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Singapore may offer better math for Utahns

By Amy K. Stewart, Deseret News

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Yeap Ban Har, a representative of the Education Ministry of Singapore, explains Singapore Math to Utah education officials and lawmakers. (Tom Smart, Deseret News)

SANDY — Education officials and lawmakers are turning to the Far East to learn more ways to help students find math interesting and to fully comprehend the concepts.

State leaders didn't have to make an Oriental excursion, however. Instead, they gathered at Alta High School in Sandy on Thursday to learn all they could about Singapore Math — and to think about implementing some of the ideas into Utah's math programs.

Kim Burningham, a member of the State Board of Education, said while American society is very different

from Asia, it's possible educators could "pull out the best of the elements" of Singapore Math for use here.

Yeap Ban Har, a representative of the Education Ministry of Singapore, gave a four-hour overview of the math program during two sessions.

Singapore Math is based on teaching students the core mathematical formulas and procedures and then moving on to solving problems by applying that knowledge.

"The students are learning how to visualize," Ban Har said.

The math program is taught in English.

Burningham said he is impressed with the idea of getting students to think and analyze — not just memorize or learn by rote — when it comes to math.



"It gets them to think mathematically," he said. "That part of it is appealing to me."

Legislators and members of the Utah State Board of Education listen to the math presentation. (Tom Smart, Deseret News)

State Rep. Becky Lockhart, R-Provo, was one of many legislators at the event. "We should learn from those who are successful — use what works," she said.

Patti Harrington, state superintendent of public instruction, said Singapore students lead the world in academic scores.

"We want our children in Utah to be as well prepared, or better prepared, than any students in the world," Harrington said. "We're very anxious to learn about Singapore Math, what its facets are and what we might learn from it as we look at Utah math."

It cost about \$3,500 to bring the Singapore Math expert to Utah for the presentation — much cheaper than sending everyone to the Far East, Harrington pointed out.

About 100 superintendents, teachers and professors from across the state attended the morning session. David Wright, a Brigham Young University math professor, said he would like to see the program adopted in Utah but it would be important to teach educators how to implement it, not just put the books in the classrooms.

"We would need to do the professional development," Wright said, adding end-of-level tests would have to be revised to match the Singapore standards.

Brenda Hales, associate state superintendent, said she likes the Singapore Math idea of teaching students in-depth and having the students proficient in math by the fourth grade.

"We have too many kids who aren't proficient in math once they graduate from high school," Hales said.

She said educators around the state could learn how to teach some of the ideas in the program.

"Some of the concepts are very sound," Hales said.

Singapore Math was developed in the 1980s after the Singapore government reviewed math programs in other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom. The new math program was launched in Singapore in 1992. It has continued to evolve and has been revamped twice.

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