ENHANCING MATH PROBLEM-SOLVING ABILITY IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

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Problem-solving lies at the heart of mathematics education. It is more than just performing calculations—it involves reasoning, critical thinking, decision-making, and the application of concepts in unfamiliar contexts. For middle and high school students, developing strong problem-solving skills is essential not only for academic success but also for real-world application and lifelong learning. Enhancing these skills requires deliberate instructional strategies that move beyond rote learning toward deep mathematical understanding.

One of the most effective ways to enhance problem-solving skills is through the use of open-ended and non-routine problems. Unlike typical textbook exercises, these problems have multiple solution paths, encouraging students to explore, justify their reasoning, and communicate their ideas. According to Schoenfeld (1992), providing students with opportunities to tackle complex, unfamiliar problems builds their strategic thinking and fosters perseverance.

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Teaching through problem-solving is another highly recommended approach. In this method, problem-solving is not just a goal but a central strategy in learning new content. Rather than presenting formulas first, teachers pose meaningful problems and allow students to discover concepts through exploration. This inquiry-based approach promotes ownership of learning and aligns with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) recommendations for effective mathematics instruction (NCTM, 2000).

To support students in problem-solving, teachers must also emphasize metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their thinking. Helping students learn how to understand the problem, devise a plan, carry it out, and reflect on the solution process—as outlined by Polya (1945)—can greatly improve their problem-solving competence. Students

should be encouraged to explain their reasoning both orally and in writing, as this practice develops clarity of thought and mathematical communication.

Collaborative learning environments are also beneficial for developing problem-solving skills. When students work together in pairs or small groups, they learn to discuss ideas, challenge assumptions, and consider alternative strategies. This social aspect of learning not only builds understanding but also helps students develop confidence in tackling difficult problems (Boaler, 2002).

Technology can further enhance problem-solving instruction. Dynamic mathematics software such as GeoGebra, Desmos, or online simulations provides interactive and visual representations that support conceptual understanding. These tools allow students to experiment and visualize mathematical relationships, making abstract problems more tangible and engaging (Pierce & Stacey, 2010).

Finally, assessment practices should reflect the goal of developing problem-solvers. Rather than focusing solely on correct answers, assessments should evaluate students' reasoning, process, and ability to explain their thinking. Rubrics that assess multiple dimensions of problem-solving encourage students to value the process as much as the outcome.

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In conclusion, enhancing problem-solving skills in middle and high school mathematics requires a shift from traditional, procedural teaching to strategies that promote inquiry, collaboration, and metacognitive awareness. By creating a learning environment that values exploration and critical thinking, educators can empower students to become confident and capable problem-solvers.

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