

Orchard Farm might switch to Singapore math

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Orchard Farm School District parents may find next school year that "made in Singapore" not only applies to the clothes and toys that their children wear and play with but how they're taught math in elementary school.

The district is close to adopting what's called "Singapore math" in kindergarten through fifth grade.

The Board of Education heard a presentation on the teaching method Nov. 16. Board members may make a decision on the curriculum during their Dec. 14 meeting at the district's central office, 2165 Highway V.

Orchard Farm, which has just under 1,500 students, would join Wentzville School District and Windsor School District in Jefferson County as the only districts in the St. Louis area to use the method.

Wentzville pioneered use of the method in the St. Louis area in 2008.

The method comes from Singapore, an East Asian nation, where students have done extremely well compared to the rest of the world on international math tests.

Using pictures, blocks, cards, charts and other hands-on aids, the method promotes a deeper understanding of math concepts, its supporters say.

"The key is that it's more about a process to solve problems," said Orchard Farm Superintendent Dan Dozier.

Rather than rote learning and memorization, students are taught why 2 plus 2 equals 4. Teaching is at a slower pace, with concentration on understanding concepts rather than remembering an algorithm.

Dozier said the district wouldn't abandon memorization and drills — such as learning multiplication tables.

Singapore math devotes time to fewer topics but with the idea of building a strong foundation that students can use when they move on to more complex studies, Dozier said.

Dozier said the method helps address a major issue in math education — that all students learn differently. "It helps students learn why they're doing what they are doing," said Tim McInnis, assistant superintendent for the district.

The method seems to hold promise for students with disabilities and for gifted students, who both seem to do well as they move to higher grades, McInnis said.

District officials were impressed with how well Wentzville students have scored in state math tests. McInnis said Orchard Farm elementary student test scores have declined or not met higher standards.

Going to a new teaching method, however, would be expensive because instructional materials cost more and 25 to 30 school would have to be trained in the new method — probably next summer, Dozier said.

Parents also may have to get used to the method. Wentzville officials have hosted parent learning nights and posted tutorial videos online, which Orchard Farm may do.

McInnis said Singapore math is gaining acceptance because other methods don't seem to have worked as well. Math scores among American students aren't as high as their counterparts in many foreign countries.

"What we're doing now is not bad, but it's not working," McInnis said. "That's in our country, not just the Orchard Farm School District."