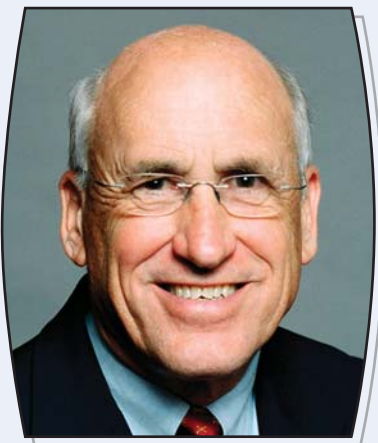


## TEACHING MATHEMATICS—CHALLENGES, POWER, INFLUENCE, AND VALIDATION!



*Francis (Skip) Fennell*

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I was talking recently with a colleague who told me he was knee-deep in tests to grade. I told him I couldn't wait to get back in a classroom. He then had the nerve to question my mental well-being! I said that my days as NCTM president were numbered, and that following the Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City I would resume teaching, writing, and working with teachers. I told him what I say to you now—that my two years as NCTM's president have been wonderful, exhilarating, challenging, frustrating, rewarding, and more. However, comments such as, "Please continue inspiring young future teachers," and, "You are a master teacher and I still try to emulate your passion," call me back. Why? Validation keeps us going.

Teaching mathematics is challenging. I compare its challenges to those faced by marathon runners: the training, the frustration, even the pain, and the ultimate—the finish. Teaching too is a long-distance event. It's more than just today's lesson, since students return tomorrow, the next day, and the next. Teaching is an ongoing cycle of planning, teaching, and assessing. Added to these daily instructional challenges, however, is a dizzying array of before- and after-school meetings and other duties, including sponsoring student groups, advising, and of course professional development.

Like most teachers, you may have entered the profession with some degree of naiveté. You quickly learned things unrelated to mathematics teaching, such as *always* being on the "good side" of particular staff members—yes, that secretary or school custodian can end your career faster than some principals. You also learned to arrive at school early if you wanted copies before the copy machine "hog" took over. But at the same time, you encountered much more than these survival issues. You were faced with

the "stuff"—the paperwork and policies to uphold, the challenges of classroom management, and for far too many, the overemphasis on high-stakes assessments.

Thankfully, your classroom is your sanctuary. This is the part of the long-distance event that you control. Teaching is powerful. Once your students arrive and the lesson starts, that class is all yours. You decide what representations to use, when to use technology, and which problems to solve. You can linger over a particular problem, move quickly through a review activity if you sense that your students are truly "getting it," and assign more or less practice depending on how they responded. All teachers have this power. But there is more—and this is the best part of the run. Your teaching is influential. It shapes and influences what students know today, tomorrow, and in years to come.

As your influence grows as a teacher, validation "events" occur, and these provide the boost that you need in this marathon-like career. The friendly encounters with your students when you are caught shopping, the thank-you notes, and especially those visits from former students who tell you how much you have meant to them and how you have changed their lives for the better—all of these keep you energized. These are your finish-line awards. Savor them all.

By the time you read this, my two-year, marathon term as NCTM president will have ended. Like you, I have been supported, questioned, *and*, yes, validated. I have learned from experiences in settings that ranged from classrooms across the country to the halls of Congress, and I continued to be challenged by NCTM's mission to support teachers in ensuring equitable mathematics learning of the highest quality for all students. Thank you so much for the opportunity to serve you and NCTM.