

Singapore Math clicking with students at Lake Forest Country Day School

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Ellie Larsen, 7, of Lake Bluff works a problem with a partner after already discussing it as a whole class during the second-grade Singapore Math class at Lake Forest Country Day School. | Linda Blaser/Sun-Times Media

The idea that some students just aren't good at math is one that Lake Forest Country Day School hopes to debunk.

In its kindergarten through fourth grade Lower School, teachers and students are two months into a new Singapore Math curriculum — and the results have started to turn some heads.

Students are excited about math, want to do more and are, generally, losing their anxiety about one of the foundations of learning, officials say.

"I know from teaching for 40 years that math anxiety can have a great impact on what a child can learn," Head of Lower School Sally Bullard said. "What we've seen with this program is that kids have much less anxiety."

What about Singapore Math is so different to make children feel at ease?

"A lot of time is spent seeing and touching what math is and why numbers do the things they do," fourth-grade teacher Paul Hedlund said, "then you get to the algorithms" — the rules for solving math problems.

In Singapore Math, those rules change, too.

"In the older grades, we don't look at multiplication in one way," Hedlund said. "We look at it in multiple ways so you have a true number sense of what you're doing when you're doing a skill."

Key to Singapore Math is the concept that numbers represent actual amounts, not just abstract figures.

To reinforce that idea, Hedlund worked with his fourth-grade math group last week on multi-digit multiplication, reminding the students that in the problem 78 multiplied by 65, for example, the seven and six represent groups of 10s, not a single digit.

"In multiplication, you're going to see a strategy — not just carrying the number," he said. "You're regrouping and understanding why you're regrouping."

The new approach has triggered a little bit of a struggle for some of his students but they're getting the hang of it, Hedlund said.

"I had one child who said, 'I finally see what math is,'" he said. "They're using different strategies to understand math and to get a better number sense."

Getting a sense of what numbers mean replaces force-feeding one math algorithm after another.

"They get mastery before they move to the next skill," Hedlund said.

Developing that mastery is critical to boosting math confidence and creating better problem-solvers, Bullard said.

"They feel confidence that sometimes is missing in a spiraling math program, where you do it just for a little bit then a month later come back to it with a something more added," Bullard said. "For that child who never really got it in the first round, now they're being asked to add on to what they didn't understand and they can get really lost."

Developing a mastery of the basics, seeing numbers and how they fit together, working in small groups to solve a problem, and seeing how others approach the same problem play a key role in Singapore Math.

"These children are developing a love of math," second-grade teacher Abby Reed said. "They understand the 'why' behind math, which compels them to know more and know more and know more."

Reed's young students quickly raised their hands during a group math lesson, offering to write down their reasoning on a flip chart for the whole class to see.

When it was time to break into small groups, Phoebe Park, 7, of Deerfield, asked if she could take the extra problems home for homework.

As they discussed their small-group approach to solving a math word problem, John Nikitas, 7, of Lake Forest said he loves math this year, but admitted he loved it as a first grader, too.

Gavin Roby and Hayden Shortsle, both 7 of Lake Forest, didn't like math in first grade at all, they said. But they like love it now, they said.

"I like how fun it is," Hayden said. "It's really challenging, but it's really fun working together in a group."

In Hedlund's fourth-grade class, his students wanted to do more math contests to get even better at their new Singapore Math problem-solving.

"Mr. Hedlund, I'm just so excited about math," Simone Sawyer, 9, of Lincolnshire said.

Head of School Bob Whelan finds that heightening level of interest an important development.

"That kids are excited about this is really something powerful to see," he said. "Because then the sky really does become the limit."

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