

RON LANCASTER, Independent mathematics consultant (North America, Asia and Israel)
How to involve teachers in popularization of mathematics?

Look around at people on a subway, in cafes, in their homes or sitting in a park and you will be sure to find many of them reading. They are reading for the intellectual stimulation, for the sheer pleasure of it and for a host of other reasons. Now peer into those places and see if you can find anyone working on a puzzle or someone playing with numbers or a person reading a book that contains some mathematics. Keep looking, keep looking, keep looking and in time you will discover the truth, a hurtful truth to be sure, but a truth none the less - Mathematics is not popular.

The same readers we met earlier would for the most part never dream of doing anything remotely connected to mathematics. The last time that they did so was in high school or college.

We will start with the premise that this is not a good situation for society as a whole. Our goal will be to study how societal attitudes towards mathematics can be changed and how we can make mathematics more popular with the masses. We will discuss various ideas, including the following strategy:

Expose students in school to the type of mathematics that can be enjoyed outside of school by anyone no matter who they are or what they do. Give students the opportunity to play with mathematical puzzles, to study topics from recreational mathematics and to occasionally see and feel the stunningly beautiful side of mathematics. The result will be a higher percentage of people who enjoy mathematics throughout their lifetime.

The good news about this strategy is that the materials have already been produced. There are countless books on puzzles and topics from recreational mathematics. Martin Gardner has spent his entire life giving us materials for this very purpose. There are games that can be used, magazines and videos are available - the goods are not in short supply. What is in short supply are teachers who know about these materials, teachers who can find ways of incorporating them into the curriculum and teachers who feel they have permission to use them.

So our first question will be - "How do we make this type of mathematics more popular with mathematics teachers?"