

## **MY TURN: State's Math Education Is Failed Experiment**

Has your child ever asked for your help on homework, and when you opened their “Everyday Math” book you found yourself lost in something that didn’t look anything like the math you studied?

And, despite your misgivings, you thought to yourself that if the state of Washington education system recommends this approach, it certainly must be OK.

But then, somewhere in the back of your mind, you remembered reading that almost half the kids weren’t passing the standard 10th-grade math test, and that American high school students couldn’t keep up with students from other countries in math. Did you finally ask yourself: Could something be rotten in Denmark?

Well, unfortunately, some people who really know math are saying that the answer is an unqualified “yes.” “Reform math” just isn’t cutting it, and across the country there is a burgeoning movement to get back to the old-fashioned methods, using internationally recognized texts like the Singapore math series.

How did we get off on such a tangent anyway? Actually, you need look no further than our Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. Terry Bergeson. Dr. Bergeson is a reform activist whose 1982 doctoral dissertation at the University of Washington set out to validate the “constructivist” curricula theories of a progressive and somewhat out-of-the-mainstream social scientist named Robert Carkhuff. Bergeson and Carkhuff have remained connected over the years, and he has reportedly received more than \$1 million in state grants to supply materials and advice to influence Washington state curriculum and student testing, including design of the WASL.

This collaboration seemingly underlies “The New 3Rs; Skills for the 21st Century” (relating, representing, reasoning), a constructivist approach to education that Dr. Bergeson introduced in 1999 during her first term as state schools superintendent. The design team consisted of Dr. Bergeson, her executive assistant Dr. Shirley McCune, assistant superintendent Dr. Andrew Griffen, and Don Benoit and Susan Mackler of Carkhuff Thinking Systems — disciples of Carkhuff. This is the curriculum concept that is currently used throughout Washington state public schools, and is the corresponding basis for WASL testing.

But just what is “constructivism” anyway, and why should anyone be concerned? One encyclopedic Web site says “... constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own ‘rules’ and ‘mental models,’ which we use to make sense of our experiences. Learning, therefore, is simply the process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences.”

The approach is generally heavy on the teaching of “concepts” and light on the teaching of “facts.” For example, reform math texts often omit standard computational methods, standard formulas, and standard math terminology. Some educators who promote a constructivist

approach also tend to dismiss standardized testing and grades, preferring instead to let students play a larger role in judging their own progress.

But it is becoming increasingly clear that the “reform” math of constructivist education is no substitute for fundamental math skills. The Snohomish County Tribune’s September 13th issue reported that in Tacoma, “Newly hired Superintendent Charles Milligan looked at students’ Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) scores and realized “very quickly” that “gaps” in (the) curriculum needed to be filled by traditional math.” In an emergency session last August, the Tacoma school board quickly reinstalled a traditional math curriculum to “supplement” the existing program.

And there is a grass roots effort to get the entire state back to math basics. A group of students, teachers and parents named “Where’s The Math” is writing letters, lobbying the Legislature and educating the public on the problem. Their Web site [www.wheresthemath.com](http://www.wheresthemath.com) has some wonderful short videos that demonstrate just how bad the reform curriculum really is. On January 25, the Seattle Times reported that this outcry finally forced Dr. Bergeson to agree to an independent review of state math standards.

It takes a lot to rile the average citizen into taking some action. But haven’t you just about had enough of these progressive educators experimenting with your children? Isn’t it time to get back to basics? You might consider writing a note or an e-mail to your legislator – reminding him or her that you support proven, traditional education methods – and that you will be voting to put the “constructivists” out of work.

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