Delaware schools: New formula helps to instill 'numbers students

Brandywine School District has added Singapore math

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Mount Pleasant Elementary School math teacher Allison Lee (left) helps fourth-grader Alaina Glover with her classwork. Lee is teaching her students math using a new concept called Singapore math, which Brandywine School District implemented in fourth through sixth grades this year. / The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS

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Children's eyes were drawn to pictures of Bert and Ernie and Batman and Robin as they were projected on a screen in a fourth-grade class at Mount Pleasant Elementary School near Penny Hill Wednesday morning.

"What do they have in common?" teacher Allison Lee asked the class.

The answer is that the pairs of people are friends, just like certain numbers go together well to form a 10, including 9 and 1 and 4 and 6, groupings that can help with addition and other math problems.

Lee and teaching partner Marissa Finocchiaro used the visual element to teach what is called Singapore math, which the Brandywine School District has implemented in fourth through sixth grades

Fourth-grader Bobby Hunter focuses on math problems during class. / The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS

Marissa Finocchiaro, who works as a teaching partner with fourth-grade teacher Allison Lee, engages her students using the Singapore math formula, which starts with a hands-on example, moves to a visual and ends with a solution. / The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS

Fourth-grader Shakim Deshields works through a Singapore math problem on the chalkboard. The formula helps tactile, auditory and visual learners. / The News Journal/FRED COMEGYS

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this year. Plans call for adding kindergarten through the third grade next year, and eventually, it will be taught in all grades in the district.

The math comes highly touted because it builds foundations by using a formula that starts with the concrete or hands-on example of a problem -- such as a specific number of blocks to be stacked -- then moves to a visual -- such as the projected image of the "friends" in the fourth-grade class -- and finishes with an equation or problem that must be solved.

"They're able to kind of make connections and see why the different concepts go together and kind of relate," Lee said of her students. "We use a lot of practice and drills, and that really gets it in their head better. It was kind of more abstract the way we did it before."

Whether students are tactile- , auditory- or visual-type learners, the Singapore math formula gives them something they can easily grasp, she said.

Hester Sutton, a math coach in the district, has noticed a difference with how students relate to math with the Singapore approach.

"The level of the engagement that I see in the classrooms I've observed is outstanding," she said. "It really does a lot to enhance the classroom experience for the students."

"It builds a very strong numbers sense, which was lacking in our students," said Julie Schmidt, the district's supervisor of accountability. "Children really have to have a firm foundation of place values, fractions, decimals, percentages and ratios" to be able to move successfully through basic to