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 conducting. At the same time, we worry about states that claim to be

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.

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