

“Is Algebra Necessary?” ... Is This the Question We Should Be Asking?

Keith Nabb, Moraine Valley Community College

Abstract

In recent years, educators, legislators, and academic researchers have examined some variation of the question, “Is algebra necessary?” As recently as summer 2012, the topic regained traction thanks to Andrew Hacker’s Op-Ed piece in the New York Times, “Is Algebra Necessary?” His article stirred the pot and brought with it extreme polarization. Almost everyone will have a response one way or the other, usually deeply rooted in personal experience.

Rather than giving a personal yes or no answer and supporting it with my own (perhaps biased) evidence, I wish to do the following in this article: First, I will summarize the views on both sides of the debate. Second, I will argue that the question “Is algebra necessary?”—although an important one—is perhaps not the question we should be asking.



Keith Nabb teaches mathematics at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, IL. He earned his degrees from Rhode Island College, Texas Tech University, and Illinois Institute of Technology. His primary interests include students’ reasoning, thinking, and beliefs.