William Schmidt, a professor of statistics and education at Michigan State University, said many claims by textbook publishers that their materials are aligned with the Common Core State Standards are a "sham."

—Brian Widdis for Education Week

Statements from publishers that traditional instructional materials are aligned with the Common Core State Standards are largely a "sham," according to a prominent researcher who conducted one of two forthcoming reviews of classroom textbooks.

The jury is still out, though, on the new wave of digital curricula hitting the market.

The findings highlight a new threat to the successful implementation of the common core, as well as a major challenge for districts in the 46 states and the District of Columbia that have adopted versions of the standards.

The studies "reaffirmed what we had been hearing from our state [textbook] working group," especially in mathematics, said Carrie Heath Phillips, a program director for the Council of
Chief State School Officers, in Washington, which has helped spearhead the new standards. Ms. Phillips downplayed the impact that misaligned textbooks will have on states' efforts to implement the new standards, but said the new studies "may be an eye-opener" for districts.

"It's buyer beware," she said.

'Snake Oil Salesmen'

Hoping to boost their share of a $9 billion annual market, many publishers now boast that their textbooks are "common-core aligned" and so can help spur the dramatic shifts in classroom instruction intended by the new standards for English/language arts and math.

But in a Feb. 21 presentation of his research at a seminar in Los Angeles hosted by the Education Writers Association, William Schmidt, a professor of statistics and education at Michigan State University in East Lansing, dismissed most purveyors of such claims as "snake oil salesmen" who have done little more than slap shiny new stickers on the same books they've been selling for years.

Mr. Schmidt, who also co-directs the university's Education Policy Center, and his team recently analyzed about 700 textbooks from 35 textbook series for grades K-8 that are now being used by 60 percent of public school children in the United States. Of those that purported to be aligned with the new standards, he said, some were "page by page, paragraph by paragraph" virtually identical to their old, pre-common-core versions.

University of Southern California professor Morgan Polikoff, meanwhile, reached a similar conclusion after analyzing seven 4th grade math textbooks used in Florida. Despite publishers' claims, the books were "only modestly aligned to the common core" and "systematically failed to reach the higher levels of cognitive demand" called for in the new standards, Mr. Polikoff said in a presentation to the EWA.

The studies conducted by the researchers are now being prepared for publication. Both Mr. Schmidt and Mr. Polikoff are also in the early stages of similar research into digital instructional materials.

Representatives from major publishers defended their work against the researchers' findings.

"The studies' assumption that [the common core] is somehow implemented in textbooks is relatively shortsighted," said Larry Singer, the managing director for the North American schools group at London- and New York City-based Pearson.
Some of the textbooks included in the studies were an immediate reaction to the new standards, Mr. Singer said, and educators now have a much greater variety of both print and digital instructional materials to consider.

The new standards were unveiled in 2010.

'Sins of Omission'

Mr. Schmidt, however, said that inside their classrooms, teachers tend to teach what's in the textbooks. And if the material in those books doesn't reflect the standards, the standards may not get taught.

Standards, Textbooks, and Practice Misaligned

When it comes to teaching key math domains, researchers say that teachers tend to follow their textbooks, which are not well-aligned with new Common Core State Standards. In 4th grade, for example, experts suggested that in order to adhere to the standards, twice as much time should be spent teaching fractions than called for in several popular textbook series, resulting in teachers spending half the time experts recommend on this key topic.

SOURCE: Center for the Study of Curriculum, Michigan State University. Research in progress.

That could present a big problem for the common core, already facing political opposition, worries about teacher preparedness, and growing concern about schools' readiness to administer related online assessments beginning next school year.

"For the first time, we can actually claim that we have world-class standards," Mr. Schmidt said. "But this is the kind of implementation issue that is facing our teachers."

Many of the textbooks he and his team reviewed, Mr. Schmidt said, committed both "sins of omission," by leaving out key concepts and content covered by the standards, and "sins of commission," by attempting to cover topics other than what the standards call for in a given grade level.

Mr. Schmidt said his research indicates that in 8th grade math, for example, teachers spent more time teaching geometry and less time teaching statistics than experts suggest is
necessary to adhere to the common-core standards; in both cases, teachers' actual practice hewed more closely to what was in their textbooks than what experts say the standards require.

In the Florida textbooks that Mr. Polikoff reviewed, including products from several major publishers, an average of 15 percent to 20 percent of the material covered in the books was not tied to grade-level common-core standards. Most of the books also failed to cover from 10 percent to 15 percent of the grade-level content the standards do contain.

Overall, Mr. Polikoff found, the books were about 60 percent to 70 percent identical to their earlier, pre-common-core versions.

Textbook publishers "don't want to make big revisions" to their existing materials, he said, because such work is both costly and difficult.

Jay Diskey, the executive director of the Association of American Publishers' pre-K-12 learning group, bristled at that conclusion, calling it "really hard to square with reality."

Publishers have worked hard to ensure that their materials are aligned with the common core, Mr. Diskey said, often hiring as consultants the experts who actually designed the standards. States have also approved many of the new materials, he said, citing the example of California, where 30 common-core math programs were recently adopted after an "exhaustive" review process.

And Lisa Carmona, the vice president of the pre-K-5 portfolio at McGraw-Hill Education, based in Columbus, Ohio, expressed disappointment that the researchers "didn't pick a more current program" to analyze.

Some of Mr. Polikoff's findings, she pointed out, were based on supplemental materials her company copyrighted in 2012 in order to help extend schools' use of her company's 2009 Math Connects program, which is no longer marketed. That textbook has been replaced by the McGraw-Hill My Math program for K-5, a digital and print resource created especially for the common core, Ms. Carmona said.

Overall, said Ms. Phillips of the CCSSO, the pending studies' conclusions reinforce the need for districts to be good consumers of common-core products.

"You shouldn't just take [common-core-alignment claims] at face value," she said, but should look to plug gaps in existing instructional materials with appropriate resources, lessons, and modules.
The Promise of Digital Content

Mr. Polikoff told the audience at the EWA seminar in Los Angeles that in the short term, new digital instructional materials being curated online via sites such as Share My Lesson and Better Lesson can be particularly effective in playing that kind of supplemental role.

Over the long term, he said, "nontraditional and new-media resources hold a great deal of promise."

Mr. Schmidt was more skeptical.

He maintained that the real promise of the common core, at least in math, comes with finally having "coherent" standards that focus on high-level conceptual understanding. For the time being, he said, neither individual digital lessons nor adapted versions of traditional textbooks are likely to fulfill that goal. There also don't yet appear to be any comprehensive yearlong digital curricula ready to do so, he said.

"Don't spend your money until [instructional materials] arrive that actually fully line up" with the new standards, Mr. Schmidt said he advises districts.