Education Experts Wrong; Parents Right

by Phyllis Schlafly September 27, 2006

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It took parents 17 years to overturn the tragic 1989 curriculum mistake made by the so-called education experts who demanded that schools abandon traditional mathematics in favor of unproven approaches. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics finally reversed course on September 12 and admitted that elementary schools really should teach arithmetic, after all.

The new report called "Curriculum Focal Points for Prekindergarten Through Grade 8 Mathematics" is a back-to-basics victory that rejects the type of math curricula that parents had derided as "fuzzy math" or "rainforest math." The experts preferred such hoity-toity titles as "New New Math," "Connected Math," "Chicago Math," "Core-Plus Math," "Whole Math," "Interactive Math," or "Integrated Math."

Whatever the title, these curricula imbedded the notion that estimates are acceptable in lieu of accurate answers to math problems so long as students feel good about what they are doing and can think up a reason for doing it. Fuzzy curricula were big on discussion, coloring, playing games, and early use of calculators.

The 1989 report (which gives the word "standards" a bad name) flatly opposed drilling students in basic math facts, taught that memorization of math facts was bad, and failed to systematically build from one math concept to another. Children were encouraged to "discover" math on their own, construct their own math language, and flounder around with their own approaches to solving problems.

This silliness is based on the false notion that children can develop a deeper understanding of mathematics when they invent their own methods for performing basic arithmetic calculations.

Despite widespread parental opposition, in October 1999 Bill Clinton's Department of Education officially endorsed ten new math courses, based on the 1989 "standards," for grades K-12, calling them "exemplary" or "promising." Local school districts were urged to adopt one of them, and were baited with federal money inducements.

One of these department-approved "exemplary" courses, "MathLand," directed the children to meet in small groups and invent their own ways to add, subtract, multiply and divide. It's too bad the kids weren't told that wiser adults have already discovered how to do all those basic computations rapidly and accurately.

It wasn't only parents who quickly sized up fuzzy math curricula as subtracting rather than adding to the skills of schoolchildren. On November 18, 1999, more than 200 prestigious mathematicians and scholars, including four Nobel Laureates and two winners of the Fields Medal (the highest math honor), published a full-page ad in the Washington Post criticizing the "exemplary" curricula.

But Clinton's Education Secretary Richard Riley refused to back away from the Department's endorsements and the 1989 "standards" adopted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

With such vague parameters for courses in math, trendy instructors began advancing their political agenda by injecting ethnic studies into math textbooks. Some taught what Diane Ravitch calls "ethnomathematics," the far-out notion that traditional math is too Western-civ and therefore students should be taught in ways that relate to their ancestral culture.

The diversion of math into the teaching of political correctness was illustrated by the "anti-racist multicultural math" curriculum adopted by Newton, Massachusetts. It's no wonder that test scores dropped after this "math" curriculum's top priority became "Respect for Human Differences."

Fortunately, during the Fuzzy Math era, a few students were fortunate enough to have teachers who dared to be heretical. Some 300 public schools adopted Singapore Math and those students are turning in good scores. Homeschoolers are very successful with Singapore Math, too.

The new National Council report tries to finesse its dramatic switch back to memorization by recommending that the curriculum focus on "quick recall" of multiplication and division, the area of two-dimensional shapes, and an understanding of decimals. It takes a pompous expert to avoid admitting that memorization of multiplication tables is the best way to have "quick recall."

Before the 1989 mistake, U.S. students ranked number-one in international mathematics tests. Since then, U.S. students have dropped to fifteenth, far behind the consistently high performance of Singapore and Japan and behind most industrialized countries.

Added to the humiliation of international tests is the appalling percentage of college students who must take remedial math before they can enroll in college courses. That means the taxpayers have been paying twice to teach students the same material.

Another dirty little secret that has finally emerged as front-page news is the small number of college students who graduate even after six years. Graduation rates at 50 four-year public universities are below 20 percent, and below 50 percent at many more universities.

Since it's likely that nearly all these students attended college using financial aid, the obvious conclusion is that the taxpayers are being ripped off by the racket of colleges pretending to teach and students pretending to learn.