

**EdSource: [California schools turn to mindfulness to help students cope with stress](#)**

By Carolyn Jones

22 June 2020

Breathing exercises can help students cope with stress and improve their ability to learn, studies say



As students face cascading uncertainties about school, the pandemic, racial unrest and their futures, some school districts are turning to a simple practice to help young people deal with stress: mindfulness.

The exercise of quiet breathing and focusing on the present moment, mindfulness is a way to become aware of one's emotional state and usher in a sense of calm. It can be particularly helpful for young people as a means to boost attention skills and cope with stress, according to a 2019 [report](#) published by researchers at Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research.

Districts across the state in recent years have begun experimenting with the practice. In Los Angeles Unified, almost 1,000 teachers have undergone training — and hundreds more are on the waiting list — to learn mindfulness, yoga, tai chi and other techniques to improve students' mental health.

Even though schools are now operating remotely, these practices are continuing online, and more important than ever, teachers said.

In the Bay Area, Pittsburg Unified is among the districts that have brought in mindfulness experts to lead classroom exercises for students, as well as teachers. Those lessons have now shifted online, but are needed more than ever, said Heather Davis Puerzer, a first-grade teacher at Foothill Elementary in Pittsburg.

"I don't think there's a person on the planet who's not feeling traumatized right now and couldn't benefit from this," she said. "My kids seem to really get something out of it. Some of

them have even started asking for it — that’s how I know it’s working. I know it’s working for me.”



Since campuses closed in mid-March due to the coronavirus pandemic, interest in mindfulness techniques for young people has soared, said JG Larochette, director of the [Mindful Life Project](#), a Richmond nonprofit that serves San Francisco Unified, Oakland Unified and other Bay Area school districts.

Downloads of the organization’s [free app](#), available on its website, have increased 250 percent in the past two months, he said. Free videos and online lessons in English and Spanish are also available.

“It’s not a surprise,” he said. “The keys to good mental health for many people — stability, routine, interaction with peers — have all been taken away. It makes sense that some people are feeling angry, afraid, hopeless.”

For children, especially those who’ve experienced trauma, learning to recognize and manage negative emotions can have a beneficial impact on behavior, mood and brain development overall, according to researchers.

When under stress, the brain releases “fight-or-flight” jolts of adrenaline. If the stress is frequent, the effect on children — whose brains are still developing — can be profound. A recent [study](#) by researchers at the Stanford School of Medicine used brain scans to show that chronic anxiety altered children’s emotional-regulation brain circuits, making them more likely to suffer from long-term mood disorders.

In the short term, chronic anxiety can cause children to suffer from behavior problems and difficulty focusing, according to the [Child Mind Institute](#).

But taking a few minutes every day to clear one's head and think about nothing but the sound of one's breathing can, over time, help reverse some harmful effects of chronic stress, Larochette said.

"The good news is that the brain has plasticity," he said. "It can adapt and change. The younger you start, the better."

Sarah Maria Carbajal-Salas, a fourth-grader at Foothill Elementary in Pittsburg, did not need convincing. The mindfulness techniques she learned in school have changed her whole outlook, she said.

"Before, if something made me angry or frustrated, I'd be like that the whole day," she said. "But now when I get like that, I just take a few breaths and calm down. It's helped me find the positive side."

She even convinced her mother, Maria, to learn. Maria Salas said she had been feeling overwhelmed the past few months, due to the pandemic, work, personal issues and apprehension about the future. She and her husband, both travel agents, saw their incomes drop significantly with coronavirus-related travel bans, and she doesn't know when business will return.

"I couldn't sleep. I was worried all the time about what will happen to us," she said.



But after talking to her daughter and following Spanish-language mindfulness instructions online, she started meditating for eight minutes every morning before the rest of the family wakes up.

"I definitely feel better," she said. "More relaxed. Not as much pressure. I can think clearly. That's why stress management is so important. Sometimes you need someone to tell you, 'Come on, you can deal with this.'"

In Los Angeles Unified, the district hopes all teachers eventually undergo training in mindfulness and other stress-reduction techniques, not just to benefit students but for their own mental health, as well, said Adriana Valenzuela, the district's coordinator for health, social-emotional learning and physical education.

Although the district hasn't collected any data on its effectiveness, teachers have reported that it's had a positive impact on students' behavior and ability to learn, Valenzuela said.

"Teachers say they love it," she said. "It helps you to free your mind, focus on the positive and not the negative. Especially now, with everything that's going on, it's so important to keep our minds and bodies healthy."



The district is offering a summer school class for all students on mindfulness and staying fit. Already, 660 students are enrolled, she said. The district also provides free mindfulness apps for students and teachers, and is hoping for more funding to expand mindfulness training next year.

[The Steve Fund](#), a national nonprofit focused on mental health for students of color, encourages young people to practice mindfulness and other relaxation techniques to help cope with day-to-day stress.

For some students of color, in particular, the ongoing demonstrations and public spotlight on police brutality and systemic racism have led to heightened anxiety, said Sandra Timmons, the organization's interim executive director.

Those anxieties are compounded by the stress all students are facing now about school closures, the recession and the pandemic.

"It was this constant drip, drip, drip and then the dam broke loose," she said. "And for some students those anxieties are playing out not in the healthiest ways."

But while practices like mindfulness, yoga and exercise are important, they don't solve everything, she said. Schools need to play a bigger role in tending to students' mental

health, especially for those who are black or Latino and are facing extra stress during this time, Timmons said.

Schools need to hire more black and Latino counselors, establish peer counseling groups and crisis lines and train teachers to address race and mental health generally in the classroom, she said.

And, ultimately, adults need to listen more, she said.

“Young people are very resilient, but we need to help them, as well,” she said. “They’re going through a lot right now. We all need to step back, listen and think about what it will take to remove the barriers preventing them from being happy, healthy members of the community.”

That sentiment was echoed by Jody Miller, head of Esther B. Clark Schools, which has campuses in San Jose and Palo Alto. The schools serve students in kindergarten through 10th grade who’ve been referred by Bay Area school districts for mental health and behavioral services.

Her schools offer weekly mindfulness sessions to students and teachers, but nothing replaces positive one-on-one attention from adults, she said. While school campuses are closed, that responsibility primarily falls on parents.

“My advice is to just listen to kids. Be available, and don’t minimize whatever they’re experiencing. Talk to them about what’s going on. Let them ask questions,” she said. “If we don’t pay attention to students’ mental health needs, they’ll only get worse.”