

# Do Social Issues Belong in Math Class?

BY GARY SHAPIRO - Staff Reporter of the Sun

January 24, 2007 URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/47301>

Can social and economic justice issues be integrated into mathematics curricula?

Radical Math, Long Island University, and Math for America, a nonprofit founded by a Wall Street titan, James Simons, who is president of Renaissance Technologies, are sponsoring such a conference in April to explore such issues called "Creating Balance in an Unjust World."

The conference will feature both a Harvard-trained civil rights leader named Bob Moses and a former Weather Underground member turned educator, Cathlyn Wilkerson, whose father owned the West 11th Street townhouse where she and Kathy Boudin survived a 1970 explosion of a bomb intended for others.

A research professor of education at New York University, Diane Ravitch, believes combining math and social justice is ill-advised. She said students may learn the political opinions without learning the math. Ms. Ravitch said too much of combining social justice and mathematics was propagandizing and introducing politically partisan positions into the teaching of mathematics. "It doesn't belong in the math classroom. Leave that for social studies," she said.

A professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Eric Gutstein replied, "Where is the presumption that exposing youth to real questions of social justice in their world is either ideological or propagandistic?"

The communications director for one of the sponsors, Math for America, Lee Umphrey, said the group had contributed a small amount of money to the conference more in support of one of their fellows than of the content of the conference. He said Math for America supports the idea that everybody should have access to quality math.

That organization, whose board includes a former director of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton and a former managing director of Salomon Brothers, has a mission of improving math education in public schools.

A professor at the Courant Institute at New York University, Sylvain Cappell, cautioned that combining social justice and math elided a reasonable concern with a potentially very damaging one. He said there was legitimate concern about society providing disadvantaged children with a full opportunity to get high-quality mathematics training. But he said the substitution of teaching of concrete mathematical skills with ideology threatens those very children.

Mr. Gutstein has found that youth in Chicago public school were often disengaged and did not learn mathematics — "high-quality or otherwise." A high school teacher and co-organizer of the conference, Jonathan Osler, said studying issues relevant to students' lives is one way of engaging them in the mathematics material.

An advocate for mathematics education, Elizabeth Carson, said student engagement is only the beginning of the process of effectively teaching, not the end or goal.

Mr. Gutstein said the purpose of schooling was to create opportunities for young people to simultaneously develop academic competencies and to understand real issues in their world.

Mr. Cappell said that in combining social justice and mathematics, the math might get short shrift. Mr. Gutstein turned the question around by saying that when a social studies teacher puts a graph on the board and takes the time to explain the mathematics involved, few would say the teacher was giving short shrift to social studies.

Ms. Ravitch, said one of the things children learn in mathematics is how to review evidence and come at questions with a nonpartisan, dispassionate perspective.

Ms. Ravitch said it was better if children were free to reach their own opinions and politics. Mr. Gutstein again responded, "Where is the presumption that we are substituting students views with our own?" He said students in his classroom consider multiple perspectives and make up their own minds and have to back up their opinions with mathematical evidence.

Messrs. Osler and Gutstein acknowledged that it would take much work balance math and social justice in an effective way.

Ms. Ravitch was less sanguine. "What they really need is to work on is teaching mathematics and equipping students for careers in the 21st century — that would be the most radical thing of all."

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