

President's Message

Status and the Status Quo— The Politics of Education

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In April 2000, NCTM unveiled a political document, *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*, at its Annual Meeting in Chicago. Most in attendance came to hear about the mathematics content and professional development updates of the original *Standards* document, *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, released in 1989. Few regarded *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* as a political statement about school mathematics and school change. And few recognized the need for NCTM to deepen its political initiatives to better promote the ideals of *Standards*.

The original 1989 *Standards* document was a political document. It talked about the content of mathematics, the pedagogy of mathematics classrooms, and the evaluation of mathematics curricula. The *Standards* suggested ways to improve the status of countless underserved students and changed the status quo in classrooms all across the United States and Canada. Because of this *Standards* document, we continue to question what we believe about ourselves and about others. It has forced us to make educational and political decisions about what we are willing to do to turn the vision of a high-quality mathematics education for every child into a practical set of behaviors. It has reached far beyond the schools into the universities, industry and business, and political institutions.

The *Standards* documents recognize that successful mathematics education programs include the best of traditional and reform-based mathematics education. However, the political debate surrounding reform in mathematics education asks educators to choose one over the other.

The political view of traditional mathematics tends to compartmentalize number concepts, algebra, geometry, and measurement in ways that promote rote learning of the content. Students are left on their own to make sense of the disjointed collection of information and relationships. Often it is assumed that there is something inadequate about the students themselves if they are unsuccessful. Consequently, the status of the students is demeaned. No value is seen in changing the content and how it is presented. Of course, many students are able to make sense of the mathematics when it is organized in a traditional framework. The best of these students are seen as special and talented. Hence, the point of view that mathematics can be understood only by the few is widely accepted. Many proponents of the traditional perspective believe the status quo permits students with natural abilities in mathematics to be successful. They reason that altering the organization of mathematics content—providing opportunities to study about data, probability, and statistics; incorporating technology in ways that might affect the nature and substance of content in the classroom; and integrating mathematics content so that

problem solving and making real-life connections are not isolated in the learning process—is unnecessary.

In contrast, reform-based frameworks assume that all children have the ability to understand mathematics and need to be offered different learning opportunities to increase the likelihood that they will succeed. The responsibility for successful learning is equally shared between teachers and students. The *Standards* suggest that teachers need to be mindful of what research tells us about how children learn mathematics, and incorporate best practice into their teaching repertoires. Concrete objects can help students of all ages visualize information and relationships. Appropriate uses of technology can enrich students' understanding of complex mathematical ideas and relationships. The roles students play in constructing their own learning can be strengthened and exploited to increase the numbers of students who are successful in mathematics classrooms.

The assessment of student performance is perhaps the most highly political aspect of *Standards*-based mathematics programs and curricula. Here the status quo is maintained if we fail to construct assessments that reflect what students have had an opportunity to learn. Often, the assessment is merely a tool to gauge how well students are measuring up to an old standard of performance, the status quo. Of course, assessments are most effectively used as tools to learn about students—what they know and how they learn—and should be an integral part of instruction used to guide teachers and enhance students' learning. As a political tool, tests can be used to advance the efforts of reform mathematics or stall it. Consequently, NCTM must take steps to educate the public about the role of assessments in promoting more and better mathematics teaching and learning.

NCTM wants to help all students improve their mathematics understanding by providing a framework for more and better mathematics. But, the definition of more and better mathematics is a political matter itself. Opponents to reform recognize that the very foundation of school mathematics and mathematics education is in question, and any change to that foundation would change the status quo.

NCTM's vision of school mathematics will only be achieved when the Council supports and maintains an aggressive, politically focused set of programs and initiatives aimed at communicating the benefits to all students of a content-rich, pedagogically sound mathematics curriculum. We must work with other organizations that share our vision of school mathematics, and forge political alliances to maximize our influence on issues such as more governmental support for ongoing and sustained

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professional development for mathematics and science teachers, more time on the job for teachers to improve their practice, and increased salaries. The Council must furnish its affiliates and supporters with information, support, and encouragement to identify and respond forcefully to the foes of a high-quality mathematics education for all students.

As members of the Council, we must take proactive stands to cultivate an understanding of our position among the decision makers in our towns, districts, states and provinces, and our nations. We cannot sit and hope that the benefits of what we profess will be embraced by all who can read the facts, interpret the research, and observe best practice. The status quo in school mathematics benefits too few students. We must demonstrate that all the students we teach, including the so-called “special and talented” students, are better served by the changes we advocate. If we want to institute changes that will help all students gain access to more and better mathematics, then we will have to recognize the political nature of mathematics education reform in our schools. And that’s the way it is.