

illinoisloop.org

Your guide to understanding education in Illinois

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Statement

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I'm Kevin Killion. I hold a degree in mathematics, I've had a long career in mathematical applications in marketing, I've written several commercial statistical analysis products, and I operate a successful business in market and media analytics.

I became involved with math reform when I observed the difficulties my own son was facing with math. Today I serve as director of the Illinois Loop, a 12-year-old organization of parents, teachers, school board members and others. Our illinoisloop.org website is a valuable source about what is going on in schools, and our has logged over 600,000 visitors.

First, a note on terminology:

Too often, the words "standards-based" are wielded as a weapon. Calling one category of math programs "standards-based" is a ploy to tarnish other programs as somehow rudderless and adrift.

I have here my beloved *American College Dictionary*. The word "standard" has 19 definitions.

Similarly, there is no single "standard" for math.

Another weapon is to blame lousy math performance on intractable, dusty old methods. Schools are urged to “*embrace change*” and teachers are exhorted to be “*agents of change.*”

The reality couldn't be any more starkly different¹. Everything *has already* changed.

On our Illinois Loop website, we provide² extensive information about how math is taught in Illinois school districts, from Addison to Zion. This resource is well-used by parents in tracking what districts are doing. Here's what we've found ...

In Chicago, some 290 schools use progressivist, constructivist math programs in early grades. On the flip side, we have been able to identify only 5 -- count 'em -- 5 conventional CPS schools that use practice-and-mastery math programs, plus another 5 schools that are charters offering Saxon Math.

Now the suburbs.

The Illinois Loop has collected info on the math programs used in 118 suburban K-8 districts in five collar counties.³ We find that progressivist, constructivist products are the math foundation in 77 percent of those districts⁴!

¹ Dr. Huntington Lyman of the University of Virginia writes (January 11, 2003), "I have worked in elementary schools and high schools over past twelve years without seeing much 'drill and kill,' memorization of decontextualized facts, or pedagogical emphasis on standardized tests. I have never actually seen a classroom with desks bolted to the floor, and very few where the desks are in rows."

Of course, the same change is also evident in schools of education. In a 2001 study, Lance Izumi and Gwynne Coburn explored them and found that they and their assigned textbooks overwhelmingly favored constructivist and “student-centered” methods. (Facing the Classroom Challenge: Teacher Quality and Teacher Training by Lance T. Izumi with K. Gwynne Coburn, Pacific Research Institute, 2001.)

² <http://www.illinoisloop.org/mathdist.html>

³ We continue to seek information on 91 additional suburban districts.

⁴ Even that is conservative, giving the benefit of a doubt to tightrope-walking math choices made in a number of districts.

But even that only hints at the severity of the problem. On the North Shore, or in Lake County, it's almost impossible to find *any* schools with *anything* but constructivist math. And across the area, we identified only 6 -- 6! -- districts -- out of 118 -- that make use of those math programs most recommended by practice-and-mastery reformers, such as Singapore Math or Saxon Math. So much for the argument that parents in the suburbs already have the schools they want⁵!

Here's a twist: We've all heard of the "dance of the lemons." Well, there is also the "Dance of the Math Lemons" performed by districts unhappy with their math programs. Example: District 39 in Wilmette dumps *Math Trailblazers* and picks up *Everyday Math*, even while District 109 in Deerfield drops *Everyday Math* to take a chance on *Math Trailblazers*. Like Lois Lane who couldn't see the truth staring her in the face, these districts stick with constructivist math and merely substitute one program for another.

We're sure not seeing any "agents for change" there! These districts are firmly mired down with a philosophy they refuse to abandon.

In the course of our work at the Illinois Loop, we receive hundreds of messages from parents. Many of them are concerned about constructivist math programs in their schools, and what these programs are doing to their kids.

I'll close by reading just a few snips of what parents are saying. I implore you to listen to the passion and the concern expressed:

- A Glencoe Mom says, **"the [math] problems are bad and getting worse"**
- A Skokie math teacher tells us, **" this series has been a dismal failure in teaching math."**

⁵ The irony here in Illinois is: If you want any options at all, *you have to move to Chicago!* And it's not just about math: You want a classical school? There are four in Chicago, none in the 'burbs. You love reading about Core Knowledge? There are 7 Core Knowledge schools in Chicago, none anywhere in the suburbs. Or you dream of some other approach for your own child? Well, there are 86 charter and magnet schools in the city, but draconian state laws here in Illinois have limited charters in the suburbs to just one.

- A Homewood parent says the math program has the **“most confusing, ridiculous methods I have ever seen. Can't believe parents are accepting this...how sad for their children.”**
- A Glenview couple writes that the math program there “stinks.”
- A Downers Grove parent wrote to us, **“It is beyond belief that so many can be upset at the situation and yet be paralyzed.”**
- A Hinsdale parent told us, “more than 40% of parents pay tutors up to \$50/ hour to teach their kids properly.”
- A Naperville⁶ Mom fears that when her daughter “finishes in this school system, she will be well experienced in making Arts and Crafts but she will lack the ability to make change!”
- A parent laments that as a result of the math program in her Lake Forest school **“you can't get your kid into the Kumon classes around here! When will they learn?”**
- A Crystal Lake parent wrote to us, **“everyone I have talked to thinks this program is terrible and their kids are struggling.”**
- A Batavia couple, **“This trend needs to be stopped now before we have a complete train wreck”**
- A Plainfield parent says, **“I think it's the most absurd form of education that I have ever seen.”**
- A Yorkville Mom said, **“Help! How can I save our children from this blight?”**

Members of the Math Panel, thank you for your concern.

⁶ Naperville has *nine* Kumon centers within a short drive!

Appendix A

Snapshots of Constructivist Math in Illinois

Palatine

Patt Heise ... has 175 students at her Kumon Center in Palatine. "What I'm seeing is ... I have a lot of kids in 5th, 6th and 7th grades who can't add without a calculator. They don't have a number sense."

Wheeling

The Daily Herald reports that after the adoption of Connected Math "a rift has developed between some parents and Wheeling Township elementary school officials".

Arlington Heights

Local news reports "Some parents said their children weren't memorizing math tables or mastering addition, subtraction, multiplication and division" and mentions parents hiring tutors to compensate for what their kids weren't getting in school.

The Chicago Tribune reported on a PTA president saying "she was horrified to observe math students leapfrogging around the room. "The cutting edge is not necessarily the place to be in education," said [this woman], who pays \$150 each month to enroll her children in a private math program that focuses on drill exercises."

Glenview

A mother writes to the Illinois Loop: "My husband and I thought the [mat program] stunk. [Our daughter] didn't learn anything very well. ... My husband and I had her tested and the real scores indicated that she didn't have any mastery or quickness she was going to need to succeed... We have now enrolled her at our local tutoring center and her mastery and quickness have gotten better in a hurry."

Northfield

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "Unfortunately the number of students tutored in math outside of school seemed to be increasing at an alarming rate and across all achievement levels ... and ... anecdotal evidence strongly suggested that there were gaps in math education that created a need for tutoring to insure students' success in high school"

Glencoe

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "I live in Glencoe and the education problems are bad and getting worse. ... The [math] program is full of games and real world discussions and extremely weak with basics, computational skills, and clear, concise examples."

Wilmette

A survey conducted and reported by the district itself raises alarm bells: The survey found that 47.4% -- almost half! -- of parent respondents disagreed with the statement, "I feel that the current math materials are appropriate for my child."

Schaumburg

The district offers a stew of hard core constructivist math. Not coincidentally, the local Catholic school, which uses a practice-and-mastery math program, is one of the largest schools in the Archdiocese.

Morton Grove

The superintendent announces a new math program, saying it "places more emphasis on problem solving rather than computational skills." The subsequent ISAT test shows fewer than half of the students met state standards.

Skokie

A math teacher writes to the Illinois Loop about the program in her school: "In my opinion, this series has been a dismal failure in teaching math."

Homewood

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "Homewood District 153 hosted a "parent Math Night" ... However, a significant number of parents voiced strong concerns. I believe the criticism caught the district administrator off-guard. The battle lines are drawing and I fear a fight looms over the horizon. "

Another parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "What is going on????? My daughter's friend (5th grade) was showing her how she was learning to multiply. She called it the lattice method. The poor girl did not understand what she was doing and it was the most confusing, ridiculous "method" I have ever seen. Can't believe parents are accepting this...how sad for their children."

Downers Grove

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "I am very concerned for [my child's] education. Having read a great deal ... and communicated with parents and children in the program who are frustrated, I would like to do something. It is beyond belief that so many can be upset at the situation and yet be paralyzed."

Hinsdale

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "I just found your web site! I think you are doing a great service for the education of the kids and I applaud you. My kids go to Illinois District 181 (Hinsdale) ... more than 40% of parents pay tutors up to \$50/ hour to teach their kids properly... "

Naperville

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "[My child's] grades in math are mostly A's, but I feel her working knowledge in this subject is shockingly below this grade level. There seems to be a strong emphasis on art and the creative aspects of their education but the rudimentary, core subjects ... are sorely lacking. I sometimes feel that when she finishes in this school system, she will be well experienced in making "Arts and Crafts" but she will lack the ability to make change!"

Emmons

The "Parent/Student Handbook" says, "Repetitive and rote learning activities such as math facts drill, spelling words, and memorization of key facts are done at home."

Lake Villa

After eight years of constructivist math, the district concludes, "Second Grade ... knowledge and use of numbers is an area for needed improvement. ... Third Grade... weakness in knowledge and use of numbers."

Lake Forest

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "[Lake Forest] uses [constructivist math] in grades K-6 and as a result, you can't get your kid into the Kumon classes around here! When will they learn?"

Libertyville

Pioneer Press reports, "Chuck and Sandy Wisniewski, whose daughter is a fifth-grader at Libertyville Elementary District 70's Rockland School, have had similar problems [involving mastery of basic math skills]. The Wisniewskis said their daughter and son have both experienced difficulties with math. The Wisniewskis ... consider the culprit is the new math program ... 'Our daughter and our son have continually struggled with this program,' the Wisniewskis wrote in a letter to the district."

Vernon Hills

Pioneer Press reports, "Monica Feld of Vernon Hills said her child, a student in Hawthorn Elementary District 73, has been seeing a math tutor for two years because the ... program being used in the district fails to teach the basics. Around 40 people attended a meeting of Concerned Parents for Quality Education last week to discuss these and other concerns about a math program which some say is inadequate in teaching children about math. ... After talking to around 80 parents who were concerned or confused about the math program, [two mothers] decided to form Concerned Parents for Quality Education to help give parents a voice about this and other issues. ... A standing-room-only crowd filled a room at the Libertyville Civic Center last week ... Many parents questioned the program's lack of emphasis on basic math skills and mastery ..."

Mundelein

Pioneer Press reports, "'Vicki Kennedy said her oldest son did not have a mastery of basic math skills when he finished elementary school in Mundelein Elementary District 75. 'Initially, we were totally unaware that our child was having problems in math,' said Kennedy. And he is still struggling, she said, although he was tutored before leaving elementary school. The Kennedys ... consider the culprit is the new math program ..."

Crystal Lake

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "I am furious. My [child] has just moved from 5th grade into 6th grade where they have fully implemented [the new math program] into the middle school curriculum. The homework is totally confusing and tedious and in many cases the answer key that the teachers have is wrong. I am in a constant battle discussing answers with the teacher. ... everyone I have talked to thinks this program is terrible and their kids are struggling."

Batavia

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: “I am a parent in this district and [math program] has been approved and implemented by the School Board. As a result, my child, who scored 82 on Iowa Basics in third grade and was an A-/B+ math student is generally failing in fourth grade. Math homework is a tear-filled challenge on a nightly basis. Test scores are between 10% and 65%, and the Iowa Basics score has fallen.”

A couple writes to the Illinois Loop: “My wife and I ... have become so frustrated with what is happening that they leave us no alternative but to get on the board and throw on the brakes and try to get the wrongs reversed. This trend needs to be stopped now before we have a complete train wreck educational system in Batavia. Some may think it already is.”

Burlington

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: “They have created a math committee that will review the curriculum and hopefully they will see that [math program] will not do any good for our children and stop this horrible program. Anyone in Central School District who is concerned about their child's education should do more research and really see what they are "attempting" to teach our kids. It really doesn't work!”

Plainfield

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop: “As a parent I think it's the most absurd form of education that I have ever seen.”

Another parent writes to the Illinois Loop: "Our family sold our home in Plainfield last month. ... huge beautiful schools [but] we had no idea what lurked inside. We had never experienced such a poor academic curriculum in our lives. My boys do well in every subject, because I paid for private schools in order to escape the snares in learning that Plainfield Schools offered. Their [math program] would sabotage any child's good foundation in math. I never understood how school board members could in good conscience allow math programs that were so poor. Any math program or reading for that matter, that has more pictures than words is very telling to anyone."

Yorkville

A parent writes to the Illinois Loop about her school's new math program: “Help! How can I save our children from this blight?”

Appendix B

Comments on the Illinois Loop

"I finally got around to examining your web site and I was amazed. What a marvelous job you have done!"

-- the late Frank Allen, former president, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)

"Gettin' Loopy: Yep, they're loopy out in the Prairie. Any more (as Midwesterners like to preface their sentences), there's the Chicago El Loop, the now-famous Lake Erie Electrical Loop, and, my favorite, the Illinois Loop Web Site. ... I post here the link to their interesting, no-holds-barred, and ever-expanding web page on testing and assessment. But, the entire Illinois Loop Web Site is a wonder to behold; it is well worth one's time to complete the circuit.

-- Richard P. Phelps, *Education News*, Tuesday, August 19, 2003

"I just have to tell you that I'm amazed whenever I go to the Illinois Loop website. You continue to do the most incredible job at synthesizing and highlighting key information. The whole country is lucky that you have designed this website."

-- a college professor in Ohio

"I've now visited your website and I think it is wonderful. [The] school reform movement [is] no longer a wilderness, thanks to efforts like yours to inform parents about what really goes on in their children's schools and how things got that way and what to do about it. ... Keep up the good work!"

-- Rita Kramer

Author, *Ed School Follies*

"Thanks for everything you are doing! How can I get involved?"

-- an Illinois math teacher (25+ years)

"I want to commend you on the Loop! ... You and the online network have created a lasting impression on the school reform movement."

-- Patricia H. Lee

Managing Vice President, Institute for Justice

"Thank you so much for your site - I thought I was losing my mind!"

-- signed, "frustrated Math Mom in New York"

"I could spend hours -- days -- on your site."

-- Peyton Wolcott

Author, *Education, Inc.*

"Illinois Loop: Great critiques on looney fads in education. Excellent source of reason and evidence."

-- Martin Kozloff, Watson Distinguished Professor,
University of North Carolina

"Your web site is spectacular! So glad you brought it to my attention. Gratefully yours,"
-- Christina Hoff Sommers
Author, *The War Against Boys*

"A terrific site that offers a fabulously rich environment for the exploration of educational lunacy."
-- *The Instructivist* blog

"What an awesome site!"
-- John E. Stone, Ed. D.
Education Consumers ClearingHouse

"Your site looks wonderful!"
-- Donna Garner

"The research on your Illinois Loop website continues to be incredibly useful! Thank you so much for your many years of work on behalf of Illinois and the rest of the nation."
-- Elizabeth Carson, NYC HOLD

"There is a terrific site that offers a fabulously rich environment for the exploration of educational lunacy ... IllinoisLoop.org"
-- *The Instructivist*

"I want to thank you for your honest and forthright information and not being afraid to tell the truth. I wish more parents were not so apathetic and would get informed and involved. ... Thank you, thank you, thank you Illinois Loop!"
-- a parent in Homer Glen

"One of the best sites for public education information that I've ever seen. ... Every parent and taxpayer in the U.S. should access this site to get a basic understanding of what has happened to public education in the U.S. ... Keep up the outstanding work!"
-- G.B., a visitor to our website

"Thank you for your timely, informative, and insightful articles on the status of education in Illinois and the nation. I have recommended your web site to many friends. In my opinion, it is a gem and always worth the time that I invest in perusing the articles."
-- a parent in Grayslake

"This is a great site. A number of parents in our area have been concerned about many of these issues in our school district for some time. ... Keep up the great work! It will be a wonderful resource for use in our continuing efforts to bring content back into the classroom."
-- a suburban parent

"The Illinois Loop has been the life raft that has pulled us to the shore of knowledge. Thank you!! (Goodness this sounds like an academy award speech!!)."
-- a parent in Highland Park

"The Loop is just great. Thanks for all you are doing."

-- a suburban parent

" You are doing education a great service."

-- a suburban parent

"Wow! I stumbled upon your incredible website purely by accident, and what a gold mine of information and links! Your content needs to be shouted from the rooftops, posthaste! Here's fair warning that I plan to quote from your material a LOT in the near future, and I won't take no for an answer. :-) Please keep up the excellent work, I look forward to exploring the rest of your site!."

-- a teacher in Philadelphia

" I must tell you how absolutely delighted I am to have discovered your site via the web."

-- a suburban parent

"You provide a worthy service with illinoisloop.org; I pass the website on to family and friends -- and it's an eyeopener for many."

-- a suburban parent

"You have a wonderful and indispensable site. I am glad there are people out there battling the anti-knowledge forces."

-- a suburban parent

"I look forward to regular visits to illinoisloop.org, with real hope that you are able to effectuate change. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to assist you ... I do intend to point others to your informative site. ... Believe me when I say that our future as a society truly depends on this sort of effort."

-- a parent in Guam

"My husband is running for the school board so we can try to rescue our schools from projects, fuzzy math and whole language reading instruction. We're looking for GOOD info on education. I bookmarked your website several years ago when I was researching reading and I come here to see the 'real deal' on methods. A thousand thanks for this excellent resource!"

-- a couple in Wyoming

"Your website is a gold mine of education information. ... Please add me to your list so I can stay on top of the issues."

-- an elected state school board member [in another state]

"This message is my way of trying to thank the folks responsible for your website and its many useful links. .. I fought the system for four years with its attempts to force me to read to/for my students, allow them to cheat off each other in so-called group learning activities or draw pictures and cut out paper dolls [Thematic Visualization] rather than read and write."

-- former public school English teacher

"Thank you for your tireless work in coordinating the Illinois Loop and educating others about what's really going on in the world of education these days! I love the Illinois Loop and often direct people to the web site and forward the articles to our current board members."

-- a north suburban parent

"Wow, is illinoisloop.org ever accurate about school processes and strategies! ... I find schools' resistance to systemic change to focus on children to be pathetic and embarrassing. Advocates for public education are having more and more difficulty defending schools. ... Every day I understand more about the enormous difficulty of truly changing schools so that they focus on kids. ... I applaud your insights and efforts."

-- A local former teacher and assistant superintendent

"I have 8 more years of teaching in the public school system still to go before I can retire and I feel more optimistic that I can make it since finding your website. You are a most welcome antidote to the insanity!! I need the laughs, the insight and the sense that I'm not alone which your website provides and I've only explored a little. Many thanks!!!!"

-- Kathy, a teacher in Toronto

"For all you do, thank you! How I wish you were running the educational programs in our district, our state. Ever consider?"

-- a local parent

"This site is the Holy Grail! ... Great site ... keep up the good work."

-- an architect

"This is the most fantastic education site, and I just wanted to thank you for your work. I wish everyone could see this site so they had a clear understanding of the follies in the modern education establishment. ... You guys are my heroes, and I absolutely love this site."

-- a teacher in Miami

"My son ... forwarded your [web address] to me a few weeks ago. Your notes are the best current compilation of what is happening today and I commend you for them."

-- a parent in Newton, MA

"God bless you! Know this is lots of work on your part. But it will pay off in the long run. I am starting to give out the web site address to candidates who often talk about solutions to education when in reality they have "no clue" as to what their solution will do. Thanks for all you do."

-- a suburban parent

"This is DELIGHTFUL! I was an English professor for 20 years and now am a talk radio show host. ... Your site is delightful ... And your clear laying out of the issues (liberal vs. conservative) is balanced and fair-minded. Thank you so much for your wish to return high standards and common sense to public school teaching."

-- a Vermont Dad

"I just started browsing through your site. However, it will take me a while to digest it all. I think, based on what I have read so far, that it is wonderful."

-- a career-switcher, going back to ed school to become a teacher

"What a spectacular bringing together of information!"

-- a suburban parent

"Thanks for all your work! The site is a wealth of information and I have used it often in my struggles.."

-- a suburban parent

"Congratulations on creating a comprehensive, one-stop information shop for parents and education activists that is both deep and wide! You have provided pointers to all of the "things that make you go, 'Hmmm...'" in K-12 education, which would otherwise take weeks of intensive Internet searching to collect -- if you knew what to look for in the first place. Keep up the good work."

-- a Minnesota education activist

"You are such a gem to send out these marvelous pieces to all of us. I am in awe of your passion and perseverance to fix the problems with education."

-- an Ed.D. in the Chicago suburbs

"Congratulations! You should be so proud of having provided such quality information to so many people."

-- a suburban teacher

"I love being able to arm myself against the progressive establishment with the articles you post. Thanks."

-- a sixth grade teacher in Texas

"Fantastic site!! Hope we can get something going like this in MA."

-- a former teacher and current school board member in Massachusetts