

President's Message

Embracing Accountability

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Two decades of increasingly demanding state and local accountability systems, accentuated by the sweeping No Child Left Behind legislation, have focused attention on large-scale tests and student test scores. Being accountable for students' learning is indeed our professional responsibility, but accountability involves more than just these limited indicators. I suggest that as teachers of mathematics and those who support teachers of mathematics, we should not complain about accountability; rather, we should embrace it. We have opportunities and responsibilities to shape the influence of accountability on mathematics learning in at least three ways as we work toward a high-quality mathematics education for all students.

Our Day-to-Day Practice

For many years now, American mathematics curricula have been appropriately labeled as "a mile wide and an inch deep." But in an increasing number of schools, caring and competent teachers have been working to improve their mathematics programs. Guided by NCTM's *Standards* documents, innovative curriculum materials, research about effective practices, and their own experience, these teachers have seen students learn mathematical skills and engage in challenging mathematics. Not only have their best students demonstrated these abilities, but students no one ever thought could learn mathematics have found success.

Yet, just when these teachers are beginning to see the results of their hard work, many of them now feel pressured to sidetrack their effective programs. Under pressure to produce results in the form of student test scores, too many communities and school systems have adopted shallow, quick-fix programs and test-prep tricks. Teachers who recognize the dangers of such Band-Aids nevertheless feel forced by requirements to implement them.

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers is to withstand these pressures and to continue teaching a well-articulated mathematics program. I have seen teachers, schools, and school districts that are standing their ground, as difficult as this may be. They have shown that by teaching a solid, well-balanced, excellent mathematics program, test scores do improve. And this seems to be true even where tests disproportionately assess rote, low-level skills that represent only a small part of a comprehensive mathematics program.

This doesn't mean that we should ignore preparation for tests. Rather, it means that we must find time-efficient, common sense ways to improve students' test-taking skills and test readiness without derailing or diluting a balanced mathematics program.

Our Participation in the Process

Often, states and provinces involve teachers and other mathematics educators in the design and implementation of standards and tests. From within this structure, we can use what we know about teaching and learning mathematics to influence standards

and tests so that they are more likely to support students' learning. In this way, mathematics education professionals

can work to ensure that state standards represent a balanced and well-aligned program of skills, understanding, and problem solving that promotes students' mathematical thinking as outlined in NCTM's *Principles and Standards*. Even where budget crises may prevent the development of ideal assessment measures, active input from knowledgeable educators can shape tests so that they support state standards as closely as possible.

When the call comes for committee nominations, reactions to draft documents, or testimony before state policymakers, it is our responsibility to answer in positive and constructive ways. Depending on where we live, such avenues for input may be well publicized or may require some searching. But if only a few individuals with limited points of view provide information, it will be no surprise when the schools we value head in directions we decry.

Our Advocacy

I believe we should work from within the system whenever possible. I also believe it is our moral imperative as citizens who care about students—as citizens knowledgeable about mathematics, education, and learning—to express opinions about actions that we believe may not be in the best interests of all students. If particular practices tend to place at a disadvantage or disenfranchise any student, we must raise the cry for changing the system where it needs to be changed. When the system is shifting in harmful ways, it is our moral and ethical responsibility to speak up. Many will pay attention to what we say.

The Bottom Line—Changing What We Believe

Our decisions and actions as professional teachers of mathematics, influence students more than any single outside initiative. If we are to be respected as a profession, we must embrace accountability. We must insist on being held accountable for producing results—showing the public that our students are learning challenging mathematics. We must also take action and speak up when students' mathematics learning is at stake. We cannot afford either to complain about an unjust system without working to address its problems or to accept without protest an inadequate system that sacrifices mathematics learning for the sake of raising test scores.

Let's Discuss It Online

Have you found ways to use accountability in support of students' mathematics learning? Do you have a success story about professional mathematics educators who have helped shape their accountability system? Please join me in an online discussion about accountability on Wednesday, August 25, at 2:00 p.m. EDT. Visit www.nctm.org at that time, and share your thoughts and successes.