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Turnaround In the Math Wars

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In a change of heart, it appears that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the group which has spent the better part of two decades promoting what has become known as "fuzzy math," has done a 180 degree turnaround. Now, once again, they embrace more traditional instruction.

This was reported on the front page of the Wall Street Journal on Tuesday and represents good news for America's ability to compete in world markets.

Proponents of "fuzzy" or constructivist math eschew the idea of teaching math by drilling or by formula. Thus memorization of times tables was discouraged, so much so that the Thomas Fordham Foundation found that only two-dozen states required that students commit multiplication tables to memory. In many school districts, children are no longer taught long division.

Instead, dependency on electronic calculators is promoted and children are taught to solve problems by developing their own methodologies. Often it is encouraged to arrive at those solutions by working in groups.

All this alarmed many parents and particularly came under fire from actual mathematicians. Their concerns were reinforced by sinking test scores and increases in the number of college students needing remedial math courses. Yet until now, the educational establishment has resisted calls to abandon their "progressive" initiatives, even in the face of evidence that they don't work.

I have often been disappointed by what at first seemed like good news not finding its way down to the classroom, thwarted by the educational establishment. Six years ago, the New York Times headlined on page one the rise in test scores of Hispanic children in California. Yet, six years later, despite increasing evidence, many states, including New York, are still abusing immigrant children in bilingual classes that doom many of them to live their lives in a linguistic ghetto.

This is simply because there are too many adults who put their own interests ahead of those of the children. This is not limited to the tens of thousands who work in the bilingual programs in America's schools. It should not be

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forgotten that huge resources were put into defeating the California initiative by the Spanish-language broadcasting industry, particularly Univision.

A similar condition exists in the way we teach reading. A non-partisan, blue-ribbon National Reading Panel was established a decade ago by President Clinton and Congress, which studied the huge volume of research on how best to teach children to read. The panel returned with the recommendation that the most effective methods included the teaching of phonics and the use of direct instruction by teachers, the opposite of the whole language approach. The federal government's Reading First initiative will now only fund those programs that conform to these findings.

Despite warnings that federal funds would be lost, in 2003, New York City's Department of Education mandated one of the most radical implementations of the discredited whole-language approach in all city classrooms. When federal and state officials rejected the application for funding, the city backtracked, but in a minimal way.

A lobby remains of "experts" who depend for their income on millions of dollars in contracts for professional development services in New York City alone. Is it any wonder that when the city's ill-conceived plan came under attack shortly after it was announced, those set to profit so handsomely from it circled the wagons?

Despite all this, I have more faith that the news this week that the turnaround in the math wars will materialize in the form of a return to traditional math instruction. That is because the change comes from those who have been the loudest advocates of "fuzzy math." Which brings us to the question of why the math establishment suddenly seems so level-headed as compared to the reading "experts" and the school administrators still touting bilingualism?

I can only speculate that in math there is an ultimate measure of effectiveness that doesn't exist for reading and language acquisition. That is uniform comparative worldwide testing that clearly compares our results with that of other nations. We don't come out that well in these comparisons. This has implications for our nation's ability to compete in the world economy.

By contrast, countries in the Far East, such as Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong top the list. American schools that have adopted the Singapore math curriculum have begun to show Singapore-like results.

Meanwhile, a Mathematics Advisory Panel appointed by Mr. Bush has begun its work, which is widely expected to debunk "fuzzy math" and all of its implications. I suspect that the action this week by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics is a preemptive strike, designed to lessen the stigma of being blamed for America's sorry performance in math on the international stage — and the resulting decline in our economic stature.

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