

washingtonpost.com

The Secret Gripes of Professor Klein: An AP-IB Drama

Advertisement

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, November 27, 2007; 11:08 AM

David Klein, a mathematics professor at California State University at Northridge, says he was pleased to review Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate math courses for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. He respects institute President Chester E. "Checker" Finn Jr., a longtime leader in the movement to improve U.S. schools. Among the views Klein shares with Finn is that overuse of calculators can interfere with students' mastery of analytical skills.

But their collaboration on Fordham's analysis of AP and IB did not turn out the way either of them hoped.

On June 4, Klein submitted his report on two courses, AP Calculus AB and IB Mathematics SL. Klein's analysis of AP and IB math was more negative and his grades lower than what the experts on AP and IB English, history and biology courses submitted to Fordham. He would have given the AP math course a C-plus and the IB math course a C-minus. The other reviewers thought none of the courses they looked at deserved anything less than a B-minus.

Still, Klein says, he got no indication from the Fordham staff of any problems until the edited version of his material came back to him for review on Sept. 28, a week before the deadline for completing the [report](#). Many of what he considered his strongest points, he discovered, had been deleted. He had Fordham remove his name as a co-author of the report, "Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate: Do They Deserve Gold Star Status?" which was released Nov. 14.

After agreeing to the name removal, Finn told Klein in an e-mail: "I imagine we'll also reduce your overemphasis on calculator use and probably change the grades (upward). Thanks, tho, for your help." Klein's grade of C-plus for AP was not changed, but his grade of C-minus for IB got a big jump to a B-minus, meaning the report was saying that IB math was better than AP math, the opposite of what Klein had said.

At first glance, this seems a minor dispute over a report the vast majority of Americans will never read. But I think there is more to it. I get dozens of reports like this every year. Some are more interesting than others, but many of them influence the debate about schools. This report has particular weight because AP and IB have become so important and because Fordham's influence, particularly on the traditional side of the ideological divide, is so great.

That was why two weeks ago I wrote [a story about the report](#) in The Post and also [a column](#) on this Web site. Reports I toss in the trash are also often cited by pundits, politicians and educators. There isn't much useful information about what is happening in schools. Even flawed attempts to provide it get noticed.

How are these studies put together? The standard operating procedures are pretty close to what Fordham did in this case. The Klein vs. Fordham squabble over how to rate AP and IB math is a useful reminder that research organizations using outside experts occasionally encounter views at odds with their own rules and values. The results of such disputes, often not made public, can be messy. We readers of such

exercises should keep that in mind.

At my request, Finn responded to Klein's complaints: "Professor Klein is a fine mathematician and expert educator for whose professional judgment I have great respect. In this particular project, however, alone among the participating author/experts (and rare in Fordham's decade-long experience producing many dozens of studies and reports that relied on outside experts), he proved unacceptably resistant to editorial guidance with respect to length and reader accessibility and, after multiple attempts and with our deadline looming, we were unable to reach a meeting of the minds about needed revisions. To my knowledge, our only substantive difference is that I view calculator use as a problem while he apparently views it as a major flaw, leading him to reduce the programs' marks somewhat more than I and my colleagues felt was justified on this ground. Under the circumstances, he asked not to be named as author of these math reviews, though about 95 percent of the words (and judgments) were his. Respectful of his wishes, we listed him as a consultant instead."

Finn has strong points on his side, the most important being the endorsement of this report by the other outside experts. I reached three of the four listed as co-authors. They said that they were happy with the final draft and that their grades had not been changed. As Finn indicated, Fordham has done dozens of other reports, several of which I have written stories about and none of which has generated any complaints like Klein's.

On Klein's side of the argument, he has the support of some other mathematicians. His views on calculator use vs. mathematical reasoning are clear and persuasive. His original reports are at [this site](#). He says the Fordham cuts in what he had written weakened his description of the threat to understanding posed by calculator overuse. He sent me an e-mail from University of Wisconsin mathematician Richard Askey, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, on that point. "Students need to use things they sort of know in a number of different ways to develop flexibility and surer knowledge," Askey said. Letting them take calculator shortcuts can inhibit the learning process.

Some readers might have preferred that Fordham publish Klein's full analysis as a minority report on its Web site, rather than reverse the preferences of an expert adviser without telling readers about it. The AP vs. IB debate is becoming more volatile and more vital. Its fiercest disputants are likely to make much out of the Klein vs. Finn skirmish. Fordham removed Klein's name as a co-author of the report, but as Finn said, he was still mentioned in the foreword, leaving the impression the contents had his blessing.

The changes Fordham made in Klein's report did not alter in any significant way its main point: AP and IB have their differences and their flaws but in most respects are similar and represent the highest standards in U.S. high schools today.

Klein's and Finn's disagreement on the calculator issue is interesting. Perhaps they can be persuaded to have a public debate. But I would prefer they both continue to focus on ways to make AP and IB better, and introduce those challenging courses to the large majority of students who do not at the moment have access to them.