WASHINGTON (AP) -- People in this country have a love-hate relationship with math, a favorite school subject for some but just a bad memory for many others, especially women.

In an AP-AOL News poll as students head back to school, almost four in 10 adults surveyed said they hated math in school, a widespread disdain that complicates efforts today to catch up with Asian and European students. Twice as many people said they hated math as said that about any other subject.

Some people like Stewart Fletcher, a homemaker from Suwannee, Georgia, are fairly good at math but never learned to like it.

"It was cold and calculating," she said. "There was no gray, it was black and white."

Still, many people -- about a quarter of the population -- said math was their favorite school subject, about the same number that preferred English and history, with science close behind, the poll found.

"It just came easy to me," Donald Foltasz, a pipefitter from Hamlin, New York, said about math. "When you got all done, you got answers. With English you could say a lot of words that mean different things, my interpretation might be different from any of the teachers. But with math, there's no interpretation -- two plus two is four."

Recent studies have suggested 15-year-olds in the United States lag behind those of the same age in Europe and Asia in math. Young people in many countries are stronger in the important subject of science, as well. Both subjects are critical in research, innovation and economic competitiveness.

Education experts say students should have a foundation in all core subjects -- such as math, English, social studies and science -- to become well-rounded citizens and skilled workers. Under the pressure of federal law, schools have put increasing focus on reading and math, the two areas in which they must make yearly progress or face possible sanctions.

The key to making children interested in math is to capture their imaginations at a young age, said Dianne Peterson, a fifth grade math teacher from Merritt Island, Florida. While she must spend part of her class time with basic tasks like...
multiplication tables and fractions, she tries to make it fun.

"I do a lot with music with them," Peterson said. "I've got some CDs that go over the facts. Some of it is rap and some of it is jazzy songs."

Compared with students overseas, students in this country tend to be stronger in math in elementary school and move progressively behind as they get into high school. Peterson said she thinks high school teachers aren't as inclined to nurture student's interest in a challenging subject like math.

When people are asked what subject they wish they had taken more of in school, they were most likely to mention foreign languages _ a feeling expressed more often in the cities and suburbs than in rural areas. That desire for more languages may have something to do with increasing numbers of immigrants, especially Hispanics, and foreign language is often a requirement for college.

"We are the only industrialized nation that routinely graduates students from high school with knowledge of only one language," said Marty Abbott, director of education at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "I think that says a lot about how other countries routinely build a multilanguage citizenry, and we do not."

More than half said they think children should get more education in both science and the arts.

Computers have become a major factor in elementary and especially high school education. Two-thirds in the poll said they think the use of a computer helps rather than hurts children with learning.

In fall 2003, nearly 100 percent of public schools in the United States had access to the Internet, compared with 35 percent in 1995, according to the Education Department.

"I think it can be an invaluable tool," said James Behrens, a retired postal worker who lives near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. "I have eight grandchildren and they're fairly computer literate. It's like having the world's best library, but it can take kids and make them pretty anti-social."

The AP-AOL News poll of 1,000 adults was conducted August 9-11 by Ipsos, an international polling firm, and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.