Math scores fail to impress ZCES, WHS principals

WHS Principal Crespin Esquivel updates the school board Nov. 14. Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – There's a memorable scene in the movie "Big" where lead actor Tom Hanks leaves a dinner party table to explain algebra to a boy having trouble with it.

Hanks tells the youngster to forget the X's and Y's.

"Let's imagine Larry Bird is going to score 10 points in the first quarter. How many is he going to score in the whole game?" Hanks asks.

"That's easy – 40 points," the boy answers in a "aha" moment.

"OK, and that's algebra," Hanks says.

With the advent of Common Core, this is where teachers are heading with their math lessons – trying to find new ways to reach children. It's one thing to know the answer. Now, students need to explain how they got there.

The topic came up at last week's Douglas County School District meeting in which two principals – Nancy Cauley of Zephyr Cove Elementary School and Crespin Esquivel at Whittell High School – provided their school performance goals.

Both principals painted a pleasant picture on the Nevada side of the South Shore.

Cauley shared her enthusiasm over milestones ranging from the hiring of a reading tutor to the funding of a native plant walk created with 15 species of trees. Esquivel expressed glee over the restoration of the ballfield and with the popularity of the culinary arts classes.

Both praised their programs in which teachers drop in the classrooms of other instructors to share ideas and gain insight of what works and what doesn't. Cauley calls hers "peer classroom visits." Esquivel labels his as the "pineapple board," named for its hospitality inference.

"It's helpful for us to get into each other's classrooms and learn from each other," Esquivel told the board.

Whatever one calls it, the program has been deemed a success to school head honchos seeking any way to improve scores and livability at school.

What the principals admitted they can't live with are math scores.

At Zephyr Cove Elementary, math SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) assessments reveal that 38.2 percent of students in third- to sixth-grade are proficient in the subject. This means most are not proficient.

The older students fared better but didn't meet their target goals. In 2017, a little less than 77 percent of students met the advanced placement goals outlining college-level curricula. In a five-year summary, Esquivel took solace in the

fact his school's scores are higher than the state's at 52.5 percent. Plus, there's an upward trend at Whittell. In 2013, those scores showed 52.5 percent of WHS students got it.

Still, board President Tom Moore warned Esquivel he would "have to get a grip" on declining scores.

Esquivel nodded and insisted "we're working on it."

And that's the challenge of Common Core.

"It's a different mindset. Now, there's a formula," Cauley told *Lake Tahoe News*, standing with Esquivel after the session. *LTN* asked them if math is harder these days.

"We have to start them in kindergarten. There's a multi-step process in which they have to give the rationale to their answer. It's not enough to have the answer. And that's Common Core," Cauley said. "We're asking students to do more with what they know."

The U.S. educational standards starting in 2009 define what K-12 students should know in English, language arts and math at the end of each grade.

Here's an elementary school example comparing a pre-Common Core question with a post.

Pre: "Each shirt costs $4. How much do three shirts cost?"

The answer "12" can be submitted without knowing multiplication tables.

Post: "Each shirt has six buttons. How many buttons are needed to make seven shirts."

The answer of 42 relies on a quick recollection of the multiplication tables.

Think of it this way. Remember those math word problems from days gone by that start with "two trains were traveling in

opposite directions…”?

Back then, teachers and tests were seeking one answer. Now, students must explain the process used without derailing the answer.

This is the subjective problem some students have and parents notice.

“Everyone describes things differently and in a different way. Much depends on how it’s taught,” said Kim Felton, a parent whose son Aubrey attended all Nevada South Shore schools. Aubrey, who graduated from Whittell High a few years ago, learned enough about math to get him into college, but it wasn’t his favorite, his mother said.

Felton laid out the difference in the two teaching styles by declaring traditional math covers one subject at a time. First grade might highlight addition and gradually work up from there in each grade. Common Core demonstrates an integrated method that blends the subjects and jumps ahead before some students grasp it.

Word problems may muddy the process because there’s room for error in interpretation.

“Math is the language of numbers. What Common Core does is make it a language of words,” Felton told *Lake Tahoe News.*