



When math does not add up

No need for algebra to ruin so many school lives, says *Richard Cohen*

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I am haunted by Gabriela Ocampo. Last year, she dropped out of the 12th grade at Birmingham High School in Los Angeles after failing algebra six times in six semesters, trying it a seventh time and finally just despairing over ever getting it. So, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, she "gathered her textbooks, dropped them at the campus book room and, without telling a soul, vanished from Birmingham High School."

Gabriela, this is Richard: There's life after algebra.

In truth, I don't know what to tell Gabriela. The L.A. school district now requires all students to pass a year of algebra and a year of geometry in order to graduate.

This is something new for Los Angeles (although 17 states require it) and it is the sort of vaunted education reform that is supposed to close the science and math gap and make the U.S. more competitive. All it seems to do, though, is ruin the lives of countless kids.

In L.A., more kids drop out of school on account of algebra than any other subject. I can hardly blame them.

I confess to be one of those people who hate math. I can do my basic arithmetic all right (although not percentages) but I flunked algebra (once), barely passed it the second time — the only proof I've ever seen of divine intervention — somehow passed geometry and resolved, with a grateful exhale of breath, that I would never go near math again.

I let others go on to intermediate algebra and trigonometry while I busied myself learning how to type. In due course, this came to be the way I made my living. Typing: Best class I ever took.

Here's the thing, Gabriela: You will never need to know algebra. I have never once used it and never once even rued that I could not use it. You will never need to know — never mind *want* to know — how many boys it will take to mow a lawn if one of them quits halfway and two more show up later. Or something like that.

Most of math can now be done by a computer or a calculator. On the other hand, no computer can write a column or even a thank-you note — or reason even a little bit. If, say, the school asked you for another year of English or, God forbid, history, so that you actually had to know something about your world, I would be on its side.

But algebra? Please.

Gabriela, sooner or later someone's going to tell you that algebra teaches reasoning. This is a lie propagated by, among others, algebra teachers.

Writing is the highest form of reasoning. This is a fact. Algebra is not. The proof of this, Gabriela, is all the people in my high school who were whizzes at math but did not know a thing about history and could not write a readable English sentence. I can cite Shelly, whose last name will not be mentioned, who aced algebra but when called to the board in geography class, located the Sahara Desert right where the

Gobi usually is. She was off by a whole continent.

Look, Gabriela, I am not anti-algebra. It has its uses, I suppose, and I think it should be available for people who want to take it. Maybe students should even be compelled to take it, but it should not be a requirement for graduation.

There are those of you, and Gabriela you are one, who know what it is like to stare at an algebra problem until you have eyeballed a hole in the page and *not understand a thing you're seeing*.

There are those of us who know the sweat, the panic, the trembling, cold fear that comes from the teacher casting an eye in your direction and calling you to the blackboard. It is like being summoned to your own execution.

Almost 20 years ago, I wrote a similar column about algebra. Math teachers struck back with a vengeance. They made so many claims for algebra's intrinsic worth that I felt, as I once had in class, like a dummy. Once again, I just didn't get it.

Still, in the two decades since, I have lived a pretty full life and never, ever used — or wanted to use — algebra. I was lucky, though. I had graduated from high school and gone on to college.

It's different for you, Gabriela. Algebra ruined many a day for me. Now it could ruin your life.

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