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## From the Editor

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During the past two months issues of mathematics instruction in the schools of the United States roiled the national newspapers (*The NY Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*) as well as email networks. In October 1999 the US Department of Education endorsed ten K-12 mathematics programs as “exemplary” or “promising.”

The expert panel that made the final decisions did not include active research mathematicians. One of the expert panelists wrote in 1994 that it is time to abandon computational algorithms. “It’s time to recognize that, for many students, real mathematical power...and facility with multidigit, pencil-and-paper algorithms...are mutually exclusive...[C]ontinuing to teach those skills is not only unnecessary but counterproductive and downright dangerous.”

Two hundred mathematicians signed a letter asking that the endorsements be withdrawn. The letter, including the list of signers, was published in newspapers and on the internet. There ensued much discussion, pro and con, on the email networks.

Part of the discussion is an article in *The Washington Post* (10/10/99) by Alfie Kohn [<http://search.washingtonpost.com/up-srv/WPlate/1999-10/10/1311-101099-idx.html>]. “The best kind of teaching takes its cue from the understanding that people are active learners...It’s simply not true that one must learn to read before being able to read for understanding; it makes a lot more sense to learn to read by reading for understanding...Wise educators don’t teach addition and subtraction as prerequisites for pursuing interesting problems; they teach these skills through interesting problems.”

But these discussions have no meaning for many students in Los Angeles and California. *The Los Angeles Times* reports (12/3/99) that the percentage of ill-trained teachers at schools serving minority students is on average six times the level at schools where most students are white. Schools serving third graders whose test scores are lowest have five times the proportion of untrained teachers as schools where children score the highest. Statewide, one in 10 teachers lacks a credential. But the ratio is higher in urban areas such as Los Angeles where one in four teachers is learning on the job. This year three out of every four teachers hired in Los Angeles had yet to obtain a credential.

Patrick Shields of SRI International said, “The state is completely committed to early literacy, and the students scoring the lowest—those who need the most help and are most at risk—are the most likely to have unqualified teachers. At nearly 1400 schools more than one in five teachers are underqualified. More than one million children attend these schools which are dysfunctional.”

The question of which math programs the Department of Education recommends would seem to be irrelevant for many students.