

Low-Income Schools See Big Benefits in Teaching Mindfulness

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On his first day teaching at Coronado Elementary School in Richmond, Calif., students threw rocks at Jean-Gabrielle Larochette, pretending he was a police officer. He spent fifteen minutes of every class calming down a handful of kids in this low-income-neighborhood public school who wouldn't follow directions or behave.

Larochette began practicing meditation and mindfulness to cope with his own stresses of teaching and supporting traumatized kids. He believed the breathing techniques that helped calm his fears might work for his students too, so he founded the [Mindful Life Project](#).

"Before we can teach a kid how to academically excel in school, we need to teach him how to have stillness, pay attention, stay on task, regulate, make good choices," said Larochette. "We tell kids be quiet, calm yourself down, be still. We tell them all these things they need in the classroom, but we're not teaching them how to do that."

The project has since grown and is now being incorporated in a group of elementary schools in Richmond, in an attempt to improve academic performance and create a more positive school culture by teaching students mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to exist in the present moment and practicing it often looks like meditation. Schools across the country are beginning to use mindfulness as part of an effort to address the [social and emotional needs of children](#), improving student achievement in the process.

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“My hour of lost teaching time because of behavior problems went down to about 15 minutes a day –that meant almost a whole other day of teaching,” Larochette said. “I had to figure out what I could do to bring this to the rest of the schools in our area.”

Studies of mindfulness programs in schools have found that regular practice — even just a few minutes per day — [improves student self-control](#) and increases their classroom participation, respect for others, happiness, optimism, and self-acceptance levels. It can help reduce absenteeism and suspensions too. A mindfulness practice helps reduce activity in the amygdala, the brain’s emotional center responsible for fear and stress reactions.

“The other thing we know mindfulness does with the brain is it increases the activity in the prefrontal cortex,” said Vicki Zakrzewski, education director at the [UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center](#), which studies the science behind mindfulness. “This is where we make our decisions, how we plan, our abstract thinking,” she said.

Educators at Nystrom Elementary school in Richmond are seeing some of those positive effects in their students. “This year is much better,” said third-grade teacher Glenna Hamilton. “Last year, it was just horrible.” One of Hamilton’s most disruptive students became more respectful and responsible since he began receiving mindfulness training. “If he does something incorrect, instead of being argumentative with me, he really thinks about it and realizes, ‘I didn’t make a good choice,’ and I see him self-correcting,” she said.

Nystrom’s school culture has shifted since the student began mindfulness training, said Principal LeDonna Williams. Students now have a common language to use when they want to calm each other down and fewer students are being sent to her office. When a student does act up, Williams will sometimes ask them to practice mindfulness before she addresses the problem. “Then you see the little fists releasing and their temperament coming down and they’re willing to talk to you a little more candidly about what their issues are,” Williams said. “They use it, they really do and it’s nice to see that.”

COPING MECHANISM FOR TRAUMA

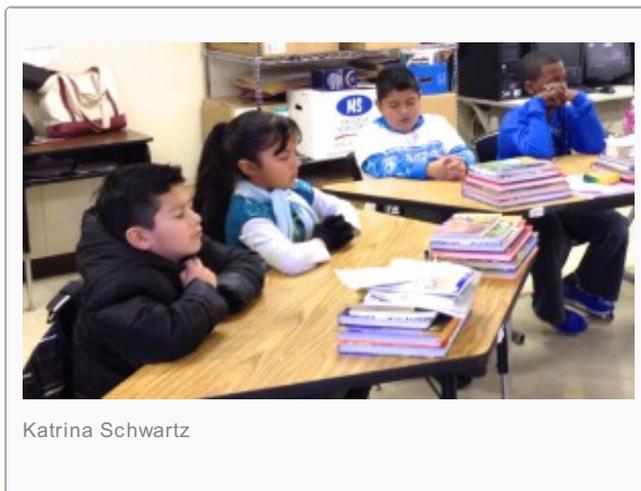
Many students at Nystrom directly know people who have been killed and others experience trauma secondhand from living in a violent neighborhood. In 2013, there were four homicides, 39 armed robberies and 47 assaults with a deadly weapon reported to the police in South Richmond.

“There’s a lot of grief and loss,” Williams said. “A lot of students experience violence on a daily basis, either in the home or in the community. And it’s coming out in their school work, in their interactions with other students, the climate of the school, it affects that.”

All the schools the Mindful Life Project works with have seen drops in detentions and referrals, said Larochette. At Nystrom, 18 kids accounted for 82 percent of the suspensions. At the beginning of their mindfulness training those kids were suspended 62 times in the first trimester. After three trimesters of mindfulness practice, that rate had dropped to 20.

“When we look at low-performing schools it’s not that these children are unable to learn, it’s that very often they are unavailable to learn,” said Madeline Kronenberg, a [West Contra Costa County](#) school board member.

“They’re not able to focus; they’re so fixated on other things that are going on in their lives that it’s difficult for them to be able to find space for learning. Our job is to educate these kids and the way you educate them is that they need to be available to learn.”



At Nystrom, students report using mindfulness in a variety of situations. “When there are older kids, we were playing football and he hit me pretty hard on purpose,” said sixth-grader Tayshawn Newman. “We were going to get into a huge argument, and I just said, ‘Forget it.’ I took a deep breath and said, ‘Forget it.’” Another student reported that the mindfulness training makes him feel calmer and that he uses it when he feels like hitting someone. Another boy said he uses his mindfulness practice when he has trouble falling asleep.

Hear about individual students’ experiences with the Mindful Life Project

The mindfulness instructors understand that for many kids the ability to create inward calm is crucial when external quiet is hard to come by.

“The idea was to really create a grassroots movement,” said Larochette. “A movement that’s within, that stays within, that solidifies within and then meeting our kids when they get to middle school and high school and sustaining those opportunities and having a mindful life project instead of just mindfulness for eight to 10 weeks or a couple of years.”

The project is in the process of finalizing contracts with two of the biggest middle schools in the area. They hope mindfulness will follow elementary school graduates, helping them navigate middle school and eventually high school. Ultimately, Larochette would love to have high school mindfulness students come back to mentor younger students.

Check out what the [Mindful Life Project](#) looks like in action.

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