

Parents: Math lessons don't add up

by Mary Stevens Decker

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Staff Writer

Supporters of a grassroots movement called “Where’s the Math?” are speaking out against the math curricula used in Lake Washington schools, saying it fails to give students sufficient grounding in basic math concepts.

At Monday’s meeting of the school district’s board of directors, critics of the district’s math programs — widely known as “Investigations,” “Reform Math” or “TERC” — read a letter signed by 300 parents and addressed to the new superintendent, Dr. Chip Kimball.

“... (S)tudents add on their fingers because they can’t recall simple addition facts,” the letter states in criticizing the Investigations curricula now being used in classrooms. “They have no instant recall of multiplication facts and add laboriously instead. Then they are expected to solve complex problems and have none of the basic math skills to help them. Because they frequently work in groups, it is easy to let others do the work, and they gain none of the deeper understanding claimed by advocates of Investigations ...”

The full letter appears on the group’s website, www.wheresthemath.com.

Among the founders of “Where’s the Math?” is Shalimar Backman, a former LWSD parent whose children now attend The Bear Creek School in Redmond. The Bear Creek School emphasizes classical education and uses a traditional math program called Saxon (www.saxonmath.com).

When her older son was in fifth and sixth grades, doing math at the kitchen table, she realized, “he couldn’t do long division, couldn’t borrow or carry numbers ... yet he had straight A’s on his report card.”

Backman asked his teacher why traditional math wasn’t being taught and was told, “We aren’t allowed; it stifles creativity.”

According to Backman, some testimonials on the “Where’s the Math?” website are from LWSD teachers who remain anonymous because they fear reprisal. At least one has told her that students can no longer be grouped based on ability and that this is detrimental to both students who “get it” and those who don’t.

“The strong students aren’t being challenged and the weak ones are just being pulled along,” she said.

Cliff Mass, University of Washington professor of atmospheric sciences, is one of several prominent educators who champions the work of “Where’s the Math?” based on what he’s seen as “a 10-year decline in math students at UW.”

He believes there’s a correlation between the use of Investigations or TERC — derived from Technical

Education Research Centers — and the “dumbing down” of classes at the university level.

Worse yet, Mass said he’s seen students in tears, forced to change their majors, “because they always wanted to be a meteorologist but their math is so bad that they can’t fix it.”

Shannon Overbay, a math professor at Gonzaga University, agreed that students who’ve grown too dependent on calculators “are unable to go into technical majors and have to struggle to pass even elementary math classes designed for non-technical majors. By the time the students hit college, the problems and gaps cannot easily be fixed with one or two refresher courses.”

The driving force behind “Where’s the Math?”, Backman concluded, “is that America will not be inventive or self-sufficient in technology in the future. The school district people will tell you that Microsoft and other high-tech companies like people to work in terms of conceptual learning, but our country was built on traditional math skills and we used those skills to put a man on the moon.”

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