

READER REFLECTIONS

In this section, we will share your points of view on teaching mathematics and your responses to anything contained in this journal. We appreciate your interest and value the views of those who write.

In the following article, Nicholas Pyke expresses his views on the mathematics reform in Great Britain.

Lone Study “Disaster” for Maths: The Government’s Numeracy Task Force Has Unveiled the Final Version of Its Rescue Plan

Nicholas Pyke

Letting children work on their own has been a disaster for mathematics teaching, according to the task force charged with devising a national maths strategy. Even now, some children spend four-fifths of a lesson working by themselves, said Professor David Reynolds, chair of the British government’s numeracy task force.

The task force published the final version of its scheme to rescue primary school mathematics, a strategy with whole-class, “interactive” instruction at its core. The £60-million [Can\$144-million] national numeracy strategy will begin in September 1999, one year later than its counterpart literacy strategy. The numeracy program features what Stephen Byers, the school standards minister, described as “tried and tested methods in a modern context.” It includes a daily numeracy hour, a strong emphasis on mental arithmetic and times tables, and a training program for teachers.

Ministers have promised that by the end of a first Labour term in office, three-quarters of all 11 year olds will be reaching level 4 in the national curriculum maths tests. By 2007, says Labour, all pupils will be hitting this target.

“We are clear about what went wrong,” said Professor Reynolds, speaking at the launch. “Methods

of teaching introduced in the 1970s and 1980s had deleterious effects on maths in particular,” he said. “All the research agrees that the one thing that badly affects performance in maths is letting children work on their own.”

The final numeracy document shows few changes from the interim, consultation version previously published. Its recommendations include the following:

- A daily numeracy lesson 45–60 minutes long, depending on pupils’ ages
- Training for every primary maths teacher on effective methods, including live demonstrations
- 300 local numeracy experts to advise schools
- A three-day training course in summer 1999 for headteachers, maths coordinators, and one other teacher from every school, plus a governor
- Intensive support for up to 60 percent of primaries
- Numeracy targets for 2002 to be agreed with each Local Education Authority
- A column to be added to primary league tables that notes the achievements of pupils who do not reach level 4

The money for the numeracy strategy will be announced as part of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review.