

Time for 'Yoga in Schools'

Pilot program will introduce the practice to youngsters in three schools

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By Pohla Smith, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's time for the students to take a test, but they're all sleepy-eyed and lethargic. What's a teacher to do?

In three local schools, they have the option of segueing into a few minutes of eye-opening yoga before handing out the exams.

The 5-minute to 15-minute sessions, which the teachers can do at any time the exercise seems warranted, are all part of Yoga in Schools, a 16-week pilot project running this school year via a \$35,000 grant from The Grable Foundation.

The involved schools are the Urban League of Pittsburgh Charter School in East Liberty, the Pittsburgh Urban Christian School in Wilkinsburg and the Helen S. Faison Arts Academy in Homewood. The involved kids range from kindergarten to eighth grade.



John Beale, Post-Gazette

In the foreground, Joanne Spence, executive director of Yoga in Schools, leads a training session for teachers at Helen S. Faison Arts Academy in Homewood earlier this month. The school is one of three participating in a program to introduce children to yoga as a boost to learning.

In addition to the mini-, teacher-taught sessions, the students will have weekly 30 minute to 40 minute-classes (depending on the grade) taught by trained yogis.

Yoga in Schools founder and executive director Joanne Spence said she believes the more than 600 students she, her staff and the teachers are reaching will benefit from "increased physical and emotional fitness.

"In terms of physical fitness, they'll be stronger, more limber and more able to participate in activities kids like to participate in, like soccer," she added.

"They're learning to manage their emotional states. Like [if they feel] stress -- sit down and breathe. That would be increasing their emotional fitness. That will increase their focus and concentration."

And that makes for better learning, she said, "mostly because the state necessary for children to learn in is being present in the moment. If children are able to do that, come to that place, the teacher will be able to teach them."

Yoga in Schools was inspired by Spence's previous career as a social worker specializing with at-risk youth and by her own experience with the benefits of the ancient Eastern discipline.

Eight years ago, she was injured in a serious car accident that left her in chronic pain until she took an intensive, three-day yoga course two years later. She continued to study, eventually becoming a yogi. She now operates her own studio, FitnessYoga , in Regent Square.

"Throughout the development of my [yoga] practice, I thought often of the many children I had previously worked with as a social worker, and what a difference these simple movements and

breathing practices would have made for the children in those years of social work practice," Spence wrote in her grant application to Grable.

Spence has received nonprofit status for Yoga in Schools. The Grable Foundation is the first to provide financial support.

Executive director Susan Brownlee said the foundation was taken by the concept and also impressed with the enthusiastic backing of Faison principal Yvona K. Smith.

"I think children from high poverty neighborhoods deal with a lot of factors that create stress and tension," Brownlee said. "And that stress and tension often leads to difficult behavior. They may be overly active or overly passive."

Brownlee said the foundation also was interested in the fact that University of Pittsburgh graduate sociology student Donna Harrington is going to do an outcomes-based assessment of the program.

"We'll be interested in seeing those numbers," Brownlee said. If they are good, further Grable funding is possible, she added.

Yoga Ed, the curriculum Spence is using, was written by a company of the same name in Los Angeles, and is designed to make yoga fun. Spence received training from the company.

For example, the way a teacher might handle the kids too lethargic to take their exam might be an exercise called "bunny breathing." The children would breathe in four times quickly through the nose and then once out through the mouth.

Or, if the students are dawdling when it's time to clean up after playing with Popsicle sticks, the teacher might turn that process into a series of yoga poses. "It's a game now, not just cleaning up,"

Spence said.

The game speeds the cleanup and provides a little more time for actual teaching.

It also helps with transition time, or the time it takes to move an entire class from one activity to another.

"Not all children deal very well with transition times or are able to move at the same time," she said. "It works in letting the teachers have an extra tool in their back pocket."

The separate classes taught by the yogis are similar to those attended by adults -- except for the built-in fun and games. They are broken into four segments: breathing, poses, games and time-in, in which the children are taught to turn their attention from what's going on around them to themselves.

Dr. Bruce Rabin, medical director of UPMC's Healthy Lifestyles program, praised the pilot project after meeting with Spence.

"I think the projects which help to calm children, which provide them with experience in behaviors that are relaxing and that enhance their breathing, that enhance their ability to call down when experiencing anxiety and stress are extremely important," he said. "... yoga is certainly one of those things."