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Bland Elementary using Singapore math

By SWVA Staff



By Millie Rothrock/Staff

Math is a very polarizing subject. Students tend to either do well and like it, or lag behind and hate it. In an effort to make math more kid-friendly, and, hopefully, raise tests scores, Bland Elementary officials are looking to the tiny island nation of Singapore, where math scores soar year after year.

The Asian island traces its success back to the 1980s, when Singapore decided to stop importing math books and created its own curriculum based on problem solving and model drawing. Since then, Singapore students have ranked at or near the top on international math exams.

Embraced by home schoolers for years, the Singapore method is becoming popular in school districts throughout the country.

“It’s a strategy that helps kids break down multi-step word problems and makes it easier for them to do,” explained Diana Tibbs, Bland Elementary School principal. “I was skeptical at first, but now I’m very impressed.”

Tibbs recently attended a conference on the Singapore Method, along with sixth-grade teacher Deborah Blessing.

“I haven’t been to a conference in a long, long time that has excited me as much as this one,” Tibbs said.

The method uses models to work out word problems. Students break the problem down one sentence at a time.

Working with a group of students last week, Blessing offered up this simple question: Oliver decorated seven cupcakes for dessert. He ate three cupcakes. How many cupcakes were left over?

The first thing students do to solve the problem – and the most important step, Blessing says – is to write what they are looking for at the bottom of the page. For this question, they wrote: __ cupcakes were left over.

Writing this sentence helps them isolate the answer they need to find.

Next, students drew a “unit bar” and split it into seven units to represent the seven cupcakes. Next, they drew a line through three sections on the left, to represent the cupcakes that Oliver ate. The remaining four spaces represent the answer: four.

It is a very visual way of learning, Blessing said. There are different models for addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The models work for whole numbers, fractions, ratios and more.

Blessing plans to hold a workshop to teach Bland Elementary teachers the method so that, next year, every grade will learn math the Singapore way.

The traditional way of teaching math is to study a topic, have a test and move on. If a student does not understand the topic by the time the class moves on, the student falls a little bit behind. Children can be taught as many as 30 concepts a year.

Singapore Math tackles fewer concepts a year, maybe 10, so that students can master them. Students are encouraged to draw out the math problem.

“It’s pretty easy once you get used to it,” said Laura Holbrooke, 11, a Bland sixth-grader. “I think it will help me on the SOLs.”

Makayla Bryan, 12, also in sixth grade, agreed. “I think it has helped me because I never understood word problems before, but now I do.”

The gifted students cannot get enough of the problems, Blessing said. “I give them a problem they couldn’t work otherwise and they solve it using Singapore Math and they love it and say, give me another one!”

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