

A Brief History of the Advisory Commission on Textbook Specifications (ACTS)

This commission has evolved over the past 70 years. Its central purpose is to maintain appropriate physical standards of quality and performance for elementary and high school instructional material. These standards and specifications are intended as a guide to aid the manufacturer, the publisher, the textbook administrator, and the general public. The working document that contains these guidelines is entitled The Manufacturing Standards and Specifications for Textbooks (MSST).

To better understand and appreciate the extraordinary efforts that have gone into the creation and growth of ACTS (and the MSST), one must look back in history to at least the early 1930's. What follows are some pertinent highlights of the commission's origin.

The 30's

In the early 30's, Colonel E.W. Palmer, Founder and President of Kingsport Press was alarmed at the cost and inefficiencies he and other manufacturers believed existed by producing a proliferating number of different editions (bindings) of the same book. Col. Palmer almost single-handedly journeyed from state to state, working with publishers and state textbook directors to encourage a trend toward specifications uniformity. While his efforts were beneficial, a wide variety of "specials" still existed from state to state, with consequent higher costs and problems to publishers and book manufacturers.

In 1939, Colonel Palmer went to a Texas Textbook Directors' meeting to propose that several states accept the specifications currently in use in Texas. The first printed specifications based on those in use in Texas were revised and approved by BMI under the guidance of Col. Palmer, who was then also President of BMI. This took place on October 6, 1939.

It is interesting to note that at this time the specifications were called both Texas and BMI Specifications, and the words were often used synonymously. It was not until 1969, thirty years later that the Joint Committee on Textbook Specifications changed its name to Advisory Commission on Textbook Specifications and decided to make BMI the publisher of record for the MSST. However, in 1971, ACTS changed its mind and rightfully proposed NASTA to be the publisher and moved for NASTA to copyright

the MSST. That is why you may still hear the names BMI and NASTA specifications used by the industry but, you have got to be in your late 60's to recall them as Texas Specifications.

The 40's

But let us return once again to the 1940's. There was some activity on the specification over the next few years, most probably interrupted by W.W.II, by the end of this decade, a set of official minimum MSST was prepared and issued by Kingsport Press, Inc. this was then approved by the state textbook directors of 10 states, and the MSST was off to its first official start.

The 50's

By 1953, these revisions had been accepted by all of the states in the National State Textbook Directors Association. By 1957, there was firmly in place a plan for semi-annual meetings entitled joint meetings on Manufacturing Standards and Specifications, attended by committees of the National State Textbook Directors Association, the BMI and the American Textbook Publishers Institute.

History points to the 1957 meeting of State Textbook Directors and others in Jackson, Mississippi, as momentous to the founding of the present ACTS program. Mr. Ben Middleton, then Mississippi textbook director, chaired this meeting, and is credited with what has been described as an almost impossible task; he got a number of other southern and western state textbook directors, a number of competing educational publishers and a number of manufacturers (also all competitors with each other) to agree to meet together and consider whether they collectively had any common problems on which a united approach might be better than individual attempts at solutions.

This 1957 meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, was indeed composed of unlikely bedfellows, with the competing book manufacturers suspicious of each other, the publishers suspicious of the publishers, the publishers suspicious of the book manufacturers, and the state textbook directors (while not suspicious of each other) suspicious of the other two groups. And these suspicions were not without foundation, since the objectives of each were different, the textbook directors obviously were looking for books built to last forever – or at least until the next official state adoption several years hence – while the book manufacturers really wanted to print more, and the publishers wished to hold down printing, binding and

material costs. Nevertheless, the three groups did learn – after a passage of considerable time – to respect each other and each other’s aims, so they were able to jointly examine the problems outlined by the textbook directors and consider whether these problems could be resolved by the use of different materials or manufacturing procedures. The groups also agreed to common approaches, so each state did not require different physical specifications to cure a common problem – or potential problem – of durability, etc.

As an outgrowth of these meetings, the state textbook directors found they had other common interests, leading them-and the textbook specification program – to become an influential segment of their own organization, the National Association of State Textbook Administrators, or NASTA. The schoolbook publishers, in turn were active in what is now called the Association of American Publishers, or AAP, while schoolbook manufacturers were all members of the Book Manufacturers’ Institute or BMI.

Through the years, the textbook specifications program has become quite formalized, to the point where there now is an official advisory commission on textbook specifications known as ACTS. This ACTS commission consists of six (6) representatives appointed by NASTA, six (6) by AAP, and six (6) by BMI.

With the organizational structure now in place, several pertinent observations persist:

1. The ACTS advisory commission and members do communicate well from competitor to competitor and from buyer to seller to ultimate user and vice versa.
2. This communication has led to meaningful NASTA specifications which, while not the perfect answer to everything, do insure reasonably durable books at practical prices. Most examples of books with dramatic classroom-use failure histories have been either due occasional manufacturing errors-which are an individual matter for resolution between the particular manufacturer, the particular publisher, and the publisher’s customers – or where the NASTA specifications somehow were not followed, with the non-spec materials or procedures simply not holding up in classroom use.
3. The standardized NASTA specifications have helped combat increasing costs for manufacturers, publishers, and all NASTA states, because special editions (with consequent higher manufacturing costs and inventory problems) are generally not required.

4. There has been a definite rub-off of these NASTA specs upon the open territory states in the Midwest and the northeast – and even Canada. This is why the NASTA label is widely seen on books throughout the non-NASTA portions of the United States and Canada. Not only does this insure better and more consistent quality books for these open territory school systems, but again the extra costs of special edition manufacturing and inventory is reduced.
5. The NASTA hardcover textbook specifications have kept pace with the new technological developments and materials. Naturally, whenever NASTA specifications are opened for such new thing, a certain amount of experience-including sometimes bad experience-is required to be sure of proper results, but this is far better than if no specs existed and the doors were open to anything.

At this time, we are reminded of some major developments over the past fifty years (which could not have been conceived in 1939):

1. Verification of the assumptions that had been made in accepting the Texas Specifications.

At their meeting in October 1957, the combined committees embarked on a momentous program of verifying the major assumptions that had been made in the specification. Heretofore, these were based on evaluations by the State of Texas and the empirical experience of book manufacturers. Now a scientific basis was to be employed by utilizing controllable laboratory and in-classroom testing.

As a result, a testing program was started to determine what a good durable book is. U.S. Testing Co. was sought out and employed as an independent testing laboratory with many years of experience in book and material testing, and this testing continued for twelve (12) years from 1957 until it was discontinued in 1969.

U.S. testing began a comprehensive testing program covering such tests as the reinforcement of the first and last signatures of books, the glare of paper, the density of board. It tested non-woven and made a comparative test on loose back, tubular back and tight back books. There were round-robin tests on B, C and C1 cloth, followed by discussions and tests on protective coatings and the validity of tumble testing. The testing continued in high-gear in the sixties. As a matter of fact, there were so many new recommendations that were being made that the concept of

“Supplemental Adoptions” was introduced so that improved recommendations could be introduced and utilized, until there was time to perform adequate testing.

However; by the end of the sixties, the committees began to be concerned with the costs of the prolonged testing, and the entire program by U.S. testing was discontinued in February 1969, but not until a tremendous number of the original assumptions on the specifications had been established.

2. Introduction of non-woven materials as an equivalent material for cloth

During the decades of the forties, fifties and most of the sixties, all textbooks were manufactured with cloth covers. Non-woven materials were introduced to the combined committee on textbook specifications in 1961. Books were tested by the U.S. testing company on the tumbler tester, and the first report to the committee on two non-woven materials was that although the corners split, the materials was otherwise impressive.

Tests continued through 1963 and 1964 but the results were inconclusive and additional tests were authorized. However, in 1965, on the basis of further investigations on materials supplied by two cover-material manufacturers, it was felt these provided to be equivalent of cloth, and it was decided to propose a temporary specification for non-woven for the first time.

In the early seventies, problems began to develop with type III non-woven. It was a concern as well that only one manufacturer was available for type III. The cover materials committee of the BMI together with the non-woven manufacturers initiated tests once again in 1973. As a result, temporary specifications were adopted Type II; however, there was still no permanent specification. As a consequence, another in-classroom-test was performed during 1975 and 1976 with permanent specifications finally being approved in the summer of 1976.

3. Introduction of coated groundwood along with sheets free of unbleached chemical or ground wood pulp.

The first discussions on the use of groundwood text papers dated back to 1963. At the time, there were only a few paper manufacturers that specialized in free sheets for the EL-HI industry and prices of paper were beginning to have a major impact on the publishing package. However, ACTS did not appear too concerned in the sixties. It was not until 1970, with film and blade-coated groundwood paper becoming available in the market that the discussions at ACTS became intensive.

In 1971, 17 paper mills agreed that machine-coated groundwood would meet the specifications and could maintain a brightness of not less than 75. No adequate aging test had yet been developed. A temporary supplemental adoption was passed at this time for a limited number of subjects, and groundwood was on its way to acceptance.

However, there was still limited groundwood on the market at this time, and the commission felt it had the time to better develop and evaluate characteristics of groundwood machine-coated paper.

In July of 1976, 3 years later, it was determined on the basis of the field test that there was no appreciable difference in aging between the coated groundwood and free sheet, and the supplementary adoption on the use of machine-coated groundwood paper was made permanent. At that time, the specification carried a requirement for brightness of 72, but that was dropped in a few years, and an entire new market was opened for textbook publishing paper.

4. Introduction of non-consumable soft cover texts for certain disciplines.

In July of 1971, specification for non-consumable soft cover books were proposed, but the commission did not accept them, and sent them back for reconsideration. This covered an entire category of books which were in common use in schools, yet on which the MSST had no coverage.

In February of 1972, ACTS spent most of the meeting revising the specifications and a temporary specification was finally accepted by the group. However, there were still many items to be ironed out as the commission continued to discuss tests on non-woven covers, and at what level in the manufacturing of the cover sandwich, the testing should be performed.

These refinements in the non-consumable specifications continued through the decade of the seventies, until they were made permanent in 1980. It is interesting to note that they were still being revised as late as 1990, but that is the nature of the work of the commission in keeping the standard up to date.

5. Introduction of adhesive-bound textbooks

Here we have the longest running acceptance issue in the industry of a new method or manufacturing process.

There had been considerable discussion in the late sixties about the introduction of adhesive binding to the El-Hi market, but the perception of this type of binding in the industry was that the quality was poor in spite of the fact that it was becoming widely used outside of the El-Hi grades.

Probably the quality of books in the college market reinforced this perception, and no real attempt was made to introduce adhesive binding to ACTS until 1971 when an in-classroom test was started with four (4) states participating in the project.

At the same time hard bound books were being tested, non-consumable soft cover texts were put into the in-classroom test. After two (2) years, the books were inspected, and it was felt that the adhesive binding had stood up as well as the conventional bindings. As a result, adhesive binding of non-consumable softcover books was accepted as a temporary supplemental specification in 1975.

Adhesive binding for hard bound books had a more difficult time. The in-classroom test after three (3) years showed that the adhesive binding had stood up quite well, but the endsheet assembly had some failure. New specifications were proposed and introduced, but NASTA had more objections including the feeling that the back margins were insufficient, and the proposal for new specifications was defeated.

In July of 1977, as the result of work of a tripartite committee, new hard-bound adhesive specifications were introduced and approved as a temporary supplemental adoption. At the same time the commission recommended a new field test to affirm the new specifications. In 1978, it was reported that five (5) publishers would have books available for the test.

In 1981, the books were examined and a report was given to the commission. Once again it was reported that the adhesive binding stood up well, but that there were some failures. However, the committee reported that there were no additional books available for the testing of adhesive binding. This was the result of reluctance on the part of publishers to use this method since several states would not accept this form of binding. However, by 1982, two (2) additional books were found to be tested and they were introduced in New England and Texas.

By 1983 there was a consensus to reduce the back margin of the adhesive-bound books. This would open the availability of books both for manufacture and testing. As a result, a new field test was proposed in 1984 for adhesive-bound books with a minimum of 5/8" back margin. This would be administered by a test committee composed of members of NASTA, AAP and BMI. By July of 1985 the ground rules were established and the first books were put into the schools.

This test was concluded after 5 years. Following numerous other refinements, by the 1990's adhesive binding was accepted as a permanent specification for several elementary disciplines and

all class II secondary level textbooks up to and including a maximum of 1-1/2” in bulk. The consideration of adhesive binding for hard bound textbooks as a viable and expansive method continues into the new millennium.

The adoption of a myriad of refinements to the specifications, as well as the five major evolutions of the MSST that have been discussed, have contributed to keeping the textbook industry supplied with a continuing flow of materials and modern methods of manufacture. As a result, we can safely maintain that we have the strongest and most economical textbooks that can be supplied anywhere – and a set of specifications that are a worldwide standard for manufacturing El-Hi textbooks.

This effort and commitment is conducted in part when the ACTS committee holds its annual meeting at various locations in mid-summer. It is at this session that new proposals or changes to the existing specification and standards are addressed. And, it should be noted that the executive committee of ACTS still formally meets in late January/early February at various locations.