

Singapore Math adds up for St. Edward's School in Vero Beach

By Janet Begley

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VERO BEACH — It's been almost three years since St. Edward's School started using Singapore Math to help students learn how to add and subtract, but for teacher Jill Diniz, it's already paying big dividends.

Diniz, who teaches 11th- and 12th-grade students at St. Edward's Upper School, was one of 15 teachers who participated in a workshop Thursday afternoon with internationally acclaimed math instructor Dr. Yeap Ban Har, who travels the world explaining the concept of Singapore Math to teachers.

Ban Har, 42, is considered a leading expert on Singapore Math, which was developed in Japan and migrated to Singapore after the country's independence in 1965. It was largely credited for moving Singapore students to the top of the world in fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics after it was launched in 1992.

Singapore Math is a method in which students learn math by drawing pictures and doing problems mentally, rather than through tables and memorization. The curriculum uses visual tools to help children learn abstract concepts like multiplication, division and even simple algebra, all while still in elementary school.

"The basic foundation is that Singapore Math emphasizes reasoning instead of procedure," said Diniz, who coordinates the program in all grade levels at St. Edward's. She added the program is extremely visual and present hands-on learning opportunities to students. It also offers teachers a new way of presenting information that may be difficult initially for children to understand.

It is Ben Har's job to make sure teachers understand the differences between traditional mathematics and Singapore Math. He has trained teachers throughout the Far East, but has recently expanded his workshops to include educators from the United Arab Emirates, Chile, South Africa, Australia and the United States. He estimates he spends at least half a year on the road, and the rest of his time working with the National Institute of Education at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

"So far, I am quite lucky," said Ben Har, who had to cut his trip to Vero Beach short because of the recent death of his father in Singapore. "The great challenge is to change teachers' mindsets and have them look at math differently. It's such a sensible program and it makes sense to most people."

Barbara Mohler, who heads up the lower school at St. Edward's, said the program is successful with students because it presents problem-solving strategies that kids carry from grade level to grade level.

"Even our pre-kindergarten teachers use these strategies," said Mohler. "Now, our children said they love math because they feel comfortable with the program and feel successful."

It's that sense of accomplishment that Ben Han strives for during his training workshops, both for teachers, and subsequently, their students.

"Kids like to reason, and they feel quite proud when they're able to solve their math problems," said Ben Har. "The program is sequential so that students have a natural chance to review as they move along. They feel a real sense of accomplishment."



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