

## District 68 adopts Asian math program

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Devonshire School teacher Elizabeth Bottonari works with students Isabella Garneata (from left) and Ashley Jeanty during math class last week at the school. They are observed by special visitors. | Buzz Orr~Sun-Times Media



### MATH IN FOCUS

Math in Focus is the only U.S. program based on the most widely used math curriculum in Singapore today. It is published by Marshall Cavendish Education in Singapore and distributed exclusively in the United States by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. For more information, visit [www.hmheducation.com/singaporemath](http://www.hmheducation.com/singaporemath),

### Article Extras

SKOKIE — A revolution in math is happening in District 68 schools, and it comes all the way from Singapore.

The district is in its second year of a new math curriculum, Focus In Math, based on a program established not in the United States but in Asia. It uses less rote memorization and more hands-on involvement; its aim is to have kids learn not just answers but the concepts in arriving at them.

Although it's too early to determine whether test scores improve because of the program, educators say they expect that to be the case. Anecdotally, teachers say it has already made a big difference.

"Our teachers keep telling us the kids get the math," Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Laurie Heinz said. "They understand how to do it, but more importantly, they understand why they're doing it. That's one of the things we love the most about this."

The Singapore program is already gaining popularity in the country, and more school districts are looking toward adopting it. There have been several site visits to District 68 from other area school districts, which either have incorporated the program or likely soon will. Educators from Singapore

visited District 68 last week to observe how Math In Focus is implemented in the United States. They were accompanied by one of the program's authors and a representative from the Houghton Mifflin Company that distributes the product in the United States.

During one of their stops, the special visitors came to Devonshire School second grade teacher Elizabeth Bottonari's class.

"What's the missing part you just helped me find?" Bottonari asked her engaged students. "What part did we take away? Five ones plus five ones is how many ones? Can you keep 10 ones in your one place?"

This kind of teaching – with its emphasis on visualizing over memorizing – would strike an older generation as a bit different, but even outsiders can see the engagement of students who have something to visualize and pieces to handle as they are learning math.

The program includes eight mathematical practices that align to the state's Common Core Standards, Heinz said.

Bottonari, a seven-year teacher at Devonshire, helped pilot the program.

"The students know more math now in the first part of the year than they did in their old program," she said.

It took her only a month of working with the program to know that she wanted to use it.

"We've been lucky that math has been a stronger area in general for us," she said. "But I think the kids are understanding the process and what they're doing now instead of just learning how to do something rote. They are making greater connections because they have a visual to go with the problems they're solving."

The program has been thriving in Singapore for more than 10 years under the name "My Pals are Here!," produced by Marshall Cavendish Education.

Marshall Cavendish Education Acquisition Associate Nora Nazerene, one of the visitors to District 68 last week, said math scores shot up in Singapore once students began learning under the program. The program is gaining popularity all over the world, she said.

"A lot of schools have been picking it up," she said. "I think that as schools see the results and how students are responding, the program is really growing."

For a few minutes last week, students were allowed to become the teachers: They got to ask their special visitors questions.

How do you know math so much? Are you math geniuses? Are some of you famous? How long

have you been studying math? How long does it take you to write a text book? And perhaps the best question of all — do you know about “dozens”?

The visitors patiently answered all questions, but they were there not for answers but for observation. If these young math students had any doubt about the importance of their new math curriculum, the visitors erased it when they revealed what it took to get there.

“We came 32 hours just to see you,” Nazerene said.

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