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Some math myths are in fact true

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A column by Virginia Warfield of the University of Washington suggests that the rising storm of criticism of Washington state K-12 math education is based on myths ("Many math 'truths' are in fact myths," Feb. 9). A careful examination of the facts suggests otherwise.

Supposed myth: Washington state K-12 mathematics instruction is in a disastrous condition.

The truth: K-12 math education in our state is in a deplorable state.

Washington students are coming to college unprepared for college math, with most unable to handle basic algebra. The math remediation rate in college is now 30 percent; 40 percent of high school students can't pass the WASL after two tries; math assessment scores of incoming freshmen have plunged at the UW; tutoring companies are enjoying triple-digit growth, and the move toward reform curricula is leaving students without the ability to do or understand math. Reform advocates like to parade Washington's average scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress as a mark of success. But varying demographics, curricula and application of this exam among states makes it a completely useless tool of comparison.

Supposed myth: Our state math standards are rated F.

The truth: Our state math standards were rated an F and deserve it.

Reform math advocates like to paint the criticism of state math by the Fordham Foundation as the work of a conservative mind-set. In reality, the study that flunked our state standards was directed by an admittedly liberal California mathematician who selected the rest of the committee and was the primary author of the report. It's interesting that true-blue California was given the honors as having the best math standards in the nation.

Supposed myth: The WASL is a bad test.

The truth: The WASL is not only a bad test, but it reinforces all the bad aspects of reform math.

The WASL exam reflects the reform math curricula that Warfield defends: Students are not taught, but asked to discover math for themselves, practice and competence with algorithms (such as long division and use of fractions) are neglected, and calculators are heavily applied. In fact, the WASL is too easy an exam and does not evaluate key ideas and skills needed in college and the real world. The WASL is also an extraordinarily expensive exam, and its development and scoring are done by one company, which also makes some of the leading reform textbooks. The WASL provides no usable information for the improvement of student learning or curriculum. Finally, because the WASL is used only in our state, we can't determine how well our students are doing compared with the rest of the country.

Warfield suggests the math problem will be solved if we just have more patience and put more resources into teacher training and parent education. That is a myth. The truth is that the reform math methods espoused by many in the educational community have made the situation infinitely worse and a generation of students are being lost to this experiment. More money is not the solution; better curricula that model the successes in those nations and states with the most success in math instruction is the only sure approach.

Staying the course, as in international relations, is not always wise, especially when we already have entered the shoals of math failure and our children are the certain victims.

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