Editorial: College students deserve a break

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Our view: California should be on the cutting edge of innovation, using e-readers to deliver less expensive textbooks to college students.

In an "industry" that's dying for money-saving innovations, higher education was jolted last week by an idea from the leader of the state Senate. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, introduced a concept for online textbooks that could save college students in California about $1 billion a year.

Higher education is rarely receptive to massive institutional changes, but we hope the hue and cry to keep things the way they've always been doesn't kill the proposal before it can be debated.

Steinberg's idea probably needs fine tuning, but it sounds promising and it's one of the few legislative remedies to attempt to address the alarming rising cost of higher education. On that count alone, Steinberg has our praise.

Tuition at California public universities has climbed to the point where university administrators and trustees can no longer justify frequent tuition increases with the rationale, "But we're still a great bargain compared to the rest of the country."

In the absence of any concerted effort to remain a nationwide leader in affordable higher education, at least Steinberg's bill is an attempt to be a trailblazer in another area — online open-source textbooks.

The cost of textbooks is painful. Steinberg said the average student in the University of California, California State University and community college systems spends $1,300 a year on textbooks. That's more than $5,000 spent on books by the time someone gets a four-year degree.

Steinberg's pilot program would try to establish shared online textbooks for 50 common lower-division courses. He estimates a $25 million up-front investment could result in about $1 billion in savings for students every year.

Based on that financial estimate alone, it's worth investigating.
Of course, the textbook industry will complain. They're fond of their profit margins. Some professors likely will complain too. Though Steinberg says participation will not be mandatory, professors may bristle over being told by a committee what should be taught.

Then there are the questions about open-source materials. There would be no copyright, so teachers could add to the texts and use whatever they want. That will lead to concerns about what has and hasn't been academically peer reviewed.

Those are all questions that need to be worked out. This much is certain: With the advent of e-readers and notebooks, there's no need for students to buy one or two dozen hard-bound books every semester.

Legislators need to think about students, not book publishers. We hope the higher education systems will find a way to make this work.