Students learning Number Sense early

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Longfellow kindergarten students and their Augustana math buddies played a frenzy of math games last Wednesday.

The fuchsia and bright orange Play-Doh, towers of colorful blocks and puzzles look like fun and games, but all the activity really amounts to specialized small group learning to give youngsters a boost with their math skills and future elementary education teachers a hands-on lesson in working in the classroom.

Augustana education professor Mike Egan leads the group made up of Longfellow kindergarten students and Augustana junior elementary education majors. The math buddies have been meeting weekly since August as part of Augustana's Number Sense initiative.

Mr. Egan said research has shown what a student learns about math before entering first grade has proven to be a powerful indicator for their future success in math.

"The research is clear that this is a pivotal age," he said. "We hope to make sure the children progress and are really ready to go."

Last Wednesday's math buddy session
involved several stations where two Augustana students and three Longfellow students worked on unique tasks geared toward areas the elementary students need to improve.

At one table, Lauren Jerzyk worked with a group of boys to solve subtraction problems using a software program on a laptop. Ms. Jerzyk said the computer games captured the boys' attention and kept them focused. In addition to staying on task, the boys did well at solving problem after problem during the session that lasted a little more than a half hour.

"How many were there? How many fell out? How many are still hiding under there?" Ms. Jerzyk asked, guiding the students through the computer game. "You guys are so good at this game. It must be your X-ray vision."

Mr. Egan said at some stations students are working with puzzle pieces to master counting to 10, another more advanced group is using blocks, dice and colored circles to count all the way to 100, and another group of girls who are struggling writing their numbers use Play-Doh to form the numerals.

"A single teacher can't individualize like this to each child's needs," he said. "The extra manpower is pretty intensive."

Mr. Egan said overall the program is going very well. Sometimes his college students are frustrated in the growth rate of their kindergarten students, but he said it's an important lesson to learn that children don't always develop at the rate you expect and sometimes they surprise you by picking up things more quickly.

Augustana student Julie Jordan said she's excited to be a part of the program.

"We love it," she said. "This is the first year that they are doing it, and we are learning so much more."

Longfellow kindergarten teacher Vicki Peterson said her students look forward to the weekly visits by the Augustana students, and she thinks their efforts are making an impact.

"Anytime you can get more help in the classroom," she said.

She said the Number Sense program fits in well with the district's pilot math program, Math Trailblazers, which some of the schools are trying out. The pilot program, which incorporates many manipulatives and games, will be used throughout the district if the try-out proves successful, she said.