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Staff room

Maths Year 2000 – A new government initiative

by Julia Hawkins



Back in March the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) invited businesses, educationalists (including our very own Millennium Mathematics Project) and the media to a conference in London to introduce their strategies for the Maths Year 2000, which will begin in January and run throughout next year.

So what is Maths Year 2000? The DfEE bill it as a drive to engage teachers, parents, pupils and business in seeing the importance of maths in daily life and the life of the economy. The initiative is designed to underpin the Government's £55 million National Numeracy Strategy, and it is clearly being modelled on this year's National Year of Reading.

The National Numeracy Strategy is aimed at the teaching of maths in primary schools, with a strong emphasis on traditional whole-class teaching methods and on the importance of children learning mental arithmetic skills and the times-tables. In fact, this led to some nervousness among the speakers, who included Tony Blair and David Blunkett, the Education and Employment Secretary. Perhaps our political leaders feared an embarrassing moment if they were to be confronted off-the-cuff with a question such as "what is 7×8 ?"

However, one of the purposes of the conference was to gather other ideas on projects for the year, and it is planned that Maths Year 2000 will include really nationwide maths and numeracy initiatives for the whole population, as well as basic numeracy for primary schoolchildren. Some illustrations of the uses of numeracy in daily life – which show how we all use maths without really thinking about it – that surfaced during the conference discussions were things such as dealing with exchange rates when you go on holiday, calorie counting and cooking (weights and measures in recipes)!

On the other hand, one of the concerns that several of the conference participants voiced was that in their initial information on the Year the DfEE seemed to be concentrating exclusively on arithmetic and ignoring the wide and exciting impact of other aspects of mathematics and its applications to everyday life. With luck this point will have been taken on board and will shape the Government's approach: we'll watch with interest to see!

The conference was chaired by Carol Vorderman, who seems to have become the nation's Face of Maths. Vorderman's enthusiasm for numbers and numeracy were infectious, and her genuine and passionate belief that numeracy is a core skill without which no child can be adequately prepared for life in the modern world

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was clearly communicated. (Moreover, the image of maths can't help but benefit from having a spokeswoman – for a change, in what is often perceived as an overly male-dominated subject – who is confident, attractive and has quite such a natty line in very chic leather trousers!)

As she pointed out, recent research has shown that mathematical skills hugely increase your employability and likely salary (see Maths adds up in this issue) – in other words (and she should know!), being numerate makes you money.

The Maths Year 2000 initiative has an important role to play in raising the profile of maths, too often seen as a boring and nerdy subject. Tony Blair referred in his conference speech to the vital place that maths skills have in ensuring the future economic success of Britain. The UK is far behind its economic rivals in standards of numeracy among both children and adults, and clearly we need strategies to confront this problem. As David Blunkett (who proudly announced that his own son had studied and hugely enjoyed A-Level Maths) explained:

Dealing with figures should be just as important as the ability to read, yet maths is sometime the poor relation. ...Maths Year 2000 will give a national focus to our drive to raise numeracy standards in this country. Together we can help people of all ages to develop the maths skills they need. Maths Year 2000 is designed to support schools, parents and businesses in making maths relevant, accessible and enjoyable.

Let's hope it succeeds!

For more information on the National Numeracy Strategy, and a brief news item on the Maths Year 2000, see the DfEEs website at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk>



Plus is part of the family of activities in the Millennium Mathematics Project, which also includes the NRICH and MOTIVATE sites.