



Numbers game

Workouts at St. Clair center add up to a greater appreciation for math

BY NANCY CROTTI

Renee Beckman-Schwind knew that her son Noah needed help with math. She so knew that she wasn't the best one to help him.

A 6th-grader at Highland Park Elementary School, Noah was doing OK in math class, but his mother suspected he was missing a few concepts. Beckman-Schwind consulted the various math learning centers in the Twin Cities and was attracted to the program offered at Mathnasium of Lakeville and Savage. When a third Mathnasium opened this fall at 1832 St. Clair Ave. in St. Paul, she was thrilled.

"I love their program and their approach to math," she said. "As someone who was always bad at math, I wanted my kids to be good at it, but I didn't feel I was the best person to help them."

Mathnasium's program differs from that of Kumon, according to Jim Nelson, director of Mathnasiums St. Paul franchise. Kumon, with 11 franchises in the metro area, teaches math according to a method developed 50 years ago in Japan. It emphasizes memorization, speed and accuracy in its teaching, Nelson said, while Mathnasium strives to teach students how mathematical concepts work. In fact, Nelson considered opening a Kumon center in St. Paul before deciding that he preferred the Mathnasium curriculum.

At Mathnasium, if a student is having trouble with subtraction, a teacher may work with that student on "mental math," counting backward or forward in his or her head rather than committing the problem to paper. With borrowed and crossed-out numbers, subtraction on paper can be messy and confusing for children, according to Nelson.

A graduate of the University of South Dakota with a bachelors degree in math, Nelson entered the Peace Corps as a young man and taught math in Uganda and Liberia for three years before embarking on a 30-year career in information technology. He earned a master's

degree in math education at Duke University, then worked in computers for Travelers Insurance and Northwest Airlines before becoming a consultant in information technology for such companies as 3M, Supervalu, Wells Fargo and American Express. The father of two children who are currently enrolled at Central High School, he lives in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood.

"Kind of by trial and error, I learned how to be a math teacher," Nelson said. "I always felt that if you could relate (math) to kids so that they understood it intuitively, then the strange symbols and strange terms I was trying to teach kids would make sense. They got it, and that's how I think Mathnasium looks at it."

Nelson's franchise is open to students in grades 2 through 12. It currently has 22 students. Nelson recommends that they make two hour-long visits per week, although any student who needs extra help may come more often.

Students are required to register for a minimum of three months of instruction. However, Nelson recommends six to nine months of instruction to gain the greatest benefit. The cost is \$175 per month for elementary students and \$250 per month for high school students.

Math tutors generally charge between \$20 and \$50 an hour, according to Nelson. "But we don't think of ourselves as competing with tutors," he said. "I'm not just helping students with their homework. I'm helping them with their mathematical fluency. We're trying to teach them to fish, so that they're mathematical people on their own."

The instructors at Mathnasium will perform an initial assessment "to figure out where it is that students are missing something, where the gap is (in their education)," Nelson said. Then, during each Mathnasium visit, students will spend 20 minutes in a "prescriptive" program

designed specifically for their needs, 20 minutes in a standard math curriculum and 20 minutes getting help with homework, preparing for tests or playing math games. Students receive a reward after completing a certain number of tasks. Nelson tracks their progress weekly and conducts a formal assessment after two months.

Nelson will also ask parents for permission to contact a student's regular math teacher to discuss the child's needs and progress. "I'm not trying to compete with the schools or take over what they're doing," he said. "I'm trying to help the kids get up to grade level so the school can take over and do their job."

Mathnasium is open during the school year from 3:30 to 7:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays. A summer schedule is also being planned. The instructors include Nelson, an elementary school teacher, and a senior math education major from the College of St. Catherine.

"What I like about (Mathnasium) is that

they tailor the program specifically to your child," said Frank Stever, whose daughter Becky is a 6th-grader at Nativity School. "You pretty much are staying on pace within the Mathnasium program, but you're also staying on pace with your school program. They do quite an effective job with that."

Stever also appreciates the math games. According to him, they are not only fun, but help Becky put her learning into practice.

Beckman-Schwind said she initially signed Noah up for a three-month stint, but she is so pleased with his progress that she is considering keeping him there throughout the school year.

"Already I've seen an improvement," she said. "There's something about their approach and their program that was a little bit different from what he'd been getting at school and something clicked."

"Noah has kind of begrudgingly admitted that he thinks it's fun. And anything can be fun once you get it."



Mathnasium director Jim Nelson gives student Anna Burrell, 9, of Macalester-Groveland a lesson in math. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER



The new Mathnasium shop at 1832 St. Clair Ave. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER