

President's Message

Focal Points— Where We Are, and What's Next?

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NCTM's *Curriculum Focal Points for Prekindergarten through Grade 8 Mathematics* has been out for about six months. Mathematics educators have been engaged in varying levels of reform ever since *Sputnik*. And now, the Council's *Curriculum Focal Points* suggests curricular reform. In today's text-message, instant-download culture, immediate results are expected. And we can't wait five or ten years to see changes take hold in classrooms, which is one reason I'd like to share my thoughts about the next steps.

What has happened? The release of *Curriculum Focal Points* precipitated a barrage of media reporting about the Council's work. Some articles wildly misrepresented the Council's intent, whereas others—such as those in *TIME*, the *Washington Post*, and *Education Week*—were much more accurate.

At present, NCTM is working to raise awareness of *Curriculum Focal Points*. The publication has been presented to the National Math Panel, the Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences, the American Mathematical Society's Committee on Education, the Joint Mathematics Meetings of the Mathematical Association of America and the American Mathematical Society, regional meetings of the U.S. Department of Education's Mathematics and Science Partnership projects, and House and Senate staff members on Capitol Hill. We have also met with or plan to meet with at least a dozen states that are considering using *Curriculum Focal Points* to redefine their state expectations at the pre-K–8 levels. In addition, more than 500,000 copies of *Curriculum Focal Points* have been downloaded, and the book is now in its second printing.

What have we found? About one-fourth of the states and many local school districts have decided to use *Curriculum Focal Points* to drive discussions about what's important in pre-K–8 mathematics curricula, and they indicate that they will use the focal points as targets of emphasis within their mathematics framework. This was one major goal of our work; however, the courses of action vary. We are impressed by the careful, reflective analyses that some states and school districts have conducted. At the same time, we worry about states that claim to be surprised by how close their frameworks already are to the focal points. *Curriculum Focal Points* does not recommend tweaking existing frameworks. Rather, it suggests that schools change the way they build their frameworks. It recommends that they start by determining what important mathematics should form the foundation for each grade.

Once the focal points become areas of emphasis for a state or school district's framework, other hard questions will arise.

What should be dropped from the existing curriculum? What should receive less attention? Answering these questions is one essential next step. How can the points of focus be targeted within existing curriculum frameworks? And how can they then affect state assessments, since teachers tend to respond more to assessments than to other elements of change?

Common misconceptions and the reality of reform. Most curricular frameworks have too many topics, expectations, objectives, or required outcomes. NCTM's focal points are areas of emphasis that we recommend for the curriculum of each grade level. State and local school district frameworks need to be built around such areas of emphasis. If discussions result in carefully organized, revised curricula, then it is less important which topics and related understandings and connections are designated for a particular grade level. In short, the selection of what understandings to focus on is yours.

The next issue is one I often mention during focal points sessions. Are the focal points within a grade *the entire curriculum* for that particular grade? Absolutely not. You may decide to establish work with data charts and data analysis as expectations. And understandings of time and money can certainly be included as expectations in the primary grades. These are perfectly appropriate as expectations, but we wouldn't define them as focal points. The purpose of the focal points is to ensure direct attention, or focus, so that what is taught can be covered thoroughly and understood deeply, with continuous engagement in problem solving, reasoning and proof, communication, connections, and related representations. In all candor, using the focal points calls for more than completing the match game of checking off topics in an existing curriculum.

What's next? Should NCTM move its attention from curriculum to instruction? Should we produce something for high school mathematics education? Should we create assessment items linked to *Curriculum Focal Points*? In an e-mail and phone conversation, my close friend John Van de Walle and I debated what to do next. We both thought the Council's next steps should be influential and significant. In fact, John proposed a publication or perhaps a series of publications designed "to show how to effectively create a comprehensive curriculum with focal points." John Van de Walle was a mathematical troubadour. He had an amazing following and a captivating persona. His was a career-long vision of all children deeply understanding mathematics. Tragically, John passed away suddenly in December. It would be my hope to make John's vision a reality. Ω