

Educators divided over math methods, evolving state standards

By **ISOLDE RAFTERY**
and **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writers

Washington's math wars got ugly this year.

Educators agree that current math standards aren't up to snuff. After all, half of Washington 10th-graders didn't pass the state's math test last year.

But there is vehement disagreement on what to do about it.

Before the mid-1990s, most Washington students learned math the tra-

ditional way. They studied fractions, decimals, algebra, geometry, trigonometry and so on in separate classes.

A rival approach known as reform, or integrated, math lumps those subjects together. The curricula emphasize word problems, and students work together to "discover" answers. Currently, 45 percent of Washington school districts use this approach.

Last fall, the state schools office set out to revamp math standards, but a divide emerged after state schools

Superintendent Terry Bergeson hired consultants from Texas to facilitate the process. Traditionalists feared the consultants support reform math and would buck their input.

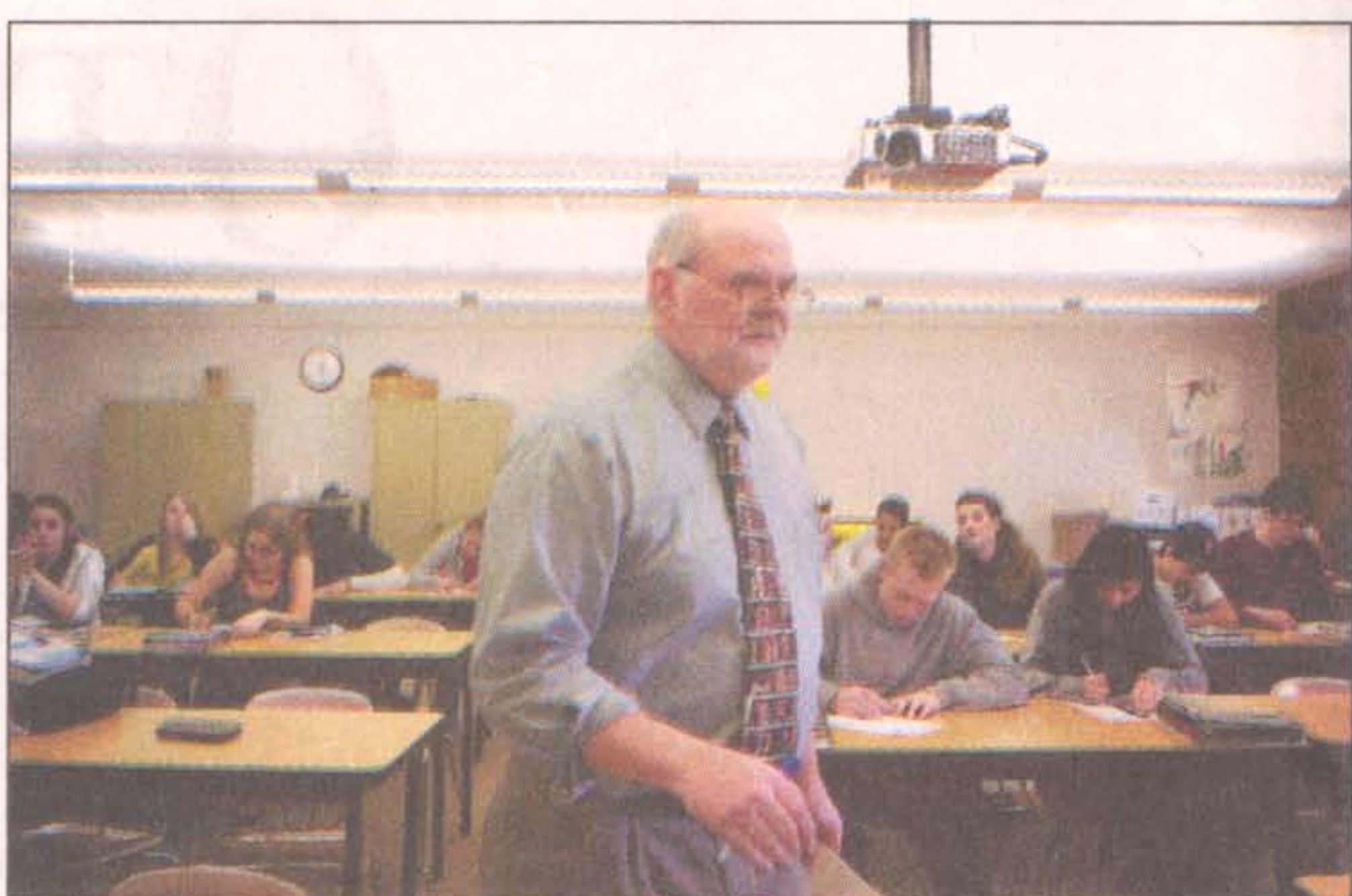
Practice, practice, practice

When the state schools office released revised standards in January, math educators from the group *Where's the Math?* became more vocal.

"I compare it to golf," said Evergreen High School math Chairman Bob Dean, a promoter of traditional math. "To really get good at golf, you need to work at the driving range, work on your stroke. ... Yeah, it's boring sometimes to hone your skills. But there isn't anybody who's really good at anything who doesn't have to do that."

Vancouver Public Schools math coach Allison Brands has taught re-

MATH, back page



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Evergreen High School teacher Bob Dean has written damning reviews of the state's new math standards. Dean believes that math instruction should emphasize practice, while the state is moving toward more word-based problems.

Math:

From Page C1

form math for two years. She said math teachers like the state's new standards because the language is specific.

"Integrated tends to give context and why it's important to learn this up-front," Brands said. "You're not getting 50 problems, do the same thing, drill and grill."

Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson contends there needn't be such a debate. Good teachers will use both approaches, she said, inserting math drills where needed.

"We need to start with a strong set of standards and build from that. We trade with the world. Our kids need to be ready."

College criticism

The most heat may come from the colleges. There, some professors say reform math has resulted in declining standards.

"This is a sign of great failure of the educational profession," University of Washington Professor Cliff Mass said. "They have a tendency to take on fads, even though there's no empirical support, because it sounds good."

"The integrated approach is really problematic; it skips around topics so much," Mass continued. "It doesn't work at all. We're seeing the product of it now."

Some reform supporters questioned whether professors know about teaching lower grades. When told this, Mass paused.

"We're saying you're not being successful," Mass said. "We're saying you're failing."

At Clark College, the num-

ber of students enrolled in remedial math has stayed steady in the last five years.

About 44 percent of students who come from the high schools are enrolled in courses that have traditionally been taught in high school, vice president of instruction Ras-soul Dastmozd said.

"Do we see a trend? People are coming to us with the same level of underpreparedness," Dastmozd said. "But four years ago, the decision was made to go to a new format. That was going to be the savior of the whole world, but it didn't live up to its expectation, did it?"

Clark College was among the first to start remedial math courses — largely a response to older students who needed refresher courses.

For Dastmozd, it boils down to better training and increased compensation.

"So long as we have questionable wages, it's not going to be an attractive profession for people to hang their hat on," Dastmozd said. "That's a broader argument I'm making — it's about the passion of your heart, yes, but today's teachers need totally different resources."

Standards under revision

Members of the state House and Senate voted unanimously this month to give more control of the standards process to the state board of education, independent of the state schools' office.

Rep. Dave Quall, D-Mount Vernon and chairman of the education committee, said he drafted the bill to temper the debate.

"I'm not even saying that it was necessary, but there has been controversy," Quall said. "We'd like to get everyone on the same page, and in order to do that we have to craft things in a way that's going to get support."

After three revisions and further review by the consultant hired by the board of education, the final standards should be complete this summer.

And while the traditionalists believe that improvements have been made, they're wary about what sort of change that may result.

After reviewing the last set of standards in March, teacher Bob Dean said he's not convinced.

In a report, he wrote: "Effort alone can't be the criteria that these standards are judged by. It is unfortunate that the result of that effort has been a set of standards that can only be judged to be very mediocre at best."

ISOLDE RAFTERY can be reached at 360-735-4546 or isolde.raftery@columbian.com.