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**Dropouts On The Rise In Los Angeles Schools... Many Blame New Graduation Requirements
And An Unprepared Math Teaching Structure For Math**

By Patricia Hawke

In 2003, the Los Angeles schools implemented a new policy of graduation requirements. The

intention was to graduate Los Angeles schools students that were better-educated and groomed for college and high-level jobs. Requirements included graduates to pass one year of algebra and one of geometry, or equivalent coursework.

Though the intention was good and the Los Angeles schools policy should work in theory, the reality is giving a much different and more dismal picture. Los Angeles schools students are unprepared to meet the new demands and are failing algebra by the thousands. Coursework that used to differentiate a college-bound student from those planning to attend technical schools or directly enter the workforce, algebra is now the cause of many Los Angeles schools students giving up and dropping out.

According to Los Angeles schools Superintendent Roy Romer, algebra is now the reason for more student dropouts than any other subject. The frustration of consistently failing algebra gives a sense of hopelessness. More and more students are giving up the hope of a high school diploma from the Los Angeles schools as futile. Some have even thought of committing suicide — all because of a mathematics requirement, and it will get worse before it gets better!

In the fall of 2004, 48,000 Los Angeles schools students in the ninth grade took Beginning Algebra. Of this group, 44 percent failed and seven percent received a grade of D, totaling 29,000 Los Angeles schools students either failing or just barely passing. Of those students who repeated the class in the spring, almost three-fourths failed again.

The failures and near failures, especially for students who had to repeat the class, has left many Los Angeles schools students discouraged and teachers frustrated.

One Los Angeles schools algebra teacher said that he failed 90 percent of his students, but seemed to blame the children for the failure. He noted that many students ignored their homework, rarely studied for tests, and often skipped his class. My question is this: Are the students lazy and do not care, as

depicted by this teacher — or are they being taught algebra in a manner they cannot understand and have just given up, possibly long before this teacher was assigned to them?

I know from experience that not all mathematics teachers should be teaching math. I took basic mathematics coursework all through school, and then decided to attend college as an adult. This meant that I had to take a lot of extra mathematics classes to catch up to the other students' skill level. In one class, I absolutely could not understand the instructor or the math he was teaching, which thoroughly confused me. In middle school, my math teacher told me I should have been taking advanced math, because it came so easy to me. Finally, I spoke to the college instructor after class, asking if he could explain it to me differently. His response, "If you can't get it here, hire a tutor." Later, in my eighth college math course of Inferential Statistics, I told my professor, who had a Ph.D. in statistics, about the incident. He said that anyone, who cannot explain mathematics at least five different ways, should not be teaching the course at any educational level.

Apparently, Los Angeles Schools Superintendent Romer agrees with my professor. He believes the

fault is in the cumulative failure of the ability to teach mathematics adequately in the public school system.

With the increased mathematics requirements, there is a shortage of credentialed teachers in the Los Angeles schools at all levels — meaning that teachers are certified in their subject or had the subject as their major or minor in college. Los Angeles schools high schools have 20 percent of their math teachers who lack these credentials. Even the state has problems with 40 percent of all eighth grade teachers teaching outside of their field of expertise.

Many Los Angeles schools students are beginning algebra who cannot add fractions or convert percentages to decimals, and they do not know their multiplication tables. Algebra teachers cannot provide a review of basic math, since the Los Angeles schools mandate they teach at a rapid pace. Additionally, many students repeating algebra are assigned to the same teachers, from whom they previously did not learn.

Now, the Los Angeles schools have raised the graduation requirements again, before making the prior policy a success. By 2016, Los Angeles schools graduates, who are now in the second grade, will be required to meet the entry requirements for the University of California — whether they plan to attend college or not. This means that the 2016 graduates must pass a third year of advanced mathematics (such as Algebra II) and four years of English.

Knowing simple algebra means the difference between a menial job at near-to-minimum wage and a high-level career. Even blue-collar apprenticeship programs, such as electricians and plumbers, now require higher math skills to calculate needed materials. It is obvious that the skills are needed, so the solution for the Los Angeles schools is not a new policy that is more stringent than the first.

With some algebra being introduced now in kindergarten, the Los Angeles schools from elementary through high school must be equipped to appropriately teach it and motivate students to learn it. The "failure to graduate" threat only produces a higher dropout rate for the Los Angeles schools. The

solution is credentialed teachers with a slower teaching pace and remedial math classes for students prior to repeating algebra.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more information on Los Angeles schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/California/Los–Angeles/index.html>

10 Tips for Better Grades in Math

By Dr. Kempton Smith

Pass these on to your high school math student:

1. Don't just aim for 70%. Aim high and shoot for 100%.
2. When doing your math homework, be neat. It does make a difference.
3. It's not just the answer that counts in math. Much of your grade is based on the intermediate steps in getting to the answer. So show all your work. Your objective should be to convince your teacher that you know how to do the problem.
4. It is important to read over the material in your math text book. Don't just focus on your homework problems.
5. Take notes from lectures, writing them neatly. When you study them, check points you need to review.
6. If you don't understand something, ask your teacher as soon as you can.
6. Watch for summaries within and at the end of assigned chapters.
7. Look for bold face and italic copy. They signify important points to remember.
8. If your homework assignments were just the even numbered questions, then do some of the others in reviewing for a test.
9. Keep up with your class on a daily basis. Try hard not to get behind.
10. Don't take the attitude that you aren't good in math. Have a positive attitude. Think, "I can do my math and I can get a good grade in math."

Dr. Kempton Smith provides math tutoring services for high school students by email. For more information and tips for getting better math grades, visit his web site

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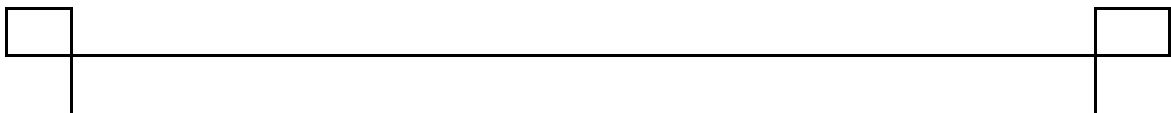
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