

President's Message

Seek First to Understand

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In his best seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey states that effective people “seek first to understand.” Understanding, communicating, and working together across communities can help us generate better ways of providing every student with the highest quality mathematics education possible. Students, in particular, benefit when mathematics educators work collaboratively with mathematicians, scientists, policymakers, school administrators, business people, and families of students. Likewise, in their efforts to improve mathematics education, it is crucial that these groups stay connected to those who work with students on a daily basis.

Mathematicians can help *educators* stay focused on mathematical content as we work to improve our mathematics teaching. *Educators* can help *mathematicians* see that students can become proficient in mathematics by using mathematical activities that engage them in solving problems that go beyond memorized procedures. *Mathematics education researchers* can offer insights that help *mathematicians* understand why certain approaches may be instructionally preferable to others that seem more mathematically defensible. *Policymakers and business people* can help *educators* realize the importance of documenting student achievement and can raise awareness about the future that students face. *Families* can give those who are working to improve mathematics education a more complete view of students’ particular needs and challenges.

Building on the commonalities and respecting important differences within these points of view can help us shape a stronger vision for school mathematics. We must reach out within and across our communities if we are going to improve students’ mathematical learning. As we make these connections, the following guidelines may prove useful:

- **Acknowledge** that not everyone within a community thinks the same way. Among mathematicians, there are as many differences of opinion as there are among educators; the same is true among policymakers, parents, and administrators. Discussions about how to improve mathematics teaching inevitably involve more than two sides.
- **Clarify** as you listen, until you understand and can let the other person know that you have heard not only the words but the underlying concerns and ideas. In particular, clarify specialized language that you may use or understand differently from others. Describe with examples rather than labels, especially when those labels may communicate extreme points of view that may or may not represent what you or someone else is trying to say.
- **Suggest** rather than criticize. No program, test, or classroom will ever be perfect, whether it reflects what you recommend or

something different. Focus on constructive suggestions to improve what is being done instead of focusing on errors or shortcomings.

- **Notice differences in communication style.** Building trust among collaborators evolves over time. Some mathematicians and scientists may argue with each other as a routine part of their academic discourse. Some business people and policymakers may want short and direct answers to problems. Some educators may want to broaden discussions to include factors beyond mathematical content. Recognizing such differences in style can help assure that both those sending messages and those receiving them do not become disengaged or offended by someone else’s approach.
- **Consider balance and emphasis,** and avoid advocating absolutes or extremes. What you support may not have to be an all-or-nothing proposition. Likewise, what someone else advocates may not be absolute. Perhaps more important than whether to include a particular topic in the math program, for example, are issues of how to engage students in learning the topic, how students can connect it to other knowledge, and how students will develop the depth of learning necessary to solve problems.

In our work to improve school mathematics, we must understand and respect the voices of mathematicians, educators, and students. To inform and ground our discussions, we must also understand and respect the perspectives of parents, policymakers, and the public at large. Understanding does not mean giving up what we believe; it is not realistic to think that we all can or should agree. Healthy differences of opinion are not only inevitable, but are also valuable, especially when we are committed to learning from each other with an eye to our shared goal of better mathematics for all students.

So let us meet together, talk with each other, listen to each other, and learn from each other. Let us seek to understand as we work side by side. Let us voice our differences constructively, come to consensus where possible, and agree to constructively disagree when necessary. Let us not make the status quo a life sentence for our students because of our inability to communicate. Let us, rather, commit to the goal of constantly improving what we are doing. Understanding each other is where we must begin.

Have you formed collaborations that support improving the way that you teach mathematics? What have you learned about mathematics teaching from someone who has knowledge or a background that is different than yours? How can we overcome barriers that interfere with working across communities? Join me for my last President’s chat, April 11 at 4:00 p.m. ET or submit your comments beforehand by visiting www.nctm.org/news/chat.htm. Ω