


 Powered by **NOISE** and **What's on**
[Arts](#) | [Movies](#) | [Dining](#) | [Events](#) | [Music](#) | [TV Listings](#) | [Boredom busters](#) | [People](#) | [Escapes](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Plan A: Search Cars.com for consumer reviews.


[E-mail it](#) | [Print it](#) | [Get E-headlines](#) | [XML](#) | [Get RSS feeds](#)

Published April 23, 2008

Mama-rama: Math equals troublesome subject

Meagan Francis
Columnist for NOISE

I have never claimed to be a math whiz. But not only did I pass fourth grade on the first try, I also passed pre-algebra, algebra, geometry and trigonometry. And though I can't remember the difference between an axiom and a corollary, I'm still handy with the basics.

So the day I spent three hours huddled over a worksheet with my 10-year-old son, both of us on the brink of tears of frustration, I began wondering if caring for children had been systematically killing off my brain cells.

Instead of working long division, the way I had learned, the example we were supposed to follow looked like a bowling score card. To multiply, he was supposed to divide each long number up and put each digit inside a separate part of a "lattice," then add them all up. I think. And each page was full of long, rambling story problems to get lost in before we got to the actual math.

Later, I got online and found that I wasn't alone: there are plenty of parents like me who, though reasonably intelligent, couldn't work their way through their child's elementary-level math curriculum. There's also a nickname for the battle between math traditionalists - who favor rote memorization and back-to-basics drilling - and proponents of new "discovery"-based math: the "math wars".

I spoke to Larry Martinek, who's taught math in the Los Angeles area for the past 30 years and together with his son created Mathnasium, a math tutoring franchise, and he gave me the lowdown on how the math wars came to be: When the Russians launched Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the earth, an embarrassed U.S. government responded by overhauling math education. After much trial and error and back and forth, the end result is the math most kids learn today. Sometimes called "new math," "reform math," "fuzzy math" or lately in our house, "Oh God, not more math," programs like Everyday Mathematics - my son's curriculum - baffle parents, kids and even some educators.

According to Martinek, many "discovery"-based math programs like Everyday Math focus on letting kids figure out their own way to solve problems - but don't do a good enough job teaching what's called "computational fluency," or the ability to remember 8×8 off the top of your head instead of having to stop and think about it.

"Fuzzy" math programs, he says, are almost single-handedly responsible for the success of his tutoring centers in some areas, where confused kids not only can't keep up with the higher math they're encountering in school, but also don't



Meagan Francis, 30, is a Michigan native and author of "Table for Eight: Raising a Large Family in a Small-Family World" (Alpha, 2007). She can be found online at www.meaganfrancis.com.

Math aides

If your child's math program doesn't seem to add up, check out these resources:

- www.ed.gov/mathpanel: Read the key points or the entire March 13 report from The National Math Advisory Panel.
- <http://mathematicallysane.com>: A balanced site promoting "rational" reform of math education.
- Mathnasium's approach uses the best of new and traditional concepts to help kids love math. Get more info at: www.mathnasium.com

Related news from the Web

Latest headlines by topic:

- [Mathematics](#)
- [Kids](#)
- [Family](#)
- [Science](#)

Powered by [Topix.net](#)

Advertisement



have a solid grasp of basic arithmetic - you know, the stuff that allows you do balance your checkbook, count change or bake a cake.

On the other hand, Martinek is quick to point out while advocates of back-to-basics math believe that everything should be learned by memorization and drilling, that can only get you so far. "Kids need not only the static knowledge - what 12 x 12 equals - but also the dynamic knowledge that will help them answer 12 x 13," he says.

On March 13, the National Mathematics Advisory Panel presented a report to President Bush and the Secretary of Education. "During most of the 20th century, the United States possessed peerless mathematical prowess ... measured by the depth and number of the mathematical specialists who practiced here but also by the scale and quality of its engineering, science, and financial leadership ... But without substantial and sustained changes to its educational system, the United States will relinquish its leadership in the 21st century," the report warned.

Confusing curriculums perpetuate the myth that you have to have the "right" kind of brain to do math, the NMAP report implied; but in reality, effective teaching, solid material and consistent effort are the real keys to success. As Larry Martinek points out, for too long we've been sold on the idea that certain people inherently "can't do" math.

"People don't hate math, they hate being frustrated and embarrassed," he says. "It's not math that's the problem, it's the way it's being presented to them."

For too long, I think we parents have felt too intimidated by math to make a fuss about confusing and frustrating curriculums. But take heart! Even the experts are baffled. If you can't help your child with his elementary-school math, maybe the problem isn't you, maybe the problem is the curriculum. And unless we want to see the day when the

U.S. "relinquishes its leadership," it's high time we parents spoke up about it. n

Talk back:

Contact Meagan Francis at meaganfrancis@yahoo.com.



Subscribe to the
Lansing State Journal



E-mail it

Print it

Get E-headlines

Get RSS feeds