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A Real Class Act For School Teachers

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One of the principal complaints about professional courses and degrees is that they are long on methods and short on content. As a result, many (if not most) education majors and professional teachers hold their own degrees in contempt.

There is one very bright spot, though, on an otherwise dull professional education spectrum. The University of Vermont is offering a truly introductory course in higher mathematics to elementary school teachers, and it is getting very high grades. Twenty-two Vermont teachers are in the third year of an MS degree program called Vermont Mathematics Initiative (VMI).

Higher math for kindergarten teachers? Sure thing, and here is the rationale for it as it appeared in a recent press article. "The premise of VMI, founded in 1999, is that to teach math well, the instructor has to be well-grounded in the subject - a grounding that many primary-grade teachers, generalists responsible for everything from language arts to science, do not have. That means exposing them to 'serious mathematics' - number theory, algebra, geometry, probability, trigonometry and the daunting capstone, calculus. 'Why should a first-grade teacher know anything about higher mathematics? For the same reason that someone teaching beginning readers should be able to read, enjoy and understand literature far more advanced than what's being taught. What's more,' said Ken Gross, a UVM mathematics professor and a VMI founder, 'national mathematics standards adopted in the past 20 years require teachers in most grades to teach math across a range of subject areas in which they have not been trained. If you don't do it right at the elementary level,' Gross said of math instruction, 'then it's remediation all the way up through high school.'"

UVM math incentive-for-teachers program has real promise. Elementary school teachers come out of the program with serious understanding, usually for the first time, of higher math. Where teachers have taken this course, math skills of their elementary students have risen. The course is expensive, though. Expensive or not, it is worth it. We commend UVM for putting it together and the teachers with the vision to take it, and we highly recommend that school boards mandate the program and pay for it. The course is an investment in the lives of our students that will pay off.

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