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Those of us who are perhaps skeptical of converting to the new metric system might be surprised to learn that metrics have been the "legal" United States method of measurement since 1866. Europe and other foreign countries have used metrics for more than 185 years, since metric beginnings in France.

According to Peg Brown, Holt School's math chairman and fifth grade teacher at Sycamore Elementary, the U.S. is one of only five countries not fully converted to metric measurement. We join Liberia, Brunei, Berma and Yemen in alternate measurement methods, other than metric legal use and foreign trade.

"The metric system is so much more logical than the customary way," Mrs. Brown said. "It's a reinforcement of everything we've ever learned, but it's easier because it works from a base unit of ten."

Mrs. Brown, who conducts a weekly evening metrics class for adults, said American's old way of measuring is confusing because it is not always easy to convert inches into feet (and vice-versa) without working out a lengthy math problem on paper. Memorization is usually difficult, too, she said.

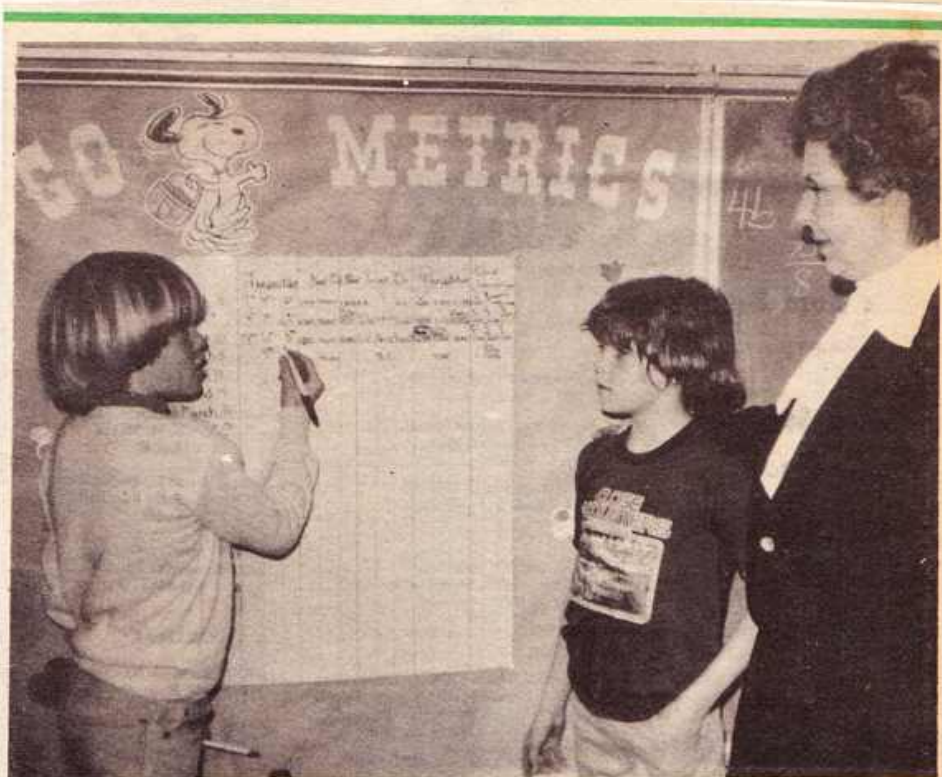
"With metrics, you learn your three major bases: meter, liter and gram," Mrs. Brown explained. "They tie everything else together. There's really no way to 'tie' inches and feet together, because the base units are different."

The inch was originally defined by the length of a king's thumb, and a foot by the length of his own foot. The mile was initially related to the marching distances of the Roman legions, Mrs. Brown added, and "any relationship between those units is accidental, especially since kings, like all of us, come in different sizes."

However, working from the base 10, metric units are always exactly 10, 100 or 1,000, or 0.1, 0.01 and 0.001 times other units.

"All metric units are related to one another in this same way and easy to work with," Mrs. Brown said. "This is the major reason it is used world-wide."

Metric system no trouble for fifth graders



Sycamore School fifth grader David Sump records the daily celsius reading on the metric weather chart at the back of the classroom. Looking on are classmate Kirk Nelson and teacher Peg Brown.

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In regards to her own fifth graders, Mrs. Brown said they're "whipping right through metrics," including the children who have trouble in other subjects and with customary mathematics and measurements.

"They're progressing faster than I expected," she laughed, explaining that the children are up to area metrics already, having passed linear, and will soon advance to cubic and volume measurement. Fractions will be incorporated later on, too, after the students learn the metric decimal system.

The main advantage, Mrs. Brown feels, is being able to teach metrics in a "hands on" method. Youngsters are learning measurement, she said, not just more computation.

Mrs. Brown said she hopes parents will be receptive to learning the system from their children as time progresses. One of her students

said she is teaching metrics to her mother, and this is encouraging, the teacher said.

When asked if she thinks we should be paying more attention to metric measurement, Mrs. Brown said yes, although she added that there is no set "deadline" when all U.S. citizens will have to convert. President Ford signed the Metric Conversion Act in 1975, but adoption will be gradual and is currently voluntary.

"I would advise that once you learn the metric system, you should use it as often as possible," Mrs. Brown said. "Don't go jumping back and forth from the customary way to metrics, you'll only confuse yourself."

Parental attitudes seem to be generally accepting, she added.

"As soon as parents understand the metric system, they're willing to go metric," Mrs. Brown said. "They see the advantages, and they want to know why we didn't convert a long time ago."

Mrs. Brown pointed out that all U.S. trade with the European Common Market countries must be done metrically now, a requirement that started in January. Obviously, she said, it would be advantageous for the entire country to convert to metrics, "unless we want to be like an island and sacrifice all international trade."

Persons who are reluctant to accept the metric system should think of the conversion "in a healthy way," Mrs. Brown suggested. "Everyone should approach it as something new to learn, something that will make them that much more intelligent. You don't have to completely forget the old way of measuring in order to learn metrics."

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