

# Deseret News

## Granite launches innovative programs school

By Amy K. Stewart , Deseret News

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Principal, Debbie Koji (center) helps to usher the kindergartners to their classes on the first day of school Monday at Diamond Ridge, a brand new school. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)

WEST VALLEY CITY — As principal Debbie Koji strolls across the fresh playground blacktop, three children run up and throw their arms around her for a giant circle hug. "Hi, Mrs. Koji!" they yell.

For Koji and hundreds of students across the Wasatch Front, Monday was the first day of school. Classes begin today in Salt Lake district and on Wednesday in the Canyons, Jordan and Uintah districts.

Koji, along with 560 students from Granite School District, moved this year from the overcrowded Silver Hills Elementary School, 5770 W. 5100 South, Kearns, to the newly constructed Diamond Ridge Elementary School in West Valley City.

The school is one of dozens across the state that offers innovative programs unheard of a generation ago to meet changing needs — and wants — of students and parents. At Diamond Ridge, students in grades 1-3 can enroll in the Singapore math pilot program, which has been championed by Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, as a teaching curriculum that can dramatically improve test scores. Diamond Ridge, 6034 W. 6365 South, is also offering a French dual immersion program for 60 first-graders.

"The kids are so excited about learning. They will be reading by the end of the year," said Katie Records, a new first-grade teacher.

Koji, who was at Diamond Ridge at 6 a.m. Monday, said the first day ran smoothly for the new school, from the first bell at 8:40 a.m. to when the kids ran out the doors at 3:20 p.m.

Fourth-grader Alan Marshall, 9, said he loves the new playground, especially the numerous basketball courts, huge playing field and painted map of the United States. "I like hopping on Utah because that's where I live," he said. The school also features a 10-foot by 10-foot black and white chess board designed into the tile on the school's second floor.



Michelle Hilton (right) waves goodbye to her daughter Jade on the first day of school Monday at Diamond Ridge Elementary. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)

Dad Joe Martinez, who recently moved to the area from Los Angeles, said he was impressed by how clean and new the building is compared to his old district. "It's beautiful," he said.



Principal, Debbie Koji (right) gives high fives to the passing kids as the head to their classes on the first day of school Monday at Diamond Ridge, in Granite School District, a brand new school. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)

Koji said one little boy piped up when he walked into school, "I think I'm in school heaven."

Diamond Ridge is nestled in the middle of Diamond Summit subdivision. The two-story, \$12 million building is 90,000 square feet. The building touts abundant natural lighting and is a replica of Granger Elementary School in Granite district.

On Monday several parents said they were happy they could walk their children to the community school instead of putting them on a bus.

"It's right in our neighborhood. I think this will help bring us together as a community," said mom Sherrie Vargas.

Other parents were optimistic about the new programs the school offers. Mom Dannene Bone, who has one child at the school, said she is excited to have her child in the school's Singapore math

program. "It's a new introduction to math," she said.

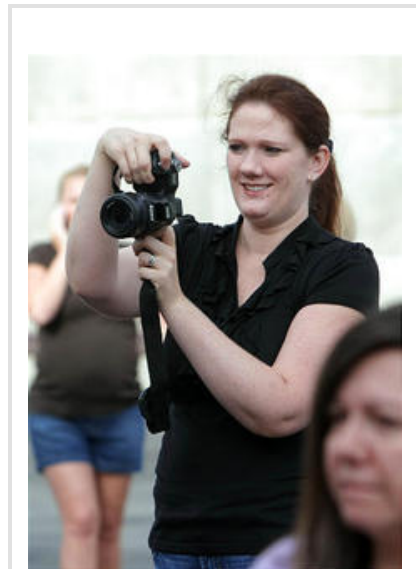
Singapore math is a method in which students master core concepts, then move on to solving math problems by applying that knowledge. The curriculum is extremely visual and involves working out math problems through words and actions. In southeast Asia's Singapore, students consistently test No. 1 internationally in math tests.

Stephenson sponsored a bill during the 2009 Legislative session that would allow schools to apply for a grant to launch Singapore math. The original legislation sought \$1.7 million but was pared down to \$500,000. The bill failed in the House the last night of the session because of budget cuts. Diamond Ridge is funding its program through regular textbook funds.

Stephenson said Monday that he is considering pitching the bill again for the 2010 session. "I'm hoping to get some funding," he said, adding he hopes to get anywhere from \$100,000 on up to help pay for the program, which costs \$100 per student to cover training and materials.



Kole Montoya (right) links pinkies with his son Conner Weske prior to Conner's first day of 2nd grade Monday, the first day of school for many school districts along the Wasatch Front. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)



Missy Gowans shoots photos of the first day of school Monday at Diamond Ridge elementary in Granite School District, a brand new school. (Scott G. Winterton, Deseret News)

First-grade teacher Sarah Van Maren, who teaches Singapore math, said, "I know money is tight but I think it's important to make sure you fund a program that has the potential of changing math for hundreds of kids."

There are 60 students in Diamond Ridge's French dual immersion program and a waiting list of about seven children seeking to get in. It is for first-graders but is planned to expand by one grade each year. The students spend half the day taught in French, and the rest of the day in English.

Half the students who attend Diamond Ridge live within the school's boundaries; the rest are from outside the area since it's a magnet program, meant to draw in students from other areas. Currently public elementary schools in the state offer three dual immersion programs: French, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese.

French dual immersion program teacher Caroline Hubac, who is from a teaching exchange program in France, said they will use a lot of pictures and repetition, as well as acting out words. They started Monday learning the flag of France and saying "je m'appelle" which is French for "my name is."

Koji said the school has really drawn the community together. People and other schools donated

1,200 of the school library's 5,000 books. "I can't believe the number of people who have been involved in opening the school and the amount of support they have given," she said. "It's great to see how many people it takes to build a school."

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