



IT DOESN'T ADD UP:

Why You Need a Better Math Curriculum
and How to Choose It



MIND
EDUCATION®

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THE CURRENT CRISIS IN MATH EDUCATION

A Guide for Administrators

If you're a district administrator grappling with declining math scores, it's time to take a closer look at what's really going wrong. The truth is, the current approach to math education is failing—and not for the reasons you might expect. Too many schools continue to rely on ineffective curricula and instructional methods that don't set students up for success. This guide will help you understand why prioritizing math education is critical and show you how to choose a curriculum that drives real, lasting improvement in student outcomes, in teachers, and fostering students to genuinely understand math concepts.

A PATH FORWARD FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

The Hurdles Standing in the Way of Math Success

One of the biggest challenges in selecting a high-quality math curriculum is shifting from a procedural approach—where students simply memorize steps—to a conceptual understanding that fosters deep mathematical thinking. Many traditional programs emphasize rote learning at the expense of problem-solving and reasoning skills, leaving students without the critical foundation they need to excel. District leaders must prioritize curricula that promote sense-making, encourage mathematical discourse, and build connections between concepts, ensuring students gain the confidence to tackle complex problems.



Change management is another hurdle. Even the most effective curriculum will fall short if teachers are not adequately supported through professional development. Many educators have been trained in outdated methods and need structured opportunities to deepen their own mathematical understanding and instructional skills. Ensuring that teachers receive ongoing, high-quality training will help them effectively implement new curriculum materials and create classrooms where all students can thrive.

Supporting a Variety of Learning Needs is a Must

Additionally, a truly effective math curriculum must be equitable and accessible. Too often, students in under-resourced schools receive less rigorous instruction, widening achievement gaps. Administrators must scrutinize curricula for built-in supports that address a variety of learning needs, including those of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. High-quality materials should provide rich mathematical tasks, multiple entry points for engagement, and strategies that empower all students to succeed.

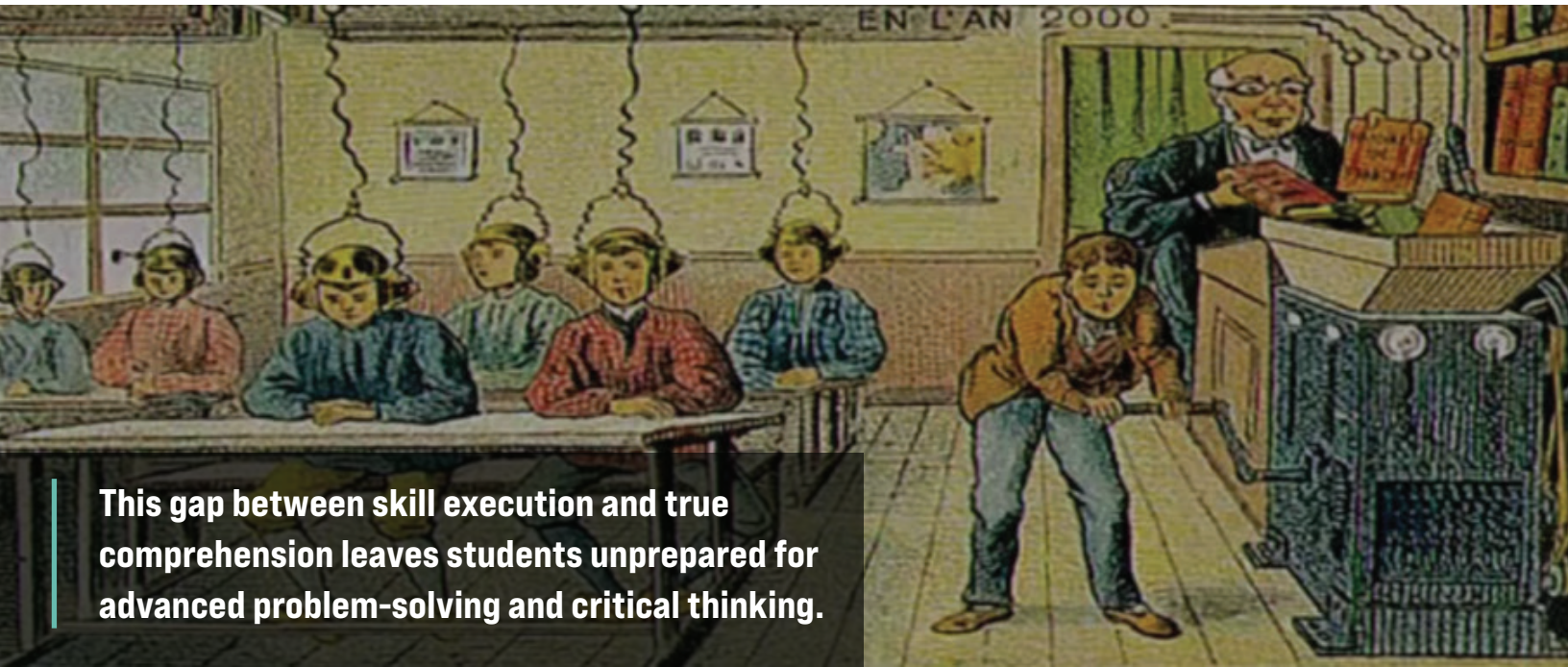
This is an urgent priority for districts nationwide. The stakes are high, but so are the opportunities for meaningful change. By recognizing the economic, societal, and institutional consequences of poor math instruction, you can take decisive action to implement solutions that truly benefit students.

The next step is understanding what makes a math curriculum effective and how to select one that aligns with the needs of students, teachers, and the community—in every sense of the word.

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RETHINKING TRADITIONAL MATH INSTRUCTION



This gap between skill execution and true comprehension leaves students unprepared for advanced problem-solving and critical thinking.

Limitations of Conventional Methods

Traditional math instruction often relies on passive learning and rote memorization, which fail to foster deep conceptual understanding. Many students can perform procedural calculations but struggle to apply mathematical concepts in the “real world.” This gap between skill execution and true comprehension leaves students unprepared for advanced problem-solving and critical thinking.

Moreover, conventional teaching practices often do not align with how students naturally learn. Research suggests that active engagement, [hands-on learning](#), and meaningful problems enhance retention and comprehension. Yet, many schools are still full of math students engaging in repetitive drills and isolated problem sets, rather than meaningful exploration and discussion.

The Need for Innovative Approaches

To reverse declining math achievement, districts must adopt neuroscience strategies that teach math the way the brain learns. This happens when educators shift to be more like coaches, skillfully allowing kids to struggle, make mistakes, and immediately provide formative feedback. Coach-like feedback that sounds like this “What do you think you could have done differently? OK, now try that.”

The brain learns math best with active learning. Active learning involves productive struggle, creative reasoning, formative feedback, student engagement, and mathematical discourse. This means a math class should be full of discussion, experimentation, and trial and error, with teachers guiding the process and challenging students with questions.

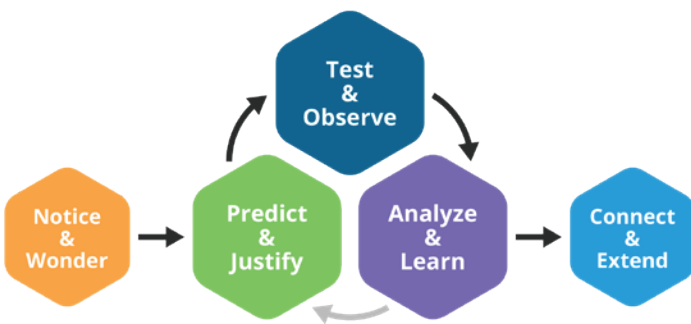


1. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM BUILT ON A FOUNDATION OF NEUROSCIENCE

What It Is

[Recent advances in neuroscience](#) provide important insights into how students' brains process mathematical concepts. A key component of this process is spatial-temporal reasoning, which involves visualizing and manipulating objects in space and time. This cognitive ability plays a fundamental role in mathematical comprehension, enabling students to grasp abstract concepts, recognize patterns, and develop problem-solving skills more effectively.

The Perception-Action Cycle, a core principle in neuroscience, explains how the brain continuously perceives, processes, and interacts with information. When applied to math instruction, this framework suggests that students learn best through active engagement and iterative problem-solving.



Perception-Action Cycle

Traditional teaching methods often rely too heavily on rote memorization and passive learning, which doesn't support this natural learning cycle. In contrast, neuroscience-based instruction fosters deeper understanding, improving retention, problem-solving ability, and long-term success.

Why It's Important

Neuroscience research shows that learning occurs through the continuous creation and refinement of mental structures, known as schemas. Strong schemas help students make connections across mathematical ideas, leading to deeper understanding and adaptability.

Initially, students form basic schemas by associating attributes and features of mathematical concepts. Through repeated exposure, problem-solving, and feedback, these schemas become more refined and interconnected, allowing for efficient processing and problem-solving.

For example, starting with the idea of multiplication as repeated addition eventually grows into seeing it as a way numbers relate to each other, making it useful in different contexts.

This approach aligns with how the brain naturally learns—through active engagement, prediction, action, and feedback. Meaningful feedback refines understanding, strengthening students' ability to recognize patterns and apply knowledge in diverse situations.

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What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

To effectively support students' mathematical development, you should seek curricula that aligns with neuroscience research and these cognitive principles. An effective math program should include:

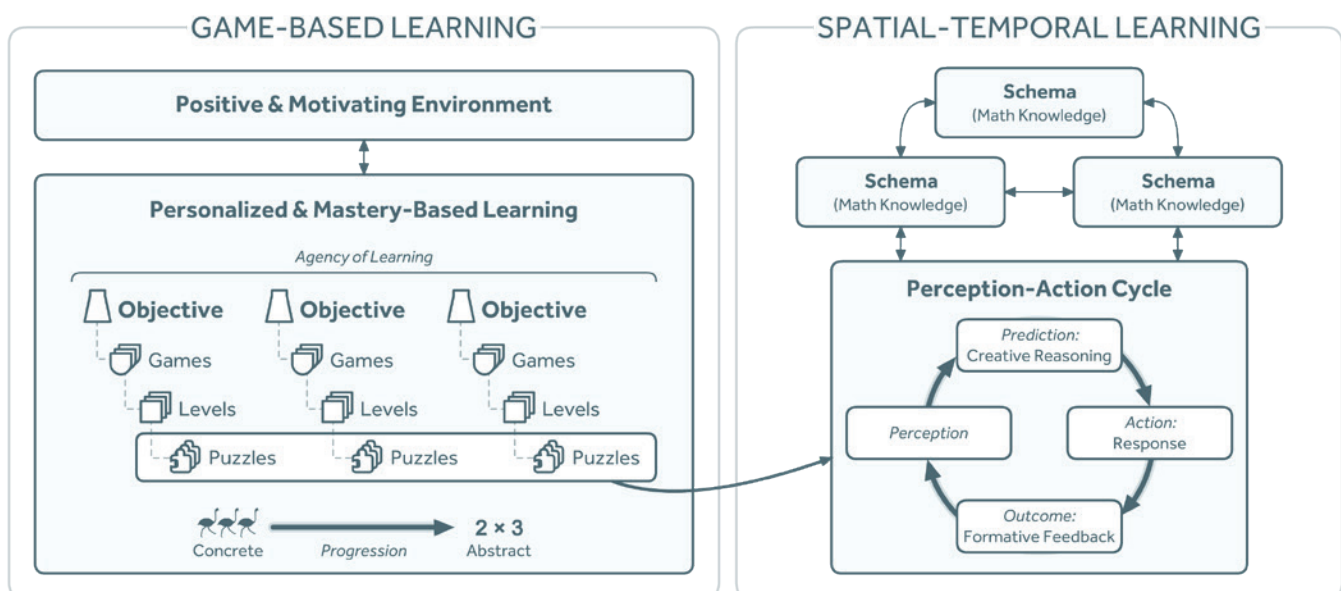
- **Game Based Learning and Spatial - Temporal Learning:** Mathematical concepts should be introduced in a way that allows students to visualize relationships, manipulate objects in space, and develop strong mental models. Visual representations help bridge abstract concepts with concrete understanding
- **Pattern Recognition and Mastery Based Exercises:** Students should engage in tasks that encourage them to identify and extend patterns, fostering cognitive flexibility and adaptive problem-solving skills. Recognizing mathematical structures across different contexts enhances students' ability to generalize and apply their knowledge.

Effective math curricula provide students with opportunities to actively explore mathematical ideas, rather than passively memorize procedures.

- **Builds Schema and Connections using the Perception Action Cycle:** Effective math curricula provide students with opportunities to actively explore mathematical ideas, rather than passively memorize procedures. When students learn math by doing, they build strong schema, make connections, and develop a deeper conceptual understanding.

By choosing a curriculum built on a foundation of neuroscience, districts can provide students with a more effective and engaging math education. Students are better equipped to tackle unfamiliar math problems, recognize patterns, and build conceptual understanding. Without language barriers, the problem is accessible to all students, regardless of skill level or language background.

ST Math.





2. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT'S EFFECTIVE ACROSS ALL STUDENT GROUPS

What It Is

It is vital to ensure that all students, regardless of background or ability, have access to high-quality math instruction. A strong, broad math curriculum recognizes that students come from diverse cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds and offers paths to success for every learner.

Key strategies for achieving this include [culturally responsive teacher](#), [differentiated instruction](#), and math mastery. Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges and incorporates students' backgrounds and experiences into the learning process, making mathematical concepts more relevant and meaningful. Differentiated instruction ensures that students receive support tailored to their individual learning needs, allowing them to progress at their own pace while mastering essential concepts.

Why It's Important

Math achievement gaps persist across different student groups, often reflecting disparities in access to resources and effective instruction. By prioritizing learning experiences that meet all students where they are, educators can address these gaps and provide them with the tools to succeed.

When math instruction is engaging and accessible, students—especially multi-language learners and those below grade level—are more likely to participate and develop confidence in their abilities. A well-designed curriculum fosters an environment where students are deeply involved in problem-solving, often without realizing they are engaging in complex mathematical thinking. When students from all backgrounds develop strong math skills, they gain the foundation needed for future academic and career opportunities.

Differentiated instruction ensures that students receive support tailored to their individual learning needs, allowing them to progress at their own pace while mastering essential concepts.



What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

To support equitable math learning experiences, educators and decision-makers should look for curricula that incorporate:

- **Language-independent - including multi-language learners and students with disabilities:** Instructional materials should include and represent a range of cultures, backgrounds, and real-world applications that resonate with all students.
- **Adaptive Learning Tools that Personalize Instruction:** Effective programs provide scaffolding and support based on individual student needs, ensuring that all learners can engage with mathematical concepts at an appropriate level.

- **Engaging, Interactive Approaches that Encourage Exploration:** Digital manipulatives, visual models, and open-ended problem-solving tasks help students build a deeper understanding of mathematical ideas in a way that feels relevant and accessible.

By adopting a curriculum designed to be effective across all student groups, educators can create learning environments that empower every student to develop mathematical confidence and proficiency. A commitment to expanding opportunity or access in math education ensures that no student is left behind, and all learners are given the opportunity to succeed.

Quick Guide: What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

- **Culturally Responsive Content:** Mathematical concepts should be presented in ways that acknowledge diverse backgrounds and offer real-world relevance.
- **Differentiated Support:** Look for programs that provide scaffolding and adaptive tools to meet students where they are.
- **Active, Engaging Learning:** Hands-on activities, visual models, and open-ended problems make math accessible and enjoyable.
- **Expanding Opportunity or Access:** Ensure all students, regardless of background, have the resources and instructions they need to succeed.



3. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT EMPOWERS EDUCATORS

What It Is

Educators are at the heart of effective math instruction. A curriculum that empowers teachers provides them with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to deliver high-quality math experiences for all students. This includes access to professional development, research-backed instructional strategies, and ongoing support that enhances their teaching practice.

[Building teacher confidence in math instruction is essential](#), particularly for those who may not have a strong background in mathematics. When educators feel equipped with effective strategies—grounded in neuroscience and research-based learning principles—they are better able to create engaging, inclusive, and impactful learning environments for students.

An empowered educator is also one who continuously learns and collaborates. Encouraging teachers to improve math facilitation, with neuroscience backed questions, guiding students to think conceptually fosters a culture of shared growth and innovation.

Why It's Important

The quality of math instruction depends largely on the teacher's ability to present concepts effectively, foster engagement, and support diverse learners. Well-trained educators are better equipped to:

- Implement research-based teaching methods that improve student outcomes.
- Adapt instruction to meet the needs of all students, including those with different learning styles and abilities.
- Instill confidence in students by modeling enthusiasm and a growth mindset in mathematics.

Professional development and collaboration among educators are key drivers of instructional excellence. When teachers engage in continuous learning, they refine their practice and discover new ways to make math instruction more effective and enjoyable. This is especially important for educators who may not see themselves as “math people”—equipping them with the right tools and support ensures they can confidently teach math and inspire their students to succeed.

A well-designed curriculum should make math instruction approachable and accessible.



What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

To empower educators, look for curricula that provide:

- **Embedded Professional Learning Resources and Training:** Effective math programs offer ongoing support, including instructional guides, questions for math discourse, video demonstrations, and access to professional learning communities.
- **Flexible Teaching Approaches:** A strong curriculum allows teachers to adapt instruction to their unique teaching styles and students' needs, whether through whole-group instruction, small-group activities, or personalized learning pathways.
- **Research-Based Strategies and Neuroscience-Informed Teaching Methods:** Programs that incorporate findings from cognitive science help teachers to feel comfortable with teacher-facilitated, student-driven learning.
- **Support for All Educators, Regardless of Math Background:** A well-designed curriculum should make math instruction approachable and accessible, ensuring that even less-experienced teachers feel confident leading high-quality math lessons.

By investing in a curriculum that prioritizes teacher empowerment, schools can ensure that every educator—regardless of experience level—has the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to help students thrive in mathematics.



Types of Teacher Professional Development

Successful, empowering professional development can go beyond traditional conference sessions and includes dynamic, hands-on learning experiences:

In-Person Workshops and Training

- Intensive, structured learning sessions led by experts.
- Often held at schools, districts, or conferences.

Virtual PD and Webinars

- Online sessions covering math pedagogy, strategies, and tools.
- Flexible and accessible for busy educators.

Instructional Coaching and Mentoring

- Ongoing, job-embedded support from experienced educators.
- Focused on classroom implementation and growth.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

- Regular collaboration with colleagues to share best practices.
- Encourages continuous learning and peer support.

Self-Paced Online Courses and Microcredentials

- Allows teachers to learn at their own pace.
- Often includes certification or continuing education credits.

Lesson Study and Collaborative Planning

- Teachers co-plan, observe, and refine lessons together.
- Enhances instructional practices through real-world application.



4. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT CULTIVATES JOY IN MATHEMATICS

What It Is

Math should be more than a subject students must endure—it should be an engaging, dynamic experience that sparks curiosity and excitement. Creating joyful math learning environments shifts students' perceptions from seeing math as difficult or boring to viewing it as an opportunity for exploration and discovery.

Using games, puzzles, and real-world applications, educators can transform math instruction into a hands-on, interactive experience. When students connect with math in a meaningful way, they develop stronger skills and a lasting appreciation for the subject.

Math should be more than a subject students must endure—it should be an engaging, dynamic experience that sparks curiosity and excitement.

Why It's Important

Math should be experienced, not just explained. Students thrive when they are actively engaged in the learning process, encountering mathematical ideas through discovery and problem-solving rather than passive instruction.

Research shows that students who enjoy math are more likely to persist in their learning, develop confidence, and pursue careers in STEM fields. Joyful learning experiences help reduce math anxiety, encouraging students to see challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles

When students associate math with positive emotions, they become more willing to take risks, think creatively, and embrace problem-solving.

A love of math doesn't just improve academic outcomes—it builds lifelong learners who are eager to engage with complex ideas.



What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

To cultivate joy in mathematics, look for curricula that prioritize:

- **Game-Based with Meaningful Problems that Spark Curiosity:** Interactive and visually engaging activities help students build conceptual understanding while making math enjoyable. Games and puzzles encourage exploration and critical thinking, allowing students to engage deeply with mathematical concepts in a stress-free environment.
- **Animated Formative Feedback:** When students try to solve an unfamiliar problem, mistakes are the perfect opportunity for learning. Animated formative feedback offers an intrinsically motivating learning experience that shows students the mathematical consequences of each answer, helping to form and shape their understanding. Students don't just guess at multiple choices, or worse, get a question wrong and wonder why.
- **Encouragement of a Growth Mindset:** A curriculum that fosters joy in mathematics should support students in developing [a growth mindset](#), reinforcing that mistakes are part of learning and that perseverance leads to success. Encouraging curiosity and resilience in problem-solving builds confidence and helps students embrace challenges.
- **Opportunities for Math Discourse and Family Math Nights:** Learning math can be a shared experience that builds communication and teamwork skills. Group problem-solving activities, math discussions, and peer teaching foster a supportive learning community where students feel motivated and inspired by their peers.

By fostering a sense of joy in mathematics, educators can help students develop a growth mindset, confidence in their abilities, and a lifelong appreciation for the beauty and power of math.

Whether through modeling financial literacy, exploring geometry in architecture, or using statistics to analyze sports performance, meaningful applications make math more compelling and accessible.



5. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT PROMOTES MATHEMATICAL DISCOURSE TO MAKE MATH DISCOURSE EASY

What It Is

[Mathematical discourse](#) is the practice of engaging students in meaningful discussions about mathematical concepts, encouraging them to verbalize their thought processes, and collaborate with peers to deepen their understanding. When students explain their reasoning, justify their answers, and listen to different perspectives, they develop stronger mathematical comprehension and communication skills.

Effective mathematical discourse goes beyond simply answering questions; it fosters an environment where students actively discuss problem-solving strategies, challenge each other's ideas, and refine their thinking through dialogue.

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Why It's Important

A curriculum that fosters classroom culture where math discourse is easy equips educators with the right tools and strategies, to facilitate discussions. Guided questions help encourage students to share their observations and wonderings in a no-pressure environment that fosters a positive math culture, free from the anxiety that often plague math classrooms.

Engaging in math discourse can help students develop a variety of important skills, such as:

- Deep conceptual understanding, which enhances learners' understanding of math concepts beyond rote memorization.
- Clarity of thinking, as articulating one's reasoning and problem-solving strategies requires a clear and organized thought process.
- Math discourse also fosters the development of mathematical language, enabling learners to comfortably communicate complex ideas. This shared language is crucial for bridging gaps in knowledge and building upon existing concepts.
- Additionally, by exposing learners to a variety of problem-solving approaches, math discourse encourages the development of different strategies, enriching their analytical toolkit and critical thinking skills.

Math class shouldn't be about right and wrong answers. It should be about facilitating conversations that lead to multiple pathways of problem-solving and foster a deeper conceptual understanding of math.

What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

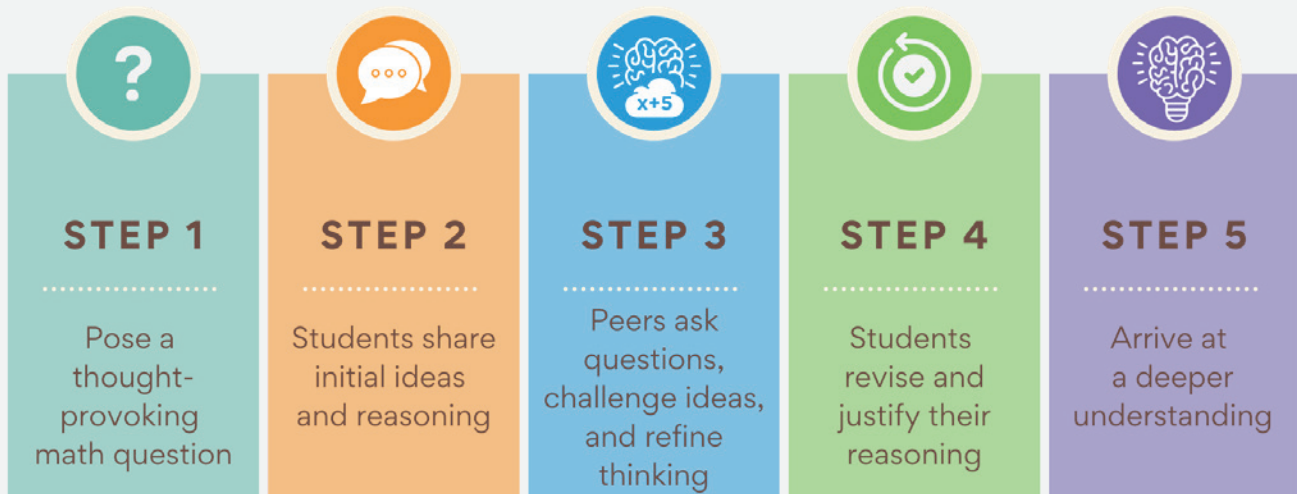
A high-quality math curriculum should actively promote mathematical discourse by incorporating:

- **Opportunities for Structured Discussions and Peer Collaboration:** Look for curricula that provide explicit guidance on facilitating math conversations, encouraging students to explain their thinking and engage in meaningful discussions with classmates.
- **Open-Ended Problems That Require Explanation and Justification:** Tasks should prompt students to articulate their reasoning, justify their answers, and explore multiple solution paths to foster deeper conceptual understanding.
- **Grade-Level, Whole-Class, and Virtual Puzzles with Guided Teacher Questions:** Well-designed math curricula integrate puzzles and problem-solving activities that engage all students, regardless of learning setting or abilities. These tasks should include teacher-guided questioning to prompt discussion and reflection.

By selecting a curriculum that emphasizes mathematical discourse, educators can create a dynamic learning environment where students learn math as they develop essential communication and reasoning skills.

create a dynamic learning environment where students learn math as they develop essential communication and reasoning skills

HOW A MATH DISCUSSION UNFOLDS





6. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT LEVERAGES FORMATIVE FEEDBACK

What It Is

[Formative feedback](#) is the process of providing ongoing, constructive feedback to students, helping them refine their understanding and improve their skills in real time. Unlike [summative assessments](#), which evaluate learning at the end of a unit, formative assessments occur during instruction, allowing students to adjust their thinking and strategies as they learn.

Effective formative feedback involves timely, specific guidance that supports students in recognizing misconceptions, refining problem-solving approaches, and building confidence in their abilities.

Why It's Important

By incorporating formative feedback, a curriculum transforms learning into an interactive and responsive process, empowering students to take ownership of their mathematical growth.

- Develops deeper understanding through adjustments.
- Refines strategies and clarifies misunderstandings.
- Strengthens problem-solving skills.
- Tailors instruction to individual needs.
- Identifies areas for support.
- Encourages a growth mindset.
- Action is critical, and mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning and understanding the “why” behind mathematical concepts.
- Animated formative feedback offers an intrinsically motivating learning experience that shows students the mathematical consequences of each answer.
- Students don't just guess at multiple choices, or get a question wrong and wonder why.



What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

A high-quality math curriculum should incorporate:

- **Built-in Opportunities for Immediate, Actionable Feedback:** Look for curricula that provide real-time insights into student thinking, allowing both students and teachers to make timely adjustments.
- **Tools That Support Adaptive Learning and Self-Assessment:** Resources should include digital or hands-on tools that allow students to track their own progress and receive personalized feedback based on their responses.
- **A Learning Environment Where Mistakes Promote Understanding:** The curriculum should create a safe space where students view errors as learning opportunities, reinforcing the importance of understanding mathematical concepts rather than just finding the right answer.

By prioritizing formative feedback, educators can cultivate a more interactive and responsive classroom where students develop mathematical skills as well as resilience, adaptability, and confidence in their learning journey.

Benefits of Formative Feedback:

- ✓ **Enhances Student Learning:** Students refine their understanding over time.
- ✓ **Encourages Growth Mindset:** Emphasizes improvement, not just grades.
- ✓ **Fosters Collaboration:** Encourages peer-to-peer learning and discussion.
- ✓ **Increases Student Motivation:** Students feel supported in their learning journey.



7. LOOK FOR: CURRICULUM THAT EMBRACES PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE IN LEARNING

What It Is

Productive struggle is the practice of encouraging students to persist through challenging problems rather than seeking immediate answers. It provides opportunities for students to engage deeply with mathematical concepts, grapple with difficulties, and develop problem-solving skills. Importantly, it distinguishes between productive struggle, which fosters learning and growth, and unproductive struggle, which leads to frustration and disengagement.

Why It's Important

A curriculum that embraces productive struggle prepares students for lifelong learning by instilling the resilience and problem-solving abilities needed to navigate complex challenges.

- Develops problem-solving resilience and a growth mindset.
- Builds confidence in tackling difficult tasks.
- Strengthens mathematical reasoning and comprehension.
- Gains a more profound and lasting understanding of mathematical principles.

Productive vs. Unproductive Struggle



PRODUCTIVE

- **Engages with challenging problems:** Students actively wrestle with tough concepts, trying different approaches.
- **Growth through mistakes:** Students make mistakes but learn from them, adjusting their strategies.
- **Perseverance:** Students persist even when the solution isn't immediately obvious, recognizing that effort leads to understanding.
- **Self-reflection:** Students pause to review their work and refine their approach.
- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Students seek out support from peers or teachers and discuss different approaches.



UNPRODUCTIVE

- **Stuck without progress:** Students repeatedly try the same strategy without making headway.
- **Frustration:** Students feel overwhelmed and unable to find a way forward.
- **Lack of self-reflection:** Students do not take time to pause and analyze their approach or mistakes.
- **Isolation:** Students work alone without seeking help or collaborating with others.
- **Lack of growth:** Students fail to learn from mistakes, leading to disengagement.

What to Look for in a Math Curriculum

A high-quality math curriculum should support productive struggle by incorporating:

- **Tasks That Require [Critical Thinking](#) and Multiple Solution Pathways:** Look for curricula that present students with complex problems that encourage exploration, reasoning, and discussion, rather than just repetitive computation.
- **Supports Like Extra Direction, Scaffolding, and Teacher Guidance Without Removing Challenge:** Effective curricula provide just-in-time support to help students navigate difficulties while maintaining the cognitive demand of tasks. Teachers should be equipped with strategies to guide students without giving away answers.
- **Mastery-Based Learning Using Concrete Problems That Become More Abstract:** A strong curriculum gradually transitions students from hands-on, concrete problem-solving experiences to more abstract mathematical reasoning, ensuring deep conceptual understanding at each stage.

By selecting a curriculum that embraces productive struggle, educators can create a learning environment where students develop perseverance, confidence, and a genuine understanding of mathematics.

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A CALL TO ACTION FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

What It Is

The state of math education demands urgent leadership. Declining scores and persistent gaps necessitate a shift to a neuroscience-based, student-centered model.

Transforming math education requires a comprehensive change in teaching, assessment, and support—prioritizing research-backed practices like discourse, feedback, and productive struggle.

District leaders must take decisive action. The path forward is clear:

- **Adopt neuroscience based curricula** that align with how students naturally learn.
- **Use guides that make math discourse easy and empowers** educators with the knowledge and tools they need.
- **Ensure that all students have access to high-quality math instruction and a path to success**, regardless of background.
- **Foster a culture of mathematical joy** that transforms student perceptions and ignites a lifelong appreciation for problem-solving.

The future of math education is in your hands. Will you continue with the status quo, or will you take bold steps to create a lasting impact? The time to act is now. Your students—and the future of your district—depend on it.

MIND Education has been at the forefront of transforming math education for more than 25 years, pioneering the use of neuroscience-based approaches to learning. We believe all students deserve the opportunity to develop a deep and lasting understanding of mathematics. We would love to show you how MIND Education's programs, including the award-winning ST Math, can help your district foster a love of learning and empower students to reach their full potential in math and beyond.






Just play at
stmath.com/play

"I love that ST Math allows our students to develop a conceptual understanding of math topics they are already learning in the classroom. It gives all students an opportunity to problem solve through visuals and challenging puzzles, and helps build perseverance and confidence among our students."

— Tamara Yeghiayan, math coach, Hawthorn School District, California

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