Some parents leery of new math
Techniques help, proponent insists.

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Published Wednesday, February 21, 2007

The Columbia [MO] Daily Tribune

http://www.columbiatribune.com/2007/Feb/20070221News001.asp

[G.J. McCarthy photo: Math consultant Ruth Parker works out math solutions yesterday at MU's Life Sciences Center. Parker is a proponent of non-traditional math education.]

A national math consultant spent two hours in Columbia last night trying to convince parents that the way they learned to do math won't help their children succeed in today's technological world.

Teaching traditional methods of solving math problems can even prevent children from understanding numbers, said Ruth Parker, CEO of Mathematics Education Collaborative, based in Washington state.

[G.J. McCarthy photo: Jenifer Smith, a fourth-grade teacher, right, listens to Parker as Denise Lasley, an elementary school speech path-ologist, center, and elementary school teacher Kathleen Casper discuss a math problem.]

"What we've been doing has never worked," she said. "Most of us are unable to make sense of numbers. -- Math competence does not come from memorizing recipes you don't understand, not in today's world."

Hosted by Columbia Public Schools, Parker is a proponent of the "Investigations in Number, Data and Space" curriculum now used in Columbia's elementary schools.

The curriculum uses workbooks and kits rather than textbooks and asks students to solve problems in ways other than traditional methods.

Parents argue that they don't understand the reformed math, which some believe isn't the most efficient way to solve problems. And without textbooks, parents say it's difficult to help their children.

Speaking last night in the Monsanto Auditorium at the University of Missouri-Columbia's Life Sciences Center, Parker spent two hours challenging attendees to mentally solve basic math problems.

When asked to subtract 18 from 43, for instance, some in the audience said they altered the numbers, such as adding 2 to both, to create a simpler problem.

Parker shunned old-fashioned subtraction to solve the problem. Simply knowing an answer without understanding it is useless because the information can just as easily come out of a calculator, she said. "When you don't have a pencil and paper to make sense of it, the information coming out of a machine won't make sense."

Parent Jennie Harvat didn't buy it. She said her fifth-grade son struggles with the concepts, even though he's good at the traditional methods she's taught him at home. He's lost confidence not only in math, but also in school, Harvat said.

Parker said she couldn't imagine a child not understanding conceptual math.

The child "could just have a lousy teacher," she said, encouraging Harvat to play math games with her son at home.

But Harvat later said the family already dedicates much of their evenings trying to figure out the new math.

"The fact remains, I've got a fifth-grader, a very intelligent son, who is struggling immensely, and there is nothing I feel I can do about it," Harvat said. "I do understand the idea of giving them different ways, but he wants to know why he can't just write it out."

Harvat said she thinks she might have to enlist the help of a private tutor to teach her son math. "He needs help, and I can't do it on my own," she said.

Another concerned parent, Michelle Pruitt, wants to organize a committee to more closely examine the math curriculum. Pruitt, who took her math concerns to the Columbia Board of Education earlier this month, plans to host an informational meeting next month.

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