Parents, Are You Ready To Teach Your Kids Arithmetic?

March 29, 2000

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

Parents are starting to realize that "fuzzy" math courses (variously called "whole math," "new math" or "new new math") are producing kids who can't do arithmetic, much less algebra. The U.S. Department of Education responded last October by officially endorsing ten new math courses for grades K-12, calling them "exemplary" or "promising" and urging local school districts to "seriously consider" adopting one of them.

The recommended programs were approved by an "expert" panel commissioned by the Department of Education. But many parents believe that the "experts" are subtracting rather than adding to the skills of schoolchildren.

Scholars are criticizing the new courses, too. They say that most of the panel's "field reviewers" who made the initial recommendations were teachers, not math experts, and that the panel making the final decisions did not include "active research mathematicians."

Within six weeks of the Department of Education's announcement, more than 200 mathematicians and scholars banded together to denounce the government-anointed curricula because they fail to teach basic skills. The group wrote a joint letter to Education Secretary Richard Riley criticizing the "exemplary" programs and asking the Department to reconsider its choices.

The group then published the letter as a full-page ad in the November 18th Washington Post. Despite the prestige of the letter's signers, including four Nobel Laureates and two winners of the Fields Medal (the highest mathematics honor), Riley refused to back away from the Department's endorsements.

Riley defended his Department's recommendations because they conform to the so-called "standards" adopted in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). But the nationally created math "standards" are just as off the mark as the nationally created history standards that caused such an

uproar when they were released in 1995.

The history standards were denounced in the U.S. Senate by a vote of 99 to 1, but that didn't faze the educators determined to indoctrinate students with "politically correct" history. After a few cosmetic changes, revisionist history masquerading under the label "standards" has infected nearly all new social studies textbooks.

The schools appear just as determined to force fuzzy math on children despite its obvious failures and the opposition of scholars and parents. In Illinois, parents have clashed with schools over one of these "exemplary" courses called "Everyday Math," or "Chicago Math" because it was produced by the University of Chicago Mathematics Project, complaining that the curriculum neglects basic computation.

Last August, parents in Plano, Texas filed a lawsuit against their school district over another of these Department-approved courses, "Connected Math," accusing the district of failing to give their children basic math instruction. In December, parents in Montgomery County, Maryland kicked up vigorous opposition to Connected Math even though the district was being enticed into using it by the prospect of a $6 million federal grant.

Another of these Department-approved courses, "Mathland," directs the children to meet in small groups and invent their own ways to add, subtract, multiply and divide. It's too bad they don't know that adults wiser than those now in school have already discovered how to add, subtract, multiply and divide.

Critics charge that these fuzzy math programs, which are touted as complying with "standards," do not teach traditional or standard arithmetic at all and actually give the word "standards" a bad name. They are based on such theories as that "process skills" are more important than computational skills and that correct solutions are not important so long as the student feels good about what he is doing.

The arguments for fuzzy math are that it is supposed to spare children the rigors of teacher-imposed rules and teach them that all they need is a calculator. Fuzzy math omits drill in basic math facts, fails to systematically build from one math concept to another, and encourages children to work in groups to "discover" math and construct their own math language.

According to mathematician Joel Hass of the University of California-Davis, one of the signers of the letter to Riley, "Saying that we don't need to teach children how to compute now that we have calculators is like saying we don't need to teach them how to draw now that we have cameras or we don't need to

teach them how to play music now that we have CD players." Mathematician William G. Quirk, whose career includes teaching 26 different math and computer science courses at three universities, says, "Nowhere in the NCTM's 258 pages of standards do they suggest that kids should remember any specific math facts."

Critics complain that failing to teach children the division of fractions precludes their moving on to algebra. David Klein of California State University, another signer of the letter to Riley, said, "In shutting the door to algebra, Connected Math also closes doors to careers in engineering and science."

In 1989 23 percent of freshmen entering California colleges needed remedial help in math. This figure has now risen to 55 percent. If parents want their children to learn arithmetic, they will have to teach them at home.