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## “Participation trophies” in math education

Steve Bakke  September 28, 2023



America's Founders made education a priority. The Land Ordinance of 1785 and The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 provided for expansion of states across the continent. Territorial land was usually sold into private hands. But when possible, one section in each township was set aside to be given to the state to support local education. Concern for education remains, but opinions and philosophies have changed.

I'm concerned about losing traditional practices such as maintaining challenging curricula, measuring achievement, and maintaining accountability for schools and students. Many traditions seem to have deteriorated in recent decades.

The Washington Free Beacon reports that a Portland, Oregon school district initiative intends to address "racial disparities" and "inequities" in grading. Their concern is that grading is naturally subjective and varies by educator. Under the new system, "zero" grades won't be given, even for cheating or late work. There won't be penalties for "non-academic factors" such as "participation, attendance, effort, attitude, [and] behavior....."

How does that approach prepare students for the real world?

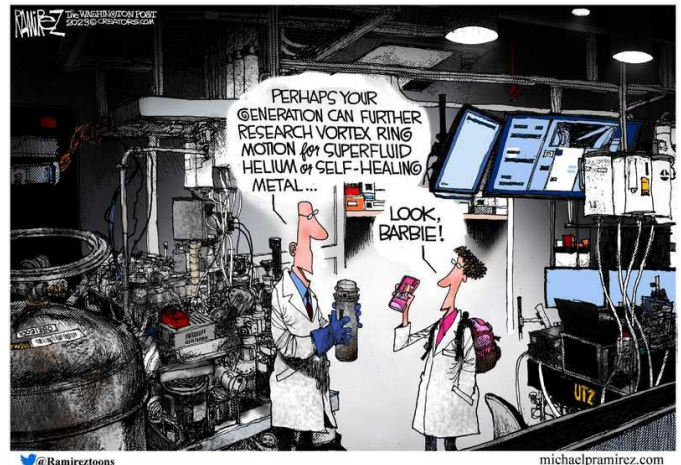
Mathematics has been a major target of puzzling transformational attacks for several decades. Nancy Percy, a Houston Baptist University professor, once expressed concern about a "new math" in "Does mathematics equal western imperialism?" She describes a small but growing theory that the concept of " $2+2=4$ " is a cultural construct, a product of "western imperialism and colonialism."

Oregon's math educator training material advanced the premise that "white supremacy manifests itself in the focus on finding the right answer." A course 'toolkit' disagrees with the mathematical concept that there are always right and wrong answers....."

I must ask, what's wrong with having the right answer? Trivializing the importance of discipline in mathematics will inevitably cripple hopes to explore our solar system, or build a canal, computer, or power grid. It cheapens accounting and engineering careers, . "Close enough" isn't an acceptable concept to apply during brain surgery or manned space exploration.

Princeton math professor Sergiu Klainerman reacted like this: "...mathematics is based on clearly formulated definitions and statements of fact. If it were not so, bridges would collapse, planes would fall from the sky, and bank transactions would be impossible."

In 2021, The Daily Signal presented California's framework for eliminating accelerated math and gifted programs for high-achieving students until at least 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Quoting: "We reject ideas of natural gifts and talents." The reason is based on achieving "equity" because they assert "all students are capable of becoming powerful mathematics learners and users." Even following much push-back, a revised 2023 version still seeks to discourage using advanced math instruction.



Katherine Timpf, writing for the National Review in 2018, provided some insight into the convoluted and confusing reasoning of Professor Paul Ernest at the University of Exeter. His book, *The philosophy of Mathematics Education Today* has a chapter, "The Ethics of Mathematics: Is Mathematics Harmful?" Ernest believes that learning mathematics can cause "collateral damage" to society because it "provides a training in ethics-free thought."

Ernest acknowledges that "mathematics is a widespread force for good." Unfortunately, mathematics involves "detached" and "calculated" thinking which values "rules, abstraction, objectification, impersonality, unfeelingness, dispassionate reason and analysis." He believes this "can be damaging when applied beyond mathematics to social and human issues."

Does math need a "warm, fuzzy, and approximate" version to be considered worthy of study for some of these "experts."

I've always thought of mathematics as a universal language, just like music. They're both based on consistent and inflexible rules of measurements and quantitative relationships. I honestly understood that music rules were acceptable for all philosophies, theologies, and cultures. But then I read Heather MacDonald's review of Hunter College professor Philip Ewell's comments about music. He argues that "the concept of tonal and harmonic hierarchies in music theory is a stand-in for pernicious racial hierarchies."

What was I thinking?

Learning shouldn't be made easy. Reducing the rigor of education and discouraging objective evaluation of the process and its results, are partly to blame for the deteriorating international standing of our education system, particularly in mathematics. Ignoring legitimate differences in outcome won't change reality. And imagining alternative theories for math won't advance social justice.

Symbols of achievement in our education system must not be reduced to the equivalent of "participation trophies."