

JCPS schools takes cue from Singapore to raise math scores

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Sheri Matter, Hite Elementary's assistant principal, demonstrates using "place value strips" during a recent training session.

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Sheri Matter, Hite Elementary's assistant principal, demonstrates using "place value strips" during a recent training session. / Amber Sigman/Special to The Courier-Journal

Surrounded by colorful number cards, dozens of elementary teachers from across Louisville sat inside a packed training room last week, learning a new way of teaching math that focuses on problem-solving and in-depth understanding — rather than rote memorization.

It's called Math in Focus: The Singapore Approach — modeled after a curriculum that has made Singapore a world leader in math education. And this fall, more than a dozen Jefferson County public elementary schools are adopting it as part of the district's move to meet the more rigorous demands of the new Common Core Standards.

"Our old math program just wasn't getting it done," said Tim Hagan, principal at Hite Elementary School in Middletown, which is adopting Math in Focus. "Our kids weren't understanding the concepts; we would see fifth-graders using their fingers to add and subtract. And with the new standards, we needed to find a better fit."

Three years ago, Kentucky became the first state to adopt the Common Core Standards in reading and math, designed by states to better prepare students for college and the 21st century workplace. Since then, 45 other states, the District of Columbia, four territories and the Department of Defense Education have adopted the them.

There has been push-back.

The Common Core Standards, along with the Next Generation Science Standards that Kentucky also is adopting, have been attacked by some religious and conservative groups as an attempt by the federal government to co-opt education. Kentucky protestors have derided the new science standards that teach climate change and evolution as "fascist" and "atheistic."

But JCPS and Kentucky education officials have been staunch supporters of the new standards, which clearly describe what students need to know before they complete each grade level. The decisions on how to teach that knowledge, and what textbooks to use, are left to each school and district.

Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday said he is encouraged by the number of schools trying "innovative" efforts such as the Singapore Approach to teaching the new education standards, particularly in math, where American test scores lag well behind most industrial nations.