



Ministers fear a failure to stop the slide in popularity of maths will see the subject fall into terminal decline

# New drive to make maths a 'cool' subject for pupils

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A pioneering bid to change the image of maths has been launched in the West Midlands.

The drive is in response to a worrying trend that has seen a drop in teenagers doing the subject at A level in recent years and a corresponding fall in mathematics graduates.

Ministers fear a failure to reverse the slide will see the subject fall into terminal decline and threaten the Government's ambition to develop a high-skilled workforce to secure the country's economic future.

The national £3.3 million project is to be co-ordinated from Birmingham University. It will involve a grass roots focus on schoolchildren to do what the likes of Carol Vorderman and Johnny Ball have tried previously - change the image of maths.

Makhan Singh, a former engineer who is leading the project, said: "This is the first time the maths community have come together as a single voice.

"It is an attempt to crack that old problem which is that kids don't

know how maths is applied. We are doing a series of posters called 'what's the point?'

"There will be one saying 'what is the point of trigonometry' and 'what is the point of algebra.'

"If you learn something in chemistry or engineering you have made something at the end of it and you think you have skills.

"With maths what we are trying to do is give practical exercises of how they use maths. The kids have a lightbulb moment where they say 'oh, that's what it's about.'"

The three-year pilot called More Maths Grads will focus on three areas - the West Midlands, East London and Yorkshire and the Humber.

If successful, the programme, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, may be extended to other areas.

Teams in the three pilot zones will work with local schools, with an emphasis on those in deprived areas, to see whether new and innovative approaches to teaching maths can help drag it out of the educational backwater.

"Some of the things we will be doing will be using a travelling

salesman game with pupils," said Mr Singh. "Pupils will have to use maths skills to work out how much petrol he will have to use, what direction of flight angle will take him to his destination.

"It's using maths in a practical fun way." The project also runs a murder mystery event for teachers to inspire them to find fun ways to teach the subject and plans to provide online curriculum-linked tools for schools.

"The ultimate aim is to get kids and teachers to understand maths in a practical way and get them enthused and excited by it," said Mr Singh. Maths is not seen as a skill by many. You can imagine a pupil when they bake a cake taking it home to show their parents.

"But maths is not celebrated in that way when in fact it is a skill. If we can get that across it will make a big difference."

Official figures show there has been an increase in overall A level entries from 660,000 in 1989 to 760,000 in 2004.

Entries for mathematics, however, have dropped from 85,000 to 53,000 during the same period. A quarter of maths classes in England are now taught by non-mathematicians.

According to Mr Singh, the perception held among young people is that it is "boring", "hard" and of "no relevance for future life".

Former Science Minister Lord Sainsbury, who led a review into the decline of pupils taking maths and science subjects at A level, claimed reversing the decline was the "only way we will be successful is creating the conditions for companies to go into high value-added services, manufacturing and industries".

As a result, the Government is to introduce new accredited courses to retrain teachers to become specialists in maths and science subjects.

Every teacher who completes the course will receive a financial incentive of £5,000 and Schools Secretary Ed Balls said a further £8 million will be spent over the next three years to double the number of science and engineering clubs in schools to 500 by April 2009.

Mr Singh added: "We need them because industry and commerce needs people able to do maths. The bottom line is we either go forward as a nation or we go backwards."