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## Singapore math

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Expect more schools in state to copy method used in Asia

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ASHLAND — New math has been around so long that it no longer merits the word “new” as part of its name. But despite all the praise “new math” received from educators when it was first introduced, it has not helped improve the math scores of American students. Just the opposite, in fact. The math scores of American students continue to decline when compared to the scores of students in other nations at a rate that should alarm us.

Maybe it is time to try a new way of teaching math. Like Singapore math, for example. While Singapore math now is being taught as part of a pilot program in nine Lexington schools, don't be surprised if it soon is taught in schools across the state. That's because the early results from the schools using Singapore math have been positive.

As its name indicates, Singapore math was developed in the small southeast Asian nation that bears its name. It has attracted the interest of American educators because students in Singapore consistently score much higher than American students on international math tests. While the Asian culture in which parents demand the best from their children and put pressure on them to excel may have much to do with the higher scores, the way math is taught in Singapore also may be a factor.

Singapore math was introduced in the Lexington schools as a pilot program in 2009, and the math scores at at least three schools have increased significantly. That led to the Lexington school board to approve an expansion of the pilot project.

The program uses an English translation of math textbooks employed in Singapore. It emphasizes problem-solving and deep mastery of mathematical concepts, the report said. It places greater emphasis on students learning math concepts than on learning math facts and how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. With the virtually universal availability of calculators, learning math facts is not nearly as important as learning math concepts.

“My students actually have become better math thinkers,” said Scott Sheets, a fifth-grade math teacher at Clays Mill Elementary, which began using Singapore math this year.

Fayette is one of the first Kentucky districts to adopt the program, built around a textbook called Math in Focus: The Singapore Approach. It follows math-teaching techniques that have made Singapore's students some of the world's top math performers.

When the Singapore approach was introduced in Fayette County, math scores of students in the program were expected to fall. “Anytime you introduce a new program, your scores probably are going to drop the first year,” one educator said.

Scores at some schools did decline, but most of the schools held their own, and some produced impressive results, according to data presented to the school board. One elementary school recorded a 12 percent gain in black third-graders reaching proficiency or distinguished on statewide tests, cutting their achievement gap in half. At another, black fourth-graders showed a 20 percent gain, and a third school eliminated its third-grade black achievement gaps.

Sheets urged the board to stick with the program over the long term. “I think you'll see even more improvement next year. And when this year's first-graders get to me, after having had the program all the way through, I think we're going to see exponential improvement,” he said.

With Kentucky having adopted much tougher math standards for all students, expect Singapore math to spread across the state, and if it succeeds in raising the math scores of Kentucky kids, “new math” soon will be old ... and forgotten.