Paul Goldenberg

**“Mathematical literacy”: an inadequate metaphor**

Literacy, as it is used in the sense of “literacy rate,” is a minimal competency: the ability to decode and produce culturally useful written forms and sufficient vocabulary to derive meaning from them. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which brings us PISA, defines mathematical literacy as “an individual’s capacity to identify and understand the role that mathematics plays in the world, to make well-founded judgments and to use and engage with mathematics in ways that meet the needs of that individual’s life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen.” We are left to invent our own meanings for “the role…in the world,” “well founded judgments,” and “use and engage with mathematics.” Most problematic is the fact that the literacy metaphor fails to capture what makes *mathematics* worth special attention, what mathematics *is* that other subjects are not.