

School News & Notes

Why Basic Math Skills Matter Today

by Andrea Pastorok, Ph.D.

(NAPSA)—The equation has not changed, even though teaching methods have—learning basic math skills still adds up to school success.

Through the 1950s, the school math curriculum taught math basics—addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions and decimals through drills and repetition. Accuracy and efficiency mattered.



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Then came the new math, which focused on helping students understand

the process of doing math. It soon fell out of favor.

A new wave of progressive math programs emerged that emphasized understanding processes and principles over performing calculations, but because the programs left out basic skills—such as multiplying two-digit numbers and dividing fractions—many parents and math scholars feared that schools were producing a generation of math-illiterate children. Without these basic skills, students may be ill-prepared for higher level math.

As a result, many parents have turned to supplemental education programs such as Kumon Math & Reading Centers to augment their children's understanding of math and prepare them for high school courses such as Algebra.

Recently The National Council

of Teachers of Mathematics revised its standards bringing back old-fashioned arithmetic and the memorization of the multiplication tables. The organization also reintroduced two key terms used by Kumon: accuracy and efficiency.

Understanding math concepts and processes is important, but is of little value if a student lacks the basic skills to put math into practice. To succeed in Algebra, children need a strong foundation in the four operations of mathematics and strong mental calculation skills.

If a student does not succeed in Algebra, he or she may lack a strong foundation in basic math or have poor mental calculation skills. These skills must be achieved before high school. If a child is struggling with basic math concepts, high school math can only be more difficult.

U.S. schools routinely update education standards for students. Starting in 2004, California students will have to pass Algebra as a high school graduation requirement. There are currently 17 states that require such exit exams for students to receive their diploma, with many others moving in that direction.

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