

# State issues book list for student reading

2,700 titles recommended on Web site

By Nanette Asimov  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Once upon a time, a dozen years ago, California's leading educators, declared that students would do well to read certain books. A list was prepared, but it languished and was soon forgotten.

Then along came education standards — new levels of excellence that students were supposed to meet — and new money for school libraries, \$158.5 million per year.

Today, a new list of 2,700 books recommended by state educators appears on the Web, searchable by title, author, awards garnered and even cultural specificity. Click on the title, and a summary appears.

"It's a great list. I'm proud of it," said Martha Rowland, an elementary school librarian who joined the selection committee and now works for the state Department of Education, which produced the list. Rowland was among dozens of librarians and reading experts who spent two years choosing titles and asking parents and teachers for feedback.

The result is an easy-to-use guide for school librarians, teachers, parents and students looking for good books.

State education officials say that they plan to update the list each year, and that a paper copy will be available for purchase in a few months. They also emphasize that the list is voluntary. Local school districts must still decide what books to buy for their shelves.

## No controversy so far

Recommending books, especially for schools, usually prompts a barrage of complaints. But the state's quiet approach — no school board vote or fanfare — has kept it free of controversy so far.

Common complaints are that book lists have too many white authors, or not enough white authors, or are offensive to certain cultures or religions.

"Witches," by the award-winning author Roald Dahl and a frequent target of the religious right, is not on the new list. But J.K. Rowling's first Harry Potter book, also slammed by witch-haters, is there.

In 1998, the San Francisco school board considered, then rejected, limiting the number of white authors on its reading list.

The state's list divides books into 20 ethnic categories, including among others African American, African, Western European,

## On the internet



See the list of the recommended books at [sfgate.com](http://sfgate.com).

Russian, Australian, Jewish, East Indian, Korean, Latino and Hmong.

In 1997, black parents in New York tried to ban the children's book "Nappy Hair," by Carolivia Herron, about a child whose family pokes fun at her hair. That book is on the list. So are 13 works of Shakespeare, three books by Dickens, and Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales."

## Huck Finn yes, Bible no

The Bible is not on the list. "School libraries should have the Bible," said high school librarian

*The result is an  
easy-to-use guide  
for school  
librarians, teachers,  
parents and  
students looking for  
good books.*

ian Kay Hones of San Francisco. "You won't understand a lot of the great literature if you don't have some basic understanding of, say, the Prodigal Son."

Hones also noticed that the state omitted a California category, and that Mark Twain's "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is absent. But she was impressed that Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" made it, despite attacks on the book's language as racist.

Books on controversial topics make a nominal appearance. Type in the word "lesbian," and four books, all for the high school level, pop up. But there may be more. Searching by keyword brings up only books with the word in its title or summary.

The word "sex" calls up 16 books, from "The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Celebrating Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young People" by Adam Mastoon, to Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire."

E-mail Nanette Asimov at [anasimov@sfchronicle.com](mailto:anasimov@sfchronicle.com).