

What's a Math Educator to Do?

I feel like a schizophrenic. I truly think that the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics (CCSSM) are a disaster. I think that the high-stakes tests based on these standards will stultify the mathematics curriculum for a decade, curtailing any attempts at experimentation and creativity. I think they will take us back to a time when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, i.e., when motivated math students got ahead and weaker students just dropped away, knowing little and content to tell anyone who would listen that they were always bad in math.

They're not the standards I would have written. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was actually on the writing team for CCSSM. Unfortunately they chose to use only the prepositions I wrote—none of the nouns or verbs. I have taken to writing blogs and op-ed pieces criticizing CCSSM and calling for quite radical change. So why do I feel like a schizophrenic? Because I am at the same time working to make the implementation of the CCSSM be as effective as possible!

I don't think that this is hypocrisy. I really don't. These standards, the tests based on them, and the curricula based on those tests based on those standards are going to be with us for a long time. Teachers will be trained in CCSSM both pre- and in-service, and a huge cohort of students will go through the system that is evolving. It will not be possible to be a U.S. mathematics educator—at least for the next decade—and not be involved with the implementation of CCSSM. I care about that generation of kids. I care that they learn as much mathematics as they can and that they learn to use that mathematics as they go on—in school, in careers, as knowledgeable citizens, and in their daily lives.

And so I will work with the assessment consortia. I will sit on advisory boards for curriculum projects. I will write reports to NSF and other funders talking about how to do this “right”, even though in my heart of hearts I wished they'd tear these standards up and start from scratch or, better yet, breathe new life into the 1989 Standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), which were never given a fair chance to succeed. In fact, it is the lesson of the “math wars” that helps to make me as divided as I am. In the 1990s critics of those standards simply threw rocks. The fact that 10+ years of attacks did nothing to help the mathematics education of so many children was not their concern. In their eyes their cause was just and therefore sacrifices had to be made.

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I am not so cavalier. I have strong and fervent beliefs that CCSSM is wrong-headed, and I will say so in public. But I will also work to make the emerging system as positive an experience for teachers and students as possible. And I know I'm not alone. It is always easier to criticize and be cynical. It is harder to roll up one's sleeves and get to work. So I will remain a schizophrenic, work for students and teachers to learn what mathematics they can, and work for the day that our standards come back to their senses.

—Solomon Garfunkel, Executive Director,
Consortium for Mathematics and Its Applications
sol@comap.com



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