

Parents look to improve math education on their own

Marge Neal News-Post Staff Feb 6, 2009

Believing their concerns about TERC Investigations have fallen on deaf ears, [FrederickEducationReform.com \(http://FrederickEducationReform.com\)](http://FrederickEducationReform.com) members are arming parents with ways to supplement a math textbook series being phased into use by Frederick County Public Schools.

But FCPS officials said they are listening to parent concerns and have made adjustments in teaching methods and resource use to address specific problems.

The reform group hosted TERC Survival Night at the C. Burr Artz Library on Wednesday. About 20 parents showed up to share their children's experiences with what many referred to as a frustrating curriculum and to share ideas on how they can help their children succeed in math.

The gathering was part informational and part group therapy. Parents relayed stories about smart children feeling stupid and about children who once mastered math skills who now say they don't understand anything being discussed.

Megan and Rick Vogel have a daughter in fourth grade at Orchard Grove Elementary School.

Megan Vogel teared up as she discussed homework battles with her daughter that have begun to erode family relationships.

"Our daughter is just so frustrated now when she tries to do her homework," Megan Vogel said. "And assignments often come home with no directions, so we can't help her when she can't figure it out because we can't either."

She shared a recent homework assignment. The page contained about four groups of connected squares that looked like crossword puzzles. One square in each group contained a six-digit number, and the only instructions or clues were the words "how much is a 100,000."

Not one of the 20 people in attendance could figure out how to successfully complete the assignment.

The Vogels returned the worksheet with two notes to the teacher -- one asking that future assignments have better directions and one informing the teacher the assignment was being returned incomplete because the child couldn't figure it out and the parents couldn't help.

"We're still waiting to hear from the teacher," Megan Vogel said.

Other parents said they are concerned that TERC materials stifle teacher creativity and ignore the use of standard algorithms in the instructional process.

Former Board of Education member Leslie Mansfield said the TERC resources "were sold to the board as a supplement in the classroom -- one of many resources available to teachers -- but the materials have become the only resources in the classroom."

Guest speaker John Hoven is a retired economist and longtime education advocate. He brought Singapore math textbooks to show an example of the type of resource parents might use to augment their children's education.

Hoven said he likes the Singapore textbook because it explains concepts so simply that it's difficult for a child to not understand the material, and because of its choice of topics.

"The essential math skills that kids need to build to algebra and beyond is here and nothing else," he said as he thumbed through a book. "The fluff is gone."

Hoven thinks "fluff" consumes about 40 percent of most math curriculums and thinks fluff exists for a reason.

While he thinks educators and administrators are intelligent, passionate, caring and concerned people, he also thinks a "primary goal of public educators today is closing the racial achievement gap.

"Fluff is a curriculum objective accessible to all kids regardless of their classroom preparation," Hoven said. "Mastering the fluff creates the image of achievement."

Details

More than 40 years ago, TERC began as Technical Education Research Centers, a nonprofit group dedicated to improving the quality and availability of job-relevant technical and occupational education in the United States, according to www.terc.edu (<http://www.terc.edu>).