Groups search for better texts

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About 30 teachers and parents spent all week poring through hundreds of math books page by page. They were choosing, from among several publishers' materials, the best mathematics books for East Baton Rouge Parish students.

The decision is harder this year because there are better books to choose from than ever before, school officials say. "These are the most good books I have ever seen," said Ann Tinsley, math supervisor for the East Baton Rouge Parish school system. "The companies have gone out of their way to produce good math books."

The three committees, whose members were chosen by principals and administrators, sift through presentations from more than 30 publishing companies and then evaluated the books to agree on three different series for teachers to choose from.

A lot of factors go into choosing the right book. A colorful, interesting cover catches the eye of school officials, but publishers know that it's not just a pretty cover they're looking for.

J.W. Green, a representative of Macmillan and Co., said his company put a greater emphasis on teacher participation when writing textbooks. "The authors write the book, editors read it and that's good," Green said. But we've also gotten together with classroom teachers all over the country to give authors and editors insight."

Green said that greater efforts to improve education nationwide may have something to do with textbook improvement, but their goal was to interest children in math. "Tougher standards may have some effect, but kids are smarter nowadays," he said.

Wayne Hebert of Laidlaw Bros. said it was not so much the content that was changed. "The content hasn't changed a lot -- we're changing how we sell it to kids," Hebert said.

He also said there was a move to write textbooks that fit the needs of all students. "The book has to be pretty inside and outside," said John Scardina, a math teacher at Tara High School. "The book has to be appealing, especially for this group of kids."

The committees were broken down into grades K-5, 6-8 and 9-12. While most committees were made up of teachers of that grade level, some high school teachers were on the middle school committees to ensure that the books chosen would make for a smoother transition for middle school students.

Associate Superintendent Donald Hoover said it was important to prepare students for tougher math

Linda Gail Pratt, left, of Baker High, and Emily Elliott, Delmont Elementary principal, examine proposed textbooks

Numerous math textbooks for elementary grades, above, and high schools, below, are available
There wasn't a gap in math skills until ninth graders were required to take Algebra," Hoover said. "Now there are big gaps and we've got to prepare students."

"We're trying to get books that add problem-solving practicality where students can get a grasp of numerical sense as well as how to use it in the real world," said Lynda Dugas, a math teacher at Scotlandville Magnet High School.

David Lovely, an eighth grade teacher at Valley Park Middle School, said he looked for textbooks that would be good for the average student to use. "We have experienced success without the reduction in standards, and we still need books for the average student to experience success in," Lovely said.

Teachers and parents used a checklist to evaluate each book. The requirements included such evaluation standards as basic skill areas, specific content, lesson development, supplementary materials, including the teachers manual, readability, physical characteristics and other considerations.

A committee of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved nine series of mathematics books for schools. The parish committee was to approve three series from the state list for each school level, Ms. Tinsley said.

Most of the teachers said they benefitted the most from seeing all the books offered and wished all teachers were able to see the books.

"I'll be able to go back and help teachers make good decisions," said Linda Gail Pratt, a math teacher at Baker High School and first-time committee member. "I wish more teachers had the opportunity to look at these books and choose."

Linda Clark, a parent and member of the elementary school committee, said she was pleased with the committee's work and the greater variety of books to choose from.

"Even the poorer ones here are better than what we have now," Ms. Clark said.