internet.

"If it's a process that they're looking for in the textbook, they can Google that same process and come up with a number of ways to do it," she said.

Kimberly Elicondo, a junior at [Austin High School](#), said some friends without textbooks come to her house to do homework, or she brings her books to them.

"It's not cool," she said. "Some parents work."

Longer hours

Jorge Arredondo, the new principal of Austin, said he has kept the school open until 8 p.m. and on Saturdays for book pickup, but he acknowledged that putting the responsibility on parents can cause problems.

"At first you're thinking, 'It's not too much to ask,' but you don't want that to be a reason for a kid not to have a book at home," he said.

At [Bellaire High School](#), students check out their own books before the year starts so they're ready to do work on day one, said Principal [Tim Salem](#).

He said books get lost - the school spent \$10,246 for 170 replacements last year - but he hasn't seen a need to pull parents into the process.

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