

**By PATRICK HALL**

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MT. JULIET -- Elementary teachers from the Wilson County School System and Lebanon Special School District were back in class Thursday, learning and sharing ideas and strategies to implement new Common Core standards for mathematics beginning this school year.

Organized by the Tennessee Department of Education, third through eighth grade math teachers from Wilson, Sumner, Rutherford and Cannon County joined together at Mt. Juliet Middle School to get acquainted with the new standards that focus more on complex problems, designed to teach students the concepts behind mathematics.

“This has never really been done before, we’ve never trained this many teachers at once,” said Janin Brock with the TDOE. After Thursday, more than 2,000 teachers statewide will have been trained on the new math standards.

The new standards in math will be adopted statewide in the 2012-2013 school year for grades three through eight. LSSD is piloting the new Common Core standards for English/Language Arts that are to be adopted in 2013-2014 statewide.

Brock said local school systems sent teams of teachers, a group from each school, to the training sessions, and those teachers, along with administrators present, would help train other teachers and implement the new standards in their schools.

Around 162 teachers and administrators participated in the training that took place at MJMS Thursday.

“We want students to have more rigorous thinking and be able to show how they know something, as opposed to just teaching how to get the answer to a problem,” Brock said.

Dr. Jeanne Barker, LSSD associate director of Learning, said the students would handle more complex problems that will show them the real world applications for mathematics concepts.

An example of the difference between current methods and Common Core was a word problem in which students would have to use multiple concepts to solve a problem that they might encounter in the real world.

The problem asks students to choose which sale gets a customer more money off a particular clothing item. Given the base price, students must figure out if taking 30 percent off that price is a better deal than taking 20 percent off, plus an additional 10 percent off the sale price.

Barker said the old system would have just given students numbers and asked to find the percentage of the number. The goal is to find more ways to engage students and to encourage them to figure out the answers to problems in various means, using the basic concepts they already know.

“Kids can find the answer to problems in a lot of ways,” Brock said.

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“Doing math under these standards looks more like applying math,” Barker added.

Brock said the teachers began with an introduction to the Common Core standards and moved into ways to evaluate and analyze teaching methods and student performance under Common Core.

In the afternoon, teachers worked in groups with colleagues from other schools and then with their co-workers in school groups, to share ideas and how to implement the new teaching standards.

Barker and Brock said the collaboration is invaluable to starting a new curriculum. They said the free-flowing ideas could help teachers adjust their teaching style, learn new methods and hear what works or doesn't work for other teachers in different schools.

But Brock noted that no two schools are the same, and each school administrator worked with their own teachers to talk about how to engage their students.

Southside Elementary School Principal Richard Smallwood talked to his teachers about working together and training the teachers at the school. Since not every teacher was asked to participate in the training, the school's team of trained teachers is now responsible for helping others adjust to the standards.

"It's going to be a struggle at the beginning," Smallwood told the group. "But you're my team, I think all the students can do it, it's just a new way of thinking."

Smallwood said the new standards would make students "great problem solvers" and the new teaching methods can be applied to all subjects. He added that other subjects would have to start getting kids to think in a more in-depth and problem-solving manner to adjust to new standards for math and the English Language Arts standards next year.

A group of teachers from Coles Ferry Elementary talked about slowly introducing the new problems and problem-solving methods to students because beginning with a complete change was not feasible.

One teacher noted that students are "learning life skills" along with mathematic concepts, such as working in groups, relying on peers for help and how to approach difficult situations with an open mind and to calmly and creatively solve the problem.

Teachers discussed beginning with the new problems on a once-a-week basis, and gradually introducing more and more problems until students are working on a daily basis with the new standards.

Some teachers even admitted that on the first day of training they were overwhelmed with the new standards. A teacher said the new standards would be difficult to grasp for some students, but easier for others and it was important for each student to help one another.

With a variety of ways to solve problems, teachers said group activity is important, and the students can talk through problems, using their particular strategy to solve the problem.

“We encourage a steady diet of these instructional tasks,” Barker said. “It’s going to take some time for everyone to get adjusted.”

Barker also noted the LSSD is a pilot system for the new English/Language Arts standards and said they also have been training teachers this summer. The new English Common Core standards will be statewide by the 2013-2014 school year.

“Common Core is something the whole United States will be doing eventually,” Brock said.

Along with the instructional change, in 2014-2015 students will also no longer be taking the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test, which all students in grades 3-8 take at the end of each year.

Barker said that test is to be replaced with Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or PARCC. The test is expected to be less multiple choice and contain more critical thinking questions and written problems.

School begins on Monday, July 30, for LSSD, and on Wednesday, Aug. 1, for Wilson County Schools.

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