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Business spotlight: Mathnasium

By SUSAN NAPIER-SEWELL, Special to the News Sentinel

Mathnasium is an educational center dedicated to holistically developing the mind while boosting math skills. The concept is tailored for "mathletes" to "work out" through sophisticated learning exercises, enforced with "reps" and "extensions."

Mathnasium

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"Math tends to be a subject that students readily comprehend or not," said Mike O'Hern, director of Mathnasium of West Knoxville, explaining that understanding is often a matter of math being put into "language kids get."

Struggling math students feel confused, frustrated and lost, he added, and those feelings can affect their performance in other subjects as well. O'Hern's passion lies in building character and confidence in young people, so Mathnasium allows him to use his skills as a past engineer,

research scientist and marketer.

Mathnasium uses an evaluate, educate and validate approach. To begin, students ages 4-18 are assessed by written and oral evaluation. Written tests determine a student's weakness in grade-level materials; a series of oral exercises are administered to ascertain the depth of the student's understanding of key math concepts and skills.

Next, a program is tailored specific to a student's weaknesses and gaps. New concept introduction is balanced with practice of what a student has already been learned.

Report cards and standardized tests - as well as a student's newfound confidence, mental flexibility and grasp of numbers, theories and applications - bear out the Mathnasium approach. Independent studies found that Mathnasium students' performance increased over two letter grades in as little as three to six months. Upper elementary average test scores increased 24 percent, while lower elementary average test scores increased 46 percent.

In a parallel study, 85 percent of parents with students enrolled in Mathnasium reported a dramatic improvement in their child's attitude toward math.

Mathnasium has been around for more than 30 years. The Knoxville franchise opened Jan. 7; the only other Mathnasium in Tennessee is in Mount Juliet, near Nashville.

Homeschoolers as well as private and public school students use Mathnasium of West Knoxville. Instructors are being added as student numbers increase.

"Martin Brown is just magic," O'Hern said of his lead instructor. "He keeps up with every detail of each student's curriculum, interfacing effectively with 4-year-olds all the way up to 18, as well as the parents."

The rest of the O'Hern family also has gotten into the Mathnasium act in a big way. O'Hern's wife, Mary Lou O'Hern, started the homeschool co-op at Cedar Springs Weekday School, and this summer will bring her teaching expertise to Mathnasium. With her husband and Brown helping, Mary Lou O'Hern will have little ones painting, sculpting and dancing, all with math themes and objectives.

Meanwhile, eldest child Adam O'Hern, a designer at Bose Corp., contributed the "mathemagician," a wizard-like icon, for the Magnificent Math Magicians, the summer sessions at Mathnasium. Middle child Aaron O'Hern, an engineering student at the University of Tennessee, is an instructor at the learning center, and youngest child, Ali O'Hern, helps organize and decorate the center when home from Florida State University. Her father calls her, "a huge encouragement with phone calls and e-mail."

Actually, Mike O'Hern said a large part of his call to teaching is due to his daughter. When she was younger, he helped her with homework and she would say, "Dad, why aren't you a teacher?" he remembered.

Now O'Hern challenges others, "Come get your math workout!"

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