

Helping a 4th- or 5th-Grader Who Struggles in Math

Picking a math enrichment program is easy to get wrong, because the most popular choices each solve a *different* problem. This page walks you through the one question to answer first, then matches your child to the right kind of help.

It is based on *Haring and Eaton's Instructional Hierarchy*, a framework for understanding how novice students learn a new subject. The *Instructional Hierarchy* is described in more detail in my Feb. 10, 2026 article "[A Closer Look at the Six Finalist Curricula: Claims vs Reality](#)" that evaluated the six semi-finalist curricula that LCUSD was considering for its K–5 curriculum adoption before deciding on *Math in Focus*.

1 Find out which problem your child actually has

Sit beside your child with a grade-level problem they find hard. Give them as much time as they need and watch closely. Almost every struggling student falls into one of two groups — and the right program depends entirely on which one.

Fluency gap

Knows how — but it isn't automatic yet

- Gets the right answer if given enough time.
- Counts on fingers or re-derives basic facts.
- Can explain the steps, just works slowly.
- Mistakes are careless, especially when rushed or timed.

The skill is there — it just needs speed and automatic recall.

Acquisition gap

The concept itself isn't there yet

- Can't get started even with unlimited time.
- Guesses, or can't articulate what the problem is asking.
- Can't explain the steps in their own words.
- Mistakes are deeper — the wrong arithmetic operation entirely.

The concept or skill is missing — practice alone will only drill confusion.

2 Match the program to the problem

IF IT'S A FLUENCY STAGE GAP...

Kumon

Strong fit for building automaticity.

Why it works:

Daily, mastery-gated practice is purpose-built for turning a known skill into a fast, automatic one — the foundation for pre-algebra and algebra later.

What to expect:

A lot of repetition and roughly 20–30 minutes of work every day. The worksheets do the teaching; instructors explain very little.

Watch out:

Because no one teaches the concept, Kumon backfires for a child with an acquisition gap — the volume becomes frustrating drilling of something not understood.

Add-ons:

[IXL](#) for extra targeted drilling at home. (Your teacher should already have given you an IXL account for your student.)

Already tried Mathnasium or JEI with mixed results? That's common. A single program applied to both problems above tends to help whichever children happen to match its strengths and stall the rest. Determine the problem first, then choose.

IF IT'S AN ACQUISITION STAGE GAP...

A Singapore Math-method program

Teaches the concept before the practice.

Why it works:

The concept is taught explicitly and built using the Concrete → Pictorial → Abstract (CPA) approach, including the bar-modeling that struggling students are usually missing.

Local bonus:

LCUSD is adopting *Math In Focus* (a Singapore Math program) for grades K–5 in 2026–27 to improve the transition to grades 6–8, where MiF has been used since 2017. It assumes bar-modeling skill — so this route remediates *and* aligns with what's coming.

Add-ons:

[Khan Academy](#) for a first explanation of a specific concept that is unclear.

Enrichment is not remediation. Math Pod, Russian School of Math (RSM), and AoPS are excellent for problem solving and *Generalization/Adaptation* stage learning, but they are not for a child who is below grade level — for a struggling student they usually deepen the frustration. Save them for later after fluency is achieved.

3 Check whether it's actually working

Don't judge by your child's mood. Pick one measurable signal and revisit it at **6–10 weeks**:

- **Fluency goal:** answers are getting faster and more facts are recalled instantly.
- **Acquisition goal:** accuracy on untimed problems is climbing, and your child can explain a problem in their own words.

If there's no movement in two months, the program is the wrong match for your child's stage. Change it — don't wait a year.