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TEACHING & LEARNING UPDATE

International Forum Examines Asian Nations' Math Strategies

One could forgive the American public if, upon examining the results of recent international tests, it regarded East-Asian nations as a single educational behemoth that had perfected a uniform strategy for dominating the United States in comparisons of students' mathematical ability.

Yet those high-performing countries are each guided by their own, often very dissimilar approaches to curriculum and instruction, as described at a conference held in Chicago last month.

The Center for the Study of Mathematics Curriculum, founded in 2004 and based at the University of Missouri-Columbia, staged its first-ever conference focused on international math issues, which drew government and education officials from China, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, as well as numerous U.S.-based experts who have studied Asian education. Attendees heard speakers describe how Singapore's math teachers, despite following a national curriculum, often take the initiative to go beyond it in their everyday lessons; and how a high percentage of Korean students are joining special programs to study an additional one to two hours of math a day outside school.

The Nov. 11-13 conference drew state and local curriculum officials, college faculty members, teachers, and publishers, among others, who hoped to get past generalizations about Asian countries' approaches and go on to specifics that could provide lessons to U.S. schools.

“When we hear about these countries, we only hear about the results,” said Zalman Usiskin, a professor of education at the University of Chicago, which hosted the event. “The purpose of the conference is to bring out the subtleties that are explanatory.”

More information about the conference can be found at www.mathcurriculumcenter.org.

— Sean Cavanagh