

## Custom learning

Walch Education in Portland, born in 1927 from a high school teacher's part-time gig, makes a name today creating textbooks tailored for individual school districts

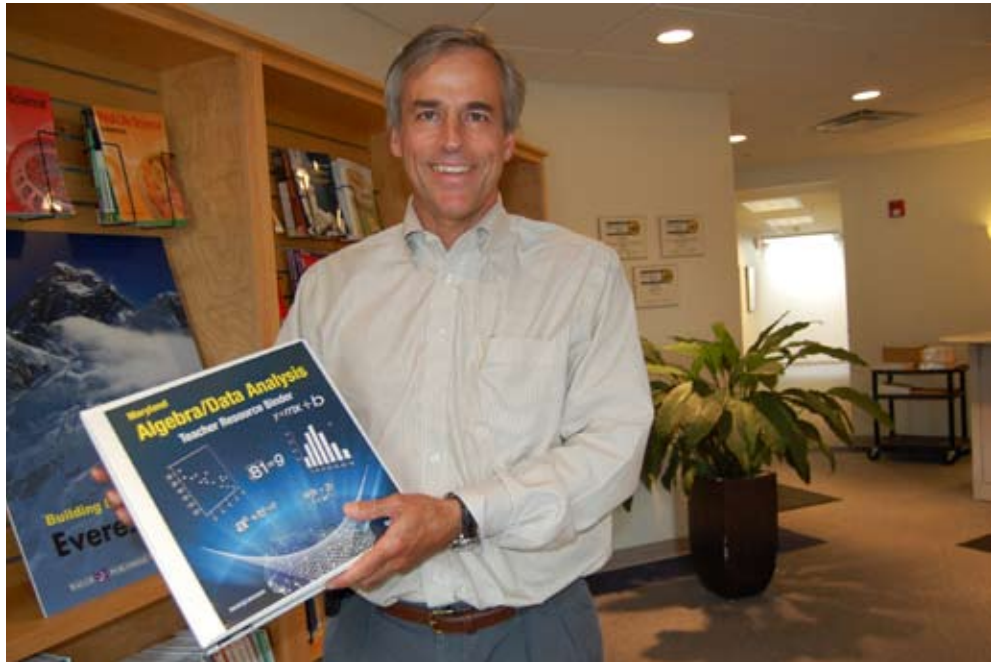
BY BRANDI NEAL

Two years ago, the average student entering high school in Baltimore, Md., could read at only the fifth grade level. Jennifer Economos Green, 2006 director of the district's high school curriculum, decided that adjusting the curriculum to reflect the needs of students attending school in a predominately poor urban area would be the best way to address the remedial reading levels.

"The district relied on an anthology that was above students' heads," Green explains. "We needed a much more adaptive reading program that allowed students to read at a lot of different levels."

But finding the textbook to make that happen was challenging. Green discovered many large educational publishing companies offer the same text book for every school and district. Green asked her staff to develop their own curriculum, but quickly realized they didn't have the time for such an undertaking. So she turned to Portland-based educational publisher Walch Education, a company that had recently approached the Baltimore school district.

Walch was relatively new to the tailor-made textbook business, having only begun in 2005 designing educational materials that cater to the needs of specific school districts. "I didn't know such a company existed, or I would have sought them out immediately," Green



PHOTO/JAN HOLDER

*Ahead of the curve: Al Noyes, president of Walch Education, steered the company out of a slump by breaking into the custom publishing market*

says. "It's hard to find publishers with the right solutions for students in urban areas."

Walch's revamped Baltimore curriculum included weekly assessments, pre- and post-class tests and a toolkit for teachers. The assessment details were then laid out in a matrix so teachers could easily identify struggling students and work with them individually or in small groups. At the end of the summer school session, each student took the same exit exam, whereas before teachers developed their own exams, and this allowed the school to better track students that were succeeding versus those in need of help.

It was as if a light had been switched on in Baltimore. More students began passing basic English courses. "We saw terrific results and a higher pass rate," Green says. "It fit our exact needs."

Successes like the one in Baltimore have helped the customized publishing

niche bolster Walch Education. About 20% of Walch's annual \$4.5 million publishing revenue now comes from customized textbooks. Al Noyes, Walch's president, expects customized publishing will grow to 50% of the company's publishing revenue over the next several years.

With schools under more pressure than ever before to meet national and state educational standards, the time is ripe for Walch to cast a wide net. But Noyes says it's not always easy to convince school districts to entertain a new idea peddled by a small publishing company in Maine.

### School of hard knocks

Walch Education began by accident. During the 1920s, debate teachers in southern Maine asked Portland High School Teacher J. Weston Walch for the notes he used to prepare his students for

#### Walch Education

40 Walch Dr., Portland

**President:** Al Noyes

**Founded:** 1927

**Employees:** 37

**Products:** Customized education materials, textbooks, commercial printing

**2007 Revenue:** \$6 million

**Contact:** 772-2846

www.walch.com

## The history of Walch Education

1927	1938	1953	1967	1970	1996	1998	2004	2005	2007	2008
Founded in Portland as the "Debater's Information Bureau" by J. Weston Walch, Portland High School teacher and debate coach	Company name changes to "J. Weston Walch, Publisher," reflecting its broad range of subject-area publications	J. Weston Walch resigns from teaching at Portland High School to devote himself full time to the company	Walch hires first full-time managing editor	Sales pass \$1 million	J. Weston Walch retires at age 94	Company switches from traditional web and offset presses to digital printing	Company moves from 321 Valley St. to 40 Walch Dr., Portland	Walch completes its first custom publishing sale, to Boston Public Schools	Company name changes to Walch Education	Completes sales to school districts in Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and the U.S. Virgin Islands

Source: Walch Education

his award-winning debate team. Walch saw an opportunity to supplement his meager teacher's salary and began selling those notes in booklets that he prepared and printed in his Portland apartment. Each year he would publish a new addition matched to national debate topics. In 1927, Walch made \$600 selling his mimeographed debate booklets and, as Walch Director of Marketing John Spritz describes, realized, "Oh my god, this is a business." Today, Walch Education produces more than 100 new titles annually in English, math, science, social studies, art, music and life skills for middle school and high school students. Located at 40 Walch Drive just off Riverside Street in Portland, the company employs 37 people and grossed a combined total of \$6 million from its publishing and commercial printing branches in 2007.

Though the basic premise of the company has remained the same since 1927 — extending and enhancing learning — Walch Education has been forced to reinvent itself several times due to changes in the market. Six decades ago, Walch expanded its reach beyond production of debate booklets and began producing an entire catalogue of textbook materials for schools. But by the 1980s, the company had hit a slump. It was run by publishers rather than educators, and the publishers didn't know what educators wanted, or how to market to them. As schools' needs and decision-making policies changed, Walch began to fall behind. Sales slowly slipped year after year because Walch continued to mail catalogues to teachers rather than to the people who were increasingly in charge of curricula — school district administrators.

In 2005 the company hired Al Noyes as its new president. Noyes, former president and CEO of the software company Pragmatech in Nashua, N.H., noticed a change in the way educational materials were purchased. "The market went away," Noyes says. "Teachers stopped buying, and younger teachers began using the Internet for materials because there's now a lot of free stuff on the

web."

In addition to the slump in sales, the increasing price of paper and postage also made mailing catalogues less attractive for Walch. So Noyes directed the company to reduce its dependence on catalogues by 80%. Noyes hired a handful of teachers who he says "can have efficient conversations with school district administrators," to help develop material designed to help the district's students pass federal "No Child Left Behind" and state testing.

In the past, customization would have been impossible because developing such products required being able to print a small number of titles for each client and make changes at will, which would have been expensive and inefficient. However, in 1998 Walch switched to digital printing and in 2004 moved from a cramped building in Portland's Parkside neighborhood to a state-of-the-art facility in Portland's Riverside neighborhood. The company now rarely contracts with outside sources to develop textbook materials. Instead, materials can be researched, developed and printed all at company headquarters, and digital capabilities makes it possible for Walch to print a small number of materials or thousands of titles for each client. The digital printing facility has also allowed Walch to establish a lucrative commercial printing branch, which in 2007 generated \$1.5 million in revenue for the company and accounts for 20% of the company's sales. Walch Printing, an extension of Walch Education, offers print-on-demand services for everything from brochures and posters to softcover books for individual clients.

"We can spin on a dime here," says Spritz. "With digital printing you don't have to print enormous inventory; all of the content is produced in house and the printing facility is here, too. We're learning to turn things out very quickly."

Changes to materials can be made and printed on demand, often on the same day, Spritz says.

To test the waters, Walch approached

the Boston Public Schools two and a half years ago about developing its summer school program, and was hired to design and pilot the "Massachusetts Academic Support Program for English Language Arts." The company partnered with the senior program director for English language arts and nearly a dozen teachers to create targeted materials for ninth- and 10th-grade students.

With the success of Boston in its pocket, Walch set its sights on Palm Beach County, Fla., a district with more than 110,000 students (versus 90,000 in Boston) from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Noyes approached Palm Beach County's Secondary Mathematics Administrator, Jean Giarrusso. Giarrusso says she was looking for a math program that had more "real world relevance" for students.

"Walch had been approaching us for several years. They sent us some material that caught my eye, so I met Al Noyes over a cup of coffee and he explained they were willing to work with us on material that fit our needs," Giarrusso says. "That was a very different approach. I was very impressed with the working partnership."

The district is in its second year of using Walch's materials, and Giarrusso says standardized test scores have increased and feedback from teachers has been positive.

Walch has also worked with school districts in Georgia, North Carolina and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Noyes says the company has a formula it uses to decide which districts to target. "Our strategy is to identify a state where there are high-stakes tests and standards that are consistently implemented, and [to] find districts within those states that understand the value of a targeted solution," he says. Noyes adds that Walch wants to locate districts that are large enough to have a team of curriculum experts on staff who have the authority to make decisions about which materials to use.

Because of Maine's small number of

students, lack of such experts, and failure to consistently implement the Maine Learning Results, Walch doesn't look for clients locally, Noyes says.

## **New edition**

Noyes admits his solicitation efforts have often been met with trepidation because the concept is foreign to most administrators.

"The challenge is getting the message out in a world where people are used to having salespeople show up and force feed them," he says. "They're surprised that we are willing to incorporate their ideas."

Indeed, after a string of success stories and three best-in-class awards from the Association of Educational Publishers, Walch still faces obstacles as it looks toward the future. Noyes says the company is still working on a plan to target smaller districts and develop ways to access those potential clients.

"We want to see how we can move beyond the districts we've described and move to more rural districts and to other states to develop products that meet their needs even if [those needs] are less well defined," Noyes explains. "As educators, we're committed to helping students, but how do we access that market? It's very difficult. Traditionally we've used direct mail and catalogues; [now we] look at alternatives, trade shows, online conferences and other less expensive ways to market. We haven't found the mix yet."

Another challenge is keeping current and past materials, as Noyes says, "up to snuff." With thousands of titles in print, keeping them all updated and current can be overwhelming. "We've redesigned our book production process, we're very adept at making changes and we use a more modern publishing system," he says.

Walch is also entertaining the idea of partnering with other publishing companies on the West Coast and in some of the country's largest districts in Texas and California.

Though the latest reincarnation of Walch has been a slow process, Noyes says the business plan is on point now and revenues are beating expectations.

"It's a daunting challenge and it will take time," he says of Walch's shift to district-based clients. "We're trying to do things sort of carefully, and step by step."

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