



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on July 6, 2010

The End of the Library with Books?

The July 4 news story in the Boston Globe described a scene that will be played out in virtually every school and community in the United States over the next five years, not always with the same decision. Cushing Academy — a 144-year-old private prep school located in the northern Worcester County, Massachusetts, town of Ashburnham — has decided to eliminate its library and replace it with an Internet center.



“When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books,” Cushing Headmaster James Tracy told [the Boston Globe](#). “Instead of a traditional library with 20,000 books, we’re building a virtual library where students will have access to millions of books,” said Tracy, whose office shelves remain lined with books. “We see this as a model for the 21st-century school.” The school has already disposed of half of its print library.

Tracy [emphasizes](#) that he’s not against the idea of books, only that he believes the school should emphasize its most modern form. “This isn’t ‘Fahrenheit 451’ [the 1953 Ray Bradbury novel in which books are banned]. We’re not discouraging students from reading. We see this as a natural way to shape emerging trends and optimize technology.”

But the decision has created a discussion that will be played out in thousands of school committees and principal’s offices over the next few years, and many have already risen to oppose what could become a trend in education. Many older devotees of libraries with books have focused upon the sentimental aspects of paper: Curling up with a good book at the beach (few would risk their iPad or Kindle there), the smell of the paper, the permanence (last year Kindle [erased](#) *1984* by George Orwell, ironically, from thousands of Kindle units) and so on. A few other arguments against electronic books are downright [Luddite](#).

But there are practical reasons for using both paper books and electronic books in schools. Paper books don’t go “down” when there is a power outage or internet interruption. And although digital documents have made tremendous strides in anti-fraud security in recent years, paper books are still far less susceptible to tampering and informational corruption than digital books. Not every book is available in electronic form free of charge, as most school libraries provide, including many of the most valuable books in world history. Thus, there is still value in teaching students how to use the Dewey Decimal System and Library of Congress method of organizing paper books.

More importantly for schools, electronic readers such as Kindle and iPad can actually become a way for



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many students to avoid gaining quality reading skills altogether. Federal regulators have already written an open letter to colleges and universities claiming that e-readers that do not have text-to-voice features may violate the Americans with Disabilities Act. In a June 29, 2010 joint letter from Assistant Attorney General Thomas E. Perez of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice and Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights Russlynn Ali of the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. government actually [complained that](#):

“...colleges and universities are using electronic book readers that are not accessible to students who are blind or have low vision and to seek your help in ensuring that this emerging technology is used in classroom settings in a manner that is permissible under federal law. A serious problem with some of these devices is that they lack an accessible text-to-speech function.”

These devices could make advanced reading skills unnecessary for lazy students who don't care enough to take the time to read the e-books they are assigned. Bookless libraries could make learning reading skills with any depth unnecessary, as students could turn on the text-to-speech feature when they come across a difficult vocabulary word, or otherwise get bored or troubled with the text. Yet in-depth reading skills are what are most needed among America's youth. Many students — and even many adults — are essentially of the view that all they need to know about any particular topic is whatever appears on Wikipedia or the first screen grab of a Google search. That's the extent of the depth in many instances.

While there is essentially nothing wrong with the concept of “books on tape” — e-readers are essentially an upgrade from that technology — e-readers can actually become a barrier to students picking up good reading habits. E-readers often come with a variety of supplementary applications — such as Facebook, texting and gaming — that can become a constant distraction for young readers from the task at hand.

All of this makes Cushing Academy's decision to sell off its library and replace it with an Internet cafe (complete with “a \$50,000 coffee shop that will include a \$12,000 cappuccino machine”) troubling. But it is a decision that schools — government and private — will be making over the next few years of the current recession. “As the school budget crisis deepens” eSchool News [reported](#) June 30, “administrators have started to view school libraries as luxuries that can be axed, rather than places where kids learn to love reading and do research.” American parents should hope - and work to ensure — more schools choose differently than Cushing Academy.

Photo: Cushing Academy, circa 1908



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