



Somerset County teacher's trip offers glimpse at Singapore's math education methods

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By **Eugene Paik/The Star-Ledger**

PEAPACK-GLADSTONE — There was little rest and relaxation during Peggy Campbell-Rush's two-week sojourn in Singapore and Indonesia.

No, this was a different type of R&R, as Campbell-Rush, an educator at a Peapack-Gladstone private school, roamed and researched to learn just what fuels Singapore Math, an unorthodox teaching approach that has students studying one problem for hours — or even days.

What she found, she said, is there weren't many differences between the Asian schools and those in the United States, and that American classes might not be too far removed from the educational success seen in Singapore.

A slowed-down approach that's gaining popularity in the United States, Singapore Math makes students spend an elongated amount of time studying fractions, multiplication tables or even just the number 1 — a crawl designed to ensure a student masters a concept.

"You're actually thinking about the thinking," said Campbell-Rush, who serves as director of the Lower School at Gill St. Bernard's School.

Not everyone is sold on the approach. Zalman Usiskin, director of the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, said what needs to be considered is the availability of educational resources in Singapore, which he called the "affluent suburb of Southeast Asia."



Amanda Brown/The Star-Ledger

Joseph A. Porzio (right), of the New York Comprehensive Center, observes a second grade class have a math lesson using the Singapore Math Program during a visit to the South River Primary School in this 2007 file photo. The Singapore math method has been gaining popularity in the United States.

The method alone isn't responsible for high test scores in Singapore, he said. Students in that nation not only go to tutoring programs outside of school, but there also is more pressure to pass exams. For example, a "high-stakes" sixth-grade knowledge assessment test determines their secondary school.

While an affluent area may offer similar socioeconomic conditions, a poor community, in which children face greater economic stress, might not be able to support such a program, he said.

It's not clear how many school districts use it, but educational book publisher Marshall Cavendish said its Singapore Math textbooks are available in 50 countries, including all 50 states in the U.S.

Over the past six years, the Gill St. Bernard's School has used the method for classes up to sixth grade. The school has seen test scores increase "considerably" among average students over the past three years, Campbell-Rush said.

Still, Campbell-Rush, who lives in Mansfield Township in Warren County, wanted to know more about the approach, to see if there were any differences between the U.S. style and what's done in Southeast Asia. So the educator went to the source: Singapore, a country that ranked in the top three globally in math and science, according to a 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

Paying for the trip with a private donation and her own money, Campbell-Rush left for Asia on March 8 as a guest of Singapore's Ministry of Education, an honor she received by networking with Singapore Math experts. The trip meant visiting more than a dozen classes in seven primary schools, she said.

There were only a few differences from her school, she said. Class sizes were bigger in Singapore, with about 40 children per class in grades 2 to 6, compared with roughly 16 at her school. And the school year, while longer, was similar to New Jersey's when comparing actual instructional days.

Otherwise, the lessons were nearly the same: Students played with numbers using their bodies and learned how to apply them in real-world situations before moving on. Campbell-Rush said she brought back some ideas for improvement on her end, such as a plan to roll out online lessons designed to get more parents involved.

"This is the way I wish I was taught," she said. "I went down there to see if there is some magic they have that we don't have here. That's not the case."

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