

How To Respond When Your School Announces a New-New Math Program

by Kevin Killion, May 25, 2000

Also see:

- [Illinois Loop: Math \(our main math page\)](#)
- [Math in Illinois, District-by-District](#)

What do you say? How do you respond when your school tells you that your child's math program is going to be replaced? What is your reaction when the replacements main advantages are a "Tokyo by Night" layout, fuzzy-headed but politically correct examples, oddball algorithms and methods (or no methods at all), and a big emphasis on writing essays and playing games?

Here is a list of some of the claims that your school may be making. For each, a few possible responses are suggested.

School Says...	Response
We wanted a new curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific measure of performance needed improvement? • Were ISAT scores in trouble? • What was broken that needed fixing? • Who wanted this new curriculum? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers? <i>All</i> the teachers? • Only the curriculum director?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did anyone on the school board actually request this? Is the school board aware of the national controversy over these kinds of math curricula? • Was this a public process?
This new math program observes [various trendy educational theories]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the publisher provided any test evidence whatsoever that this proposed program is any better than our existing math program, or other proven texts from other publishers, in teaching kids math? If not, why should our kids be the guinea pigs? • Are you aware that the NCTM "standards" have been subjected to severe criticism from the AMS (American Mathematical Society), IEEE (engineers), numerous legislators and newspapers, many parents organizations and many, many individual teachers, scientists and engineers? • Does this signal a move by our school to fuzzy math? What else comes next? Might you consider even worse curricula such as Everyday Math or Math Trailblazers?
We needed to move to a "standards-based" math program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To which "standards" do you refer when you use the term "standards based?" • If you mean the so-called "standards" written by the NCTM, are you aware that there is no law or regulation requiring you to observe those?
This new program observes the Illinois math standards	The Illinois standards are generally vague and minimal. In its 2005 review of math standards, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation graded Illinois' math standard a "C". (In its two preceding reviews, Illinois math standards were graded "D" and "D". Why the change from a poor of "D" to a mediocre grade of "C"? The Fordham review says that Illinois' most recent revision "does add some specificity to the generally poor Learning Standards". See this page on Illinois standards .)
The lively design of the book helps hold kids' attention.	To the contrary! The never-ending assault of Tokyo-by-night graphics is a powerful <i>distraction</i> . In contrast, the old program is calm, clear and uncluttered.
The "real-world" examples help hold kids' attention.	I doubt that this can be proved. The so-called "real world" examples and "integrated content" are meaningless and irrelevant to kids this age and are almost entirely composed of fortune-cookie throw away factoids. They don't teach anything useful about science, history or literature as they pompously suggest, but they do impede teaching of math.
The new program will be used only used a base ...	Then why not use something solid, clear and proven as a base?
... and we plan to supplement it extensively	Why not make the <i>basics</i> the base, and supplement <i>that</i> with activities and integrated topics? For example, use Saxon Math, and then add on whatever trendy stuff you like that actually seems to produce results.

We're selective -- we only will use <i>parts</i> of this proposed math program	EXACTLY what parts specifically? Which pages of the workbook are free from MTV clutter, bizarre examples, and off-topic material? Which pages teach specific unique methods of doing pen-and-paper math while offering plenty of practice, without algorithmic chop suey or flaky "ways" of doing things?
We just bought it this year, so we already have made the investment	Exactly how much did it cost? Did this require board approval? Did anyone think to ask parents who endured the 2nd grade version for their opinions? Do you want us to solicit donations from parents to buy a decent curriculum? We'd be happy to do that.
It seems to have gone well in the pilot program	In 2nd grade it didn't! Are you talking to parents? We did. We talked to plenty of parents who complained that year! Some 4th graders are bored silly by this new math program. With respect to performance, does the publisher have any specific evidence that the proposed new math program does better than its older series, or better than series from other publishers?
Teachers report good results.	Sometimes teachers acquire a good feeling about new-new programs simply because those kids who do get what's going on are active and chatty about it. Also, it's very easy to observe physical activity and assume that learning is taking place. The problem is that the teacher's own observations are subjective, and that many kids who are lost by new-new math programs do not participate in discussion and do not gain any benefit from the activities.
We found some reference to some other school district somewhere that reported that grades improved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let's see it. (The most empty words used by the educational establishment are "research shows". Call their bluff.) • Ask around anywhere where new-new math programs have been established and see where there are new Kumon, Huntington, Score or Sylvan tutoring centers and "teacher" stores selling workbooks. Uniformly they will tell you that fuzzy new-new math (and whole language in reading) are good for their business. New-new math programs aggravate learning problems so badly that parents are finally pushed over the edge to take independent action. Even more commonly, parents suddenly devote far more time to teaching at home, when they realize their kids are failing with the school's program. • Social researchers always consider something called the "Hawthorne Effect" when you make a change, <i>any</i> kind of change, benefits can happen. (The name refers to a factory in which a new kind of light bulb was tried for a trial period for illuminating the work areas. There was a productivity jump. But when the trial was over, and the old bulbs were re-installed, there was a productivity jump again.)
The publisher has provided these extensive test results.	Remember, the publisher is submitting selected materials to you for the express purpose of selling you on their programs. Research behind fuzzy math programs has been dicey at best: to really understand such research claims, see Mary Damer's article " Is This Math Program Proven? ".
But the research has shown...	Much of what has been called education "research" is actually collections of what other "experts" are saying

about issues. Very little education research consists of the kind of controlled, double-blind, randomly assigned panels that are *de rigeur* in scientific fields. Read more about the phrase "research has shown" on this [page on education research](#).
