

Back to Whitby school borrows 'world-best' teaching methods

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A small group of Whitby girls is learning math the Singapore way — not rushed, lots of sketching — in a quest for the number savvy that drives that small country's test scores through the roof.

The same students at Trafalgar Castle School will, when they hit Grade 9, start an unusual course in clear writing, originally designed for freshmen at the University of Chicago. They will learn music the way it's taught in London, England, study the leadership principles of the Canadian armed forces and their science labs soon may borrow from Finland, home of one of the most celebrated school systems in the world.

And sometime between Grade 5 and 12, each of the 200 students at this private all-girl school must take Mandarin, Latin and Greek.

It's all part of the "world best" curriculum that headmaster Adam de Pencier is trying to build by cherry-picking teaching methods from around the globe to apply to Ontario's curriculum.



Grade 5 students at Whitby's Trafalgar Castle School learn to use the bar model to solve problems using Singapore math, one of several 'world-best' teaching methods adopted by the school.

YVONNE BERG/FOR THE TORO

“If we believe curriculum drives a school, shouldn’t we try to choose the best curriculum, whether it’s from Whitby, Walla Walla, or Wellington?” asked de Pencier, who had math teacher Jessica Semkin train in Si math last summer.

Semkin said the Singapore approach “slows down the pace of learning to make sure there is a mastery of skills. With Singapore math, about two weeks on multiplying fractions, instead of a day or two, and then coming back to it later.”

It also uses visual aids. In a recent Grade 5 lesson, Semkin asked: “Cameron has three more seashells than Madison. Cameron and Madison have 15 seashells together. Find the number of seashells that Madison has.” Instead of having students write an equation, Semkin asked them first to draw two bars to represent each girl’s pile of sea shells. By working with these “bar models” as well as numbers, Semkin said students “get a deeper grasp of the actions they’re performing.”

Said 10-year-old Chris Sim: "I wasn't as good at math but this really does help by using pictures and coloured blocks, so we get it before move on to figuring it out on paper."

While few Ontario educators seem familiar with Singapore math, many say Ontario teachers already use hands-on materials.

To Mary Fiore, math coordinator for the Peel Region District School Board, Singapore math's "bar models" sound like the "fraction rods circles and fraction strips and other manipulatives we already encourage teachers to use to focus on problem-solving skills." Numeracy coordinator Gina Iuliano Marrello of the Toronto Catholic District School Board added the slow pace "sounds like what we do; the idea of 'to go fast,' to make sure kids understand before you drive through the curriculum."

Trafalgar Castle School also launched a self-editing course this year called Little Red Schoolhouse, developed at the University of Chic

"It's about approaching your writing from the reader's perspective and taking out the double-speak you throw in to sound smart," said EHS teacher Theresa Fuller. "It's about being concise and taking out the lengthy prepositions and using verbs that have more impact."

Writing coach Lesley Phillips argued today's students need extra help because there is so little grammar taught, "and combined with all tweeting and texting, that has produced a generation that can struggle to write clearly."