

# 9 x 8 = 72 - or that's what I thought

## COMMENTARY

June 23, 2009 By Mike Thomas, Sentinel Columnist

Seminole schools are going fuzzy on math.

By way of explanation, let me ask you this:

What is 9 x 8?

While I can't calculate myself out of a brown paper bag, I can tell you instantly the answer is 72. I asked several co-workers older than 40 the same question, and all nailed it.

We learned math old-school.

You memorized the multiplication tables up to the 12-times. You how to add using the simplest method -- lining up the numbers, and going row by row, carrying the leftovers as you went.

And then when the world got more complicated with algebra, you learned formulas. You learned one and then moved on to the next.

At some point, the natural order asserted itself.

Those with math brains moved on to trigonometry, calculus and so on. They built the Hoover Dam, the atomic bomb, got us to the moon and figured out how to securitize home mortgages.

Everybody else maxed out somewhere around geometry and became lawyers, real-estate agents, politicians and journalists.

Sometime in the 1980s, some educators decided this system was broken and the result was "constructivist" math, also known as "inquiry" math, also known as fuzzy math. This is the type of system Seminole are about to adopt, causing much confusion and concern among parents and teachers.

Their angst is not without reason.

Supporters of fuzzy math decry a system in which they say students sit passively, accepting rules and formulas dispensed by , often without understanding them.

Forget about memorizing  $9 \times 8 = 72$ .

Instead, give kids the relevant information and allow them to reach that conclusion on their own.

Show them eight groups of nine chips and let them count them. Show them a grid with eight squares on the horizontal row and nine on the vertical row and let them count them. Let them estimate the answer. Have them write about it. Let them see what their buddies think.

This brand of math endorsed the use of calculators to free young brains from the burdens of subtraction, addition, multiplication and long division.

But how do you kids math by protecting them from numbers?

This is why the kids at McDonald's can't give you change without consulting the cash register.

I believe in creating informed free thinkers in our classrooms. But there are some things in life, particularly math things, where there is a wrong way, a right way and a better way.

One of life's critical skills is the mental discipline to sit, listen, absorb and, God forbid, even memorize.

In dumbing down math for the few, we dumb it down for everybody.

So it's not surprising that the presidential National Mathematics Advisory Panel called American math education "broken" last year. It reported that our lagged behind students in 23 other countries in math.

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