

Quakertown returns to 'old' math
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“Scores rose under current system, but grads say it hurt them at college and work.”

By Melinda Rizzo, Special to The Morning Call

Quakertown Community School District directors voted 8-0 to return to a traditional math program for Grades 9-12 beginning this fall, replacing the district's integrated math program.

The district will prepare a transition plan, develop a curriculum and find textbooks to prepare teachers for the change in September. "We did a two-year curriculum evaluation and implementation task in two months," Quakertown Curriculum Supervisor Debra Kopp said.

The vote at Thursday's regular business meeting did not come without concerns about turning away from a program that has shown gains in Pennsylvania System of School Assessment scores over the past several years.

"Our scores were not improving [prior] to the program change before," School Director Linda Martin said. "I'm gravely concerned about what the next eight years of PSSA scores will look like, but I will not vote against changing the program," Martin said.

Quakertown switched from traditional math in 2001 to an integrated math program, which teaches some higher math concepts throughout a student's four years, rather than a traditional approach where single subjects like algebra are studied over the course of a year.

The district's math program came under fire last year when, after a survey of high school graduates, several alumni told school board directors that Quakertown's math program had left them ill prepared for college math courses or technical jobs.

"There's no doubt the negative comments from graduates accelerated the process," acting Assistant Superintendent James Newcomer said.

The survey results were questioned because only 22 percent of graduates questioned, or about 66 out of 300, responded. "Many who respond to surveys do so because they are unhappy about something,"

Newcomer said.

School Director Paul Stepanoff said the surveys were valuable because they were within general statistics guidelines, and they prompted the current math program to be questioned.

District officials said student progress will be carefully monitored, students who are struggling will be followed closely and provided with remedial help, and graduate surveys will be sent out each year in December. "I'm more comfortable with this because it will be monitored," Stepanoff said.

A hybrid math program to ease the transition for students entering Grades 10 and 11 in the fall would also be available, Kopp said.

A math task force made up of teachers, district officials and parents was formed to evaluate the high school program and made a recommendation in January to switch to a traditional math track.

Another committee is researching the elementary and middle school math curriculum. "Our neighboring districts hold our primary and middle school math program in high regard," said School Director Robert Leight.

School officials said significant gains in PSSA math scores had been made in the primary and middle school grades over the past five years.

In 1998, the Bucks County Intermediate Unit reviewed the district's traditional math program and recommended an integrated math curriculum to replace it. Endorsed by the National Science Foundation, the new math program was intended to improve student performance and raise standardized test scores. Integrated math was phased into the district from 2001 to 2002.

Traditional math programs, which were phased out of Quakertown by 2002, teach specific subjects like algebra, geometry, trigonometry or calculus over an entire school year. Courses are taken in order of difficulty, so concepts and theories build from the previous material.

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