



Sunday, February 15, 2004

## Parents hope to change 'fuzzy math'

By Grace Rubenstein  
*Staff Writer*

NORTH ANDOVER -- Add up private tutors, mediocre MCAS scores and children who can't do arithmetic, and that equals serious parent concerns about the elementary math program.

The program, designed by the Cambridge-based company TERC and the National Science Foundation, emphasizes problem-solving skills and real-world applications -- what one father calls "fuzzy math" -- and parents complain that it omits the basics. With the program in its fifth year in North Andover, some children are reaching the high school unable to add, subtract, multiply and divide, parents say. Many are teaching their children arithmetic at home or paying private tutors to fill in the gaps left in school.

School leaders, who say they have heard complaints from teachers, too, agree the system needs to change.

"There's been some very valid criticism brought to us by parents and by teachers," School Committee Chairman Daniel J. Murphy said, "and it's appropriate to evaluate the whole system at this point."

Last spring, 50 percent of fourth-grade students in the district scored at a proficient or advanced level on the MCAS math test. Another 41 percent were scored as needing improvement, and 9 percent failed. That beats the 40 percent of students statewide scoring at the proficient or advanced level, but concerned parents still say it's not good enough for North Andover.

For Edward Maguire, who has a son in first grade at the Atkinson School, the number of weak MCAS scores in town "makes me faint."

"I don't want to blame the teachers and I don't want to blame the program," he said, "but the bottom line is it's had its time. It has shown that it's not working."

Every night, Maguire and his wife work with their son, Grady, for up to an hour on flash cards to practice skills like multiplication and subtraction. The program's real-world applications of math could be "wonderful" if basic arithmetic were included, Maguire said, but if children "can't add, subtract, multiply or divide, it doesn't matter."

Parent William W. Kelly -- who plans to make another bid for School Committee after his narrow loss last year -- said he and his wife hired a high school math teacher to tutor their daughter, a freshman, in arithmetic.

The tutor, whom Kelly would not name, told him she is tutoring seven other students too, he said.

"You expect the School Department to provide a solid curriculum," Kelly said. "You just don't want to dwell in the rote stuff, but you need to have some of it."

He and others question why the program, for example, teaches students to multiply 10 and five by writing the number 10 five times and adding it up.

School officials say the parents' complaints are valid, but they want teachers' guidance before they decide what to change. On Feb. 23, while students are on vacation, the elementary teachers will meet in groups by grade level for an all-day conference on strengths and weaknesses in the district's elementary curricula.

If the teachers name math as a key concern, Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian said, he will spend the next school year researching alternative math programs and testing some of them in particular classrooms. After evaluating the programs and gathering teacher input, a districtwide change would not occur until at least the 2005-2006 school year, he said.

Harutunian said part of the problem could be that there has been no teacher training on the program in the past two to three years, during which time around 25 percent of the elementary teaching staff has turned over. The TERC program has been successful in other districts, he said.

Thomson School parent Sandra J. Gleed said she is willing to give Harutunian a few years to put a better program in place, as long as children get extra support, like the math enrichment activities some parent groups are organizing. She said she saw proof of the problem when she took her Girl Scout troop shopping for donations to a food pantry, and many of the fifth-grade girls couldn't figure out how many jars of baby food

they could buy for \$30.

Gleed said Harutunian's plan to ensure the curriculum is being taught consistently across the district is also important in the meantime, so that all children end up on the same page.

"If we're going to look at other curriculums, I want it to be done and done right," she said, "but I'm not willing to see the next three years wasted, either. ... The teachers are doing the best they can with a curriculum that just has too many holes."

[Next Story: A job not many want anymore](#) 



---

*Copyright© 2003 Eagle-Tribune Publishing. All Rights Reserved. Contact [Online editor](#)*