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Relax, stretch and learn

Middle school teachers find a new tool to help kids — YOGA

By Amanda McGregor
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SALEM — Sarah Mason has noticed a change in her students: They are more focused, relaxed and physically stronger, too. So what's their secret? Mason attributes it to yoga.

Approximately 10 teachers and aides at Collins Middle School began using yoga in the classroom this fall, teaching students to use postures, breathing exercises and visualization techniques.

"It is amazing how a few minutes of breathing, stretching or yoga poses and guided time-ins can change the mood of a class," teacher Ruth Hendrickson marveled.

Through a grant to teach yoga to educators, retired Collins teacher Linda Viel, who is a certified yoga instructor, taught a six-week course this fall with certified Kripalu yoga teacher Bruce Callahan. A variety of teachers — special ed, ESL and regular classroom teachers — took the training.

"The great part about it is helping kids to learn at their best," said Mason, whose learning skills class at Collins enrolls students with intellectual disabilities. "It's what you can do physically to help your mind be fully ready to learn."

Viel and Callahan used a program called "Yoga Ed." to train the teachers to incorporate yoga into education in order to improve fitness, academic achievement and stress management. Callahan secured the grant to teach the course in Salem from the Rachael Greene Memorial Fund at Kripalu in Stockbridge.

"The students learn how to comfortably relax and focus as the day progresses," said Viel, the program uses breathing exercises, games, yoga postures and rest/meditation time (called time-in).

On a recent morning, Mason had the students pull out their yoga mats and then guided them through a series of exercises, at one point directing the students to make a tree posture.

"Plant your roots," she said. "Twist your hips down and shoulders back. ... We're balanced into the ground. Let's see how balanced we can be on one foot."

She continuously reminded children that yoga is aimed at making them feel better and repeated a sort of mantra: "This is to get your brain and your mind connected to your body so you can do your best for the rest of the day."

As she wound down the lesson, speaking slowly and gently, Mason instructed the students to "feel your breath go in and out, and then relax your shoulders, your back, your spine ..." which she followed with a visualization exercise.

After the lesson, the students rolled up their mats and returned to their desks.

"The children really showed improvement doing the postures and at staying still during the rest/visualization activities," Viel said of the yoga classes, which made students "so much more calm and cooperative." Mason said she does a full yoga lesson about once a week but mainly incorporates the techniques throughout the day in five- or 10-minute segments. "I'll get a feel for what the room needs, like a couple of calming breaths," Mason said. "Just doing that for five minutes makes the next 40 minutes more productive."

Student Antonio Rosario said the yoga and breathing exercises have made a difference. "I like the breathing because it gets us focused and ready," said Antonio, 13. "It makes you strong. I feel different."

When Mason first introduced yoga to her students, they struggled to execute the postures and to hold them without losing their balance. But she has witnessed a transformation, she said, and they are "more aware of how their bodies are feeling."

"As we've done it, their muscles have built memory and strength," Mason said, "and I can definitely see it connecting. It has to do with feeling peaceful and settled. When you're grounded, I think you're more willing to do a lot of things like be motivated, take academic risks and be more social."

Mason had never taken a yoga class before the Yoga Ed. course.

"I knew that in helping myself, it would help me be better for them," she said. "It's about having all the tools I need."

"The teachers have been learning five- to 10-minute activities," Viel said, "using the tools to improve the learning environment of their classes."

Ideally, teachers are passing on techniques to students that they'll incorporate at a conscious level at first, but then use subconsciously throughout their lives, Mason said.

Student Isaiah Caouette, 13, said he used a breathing technique at home when he got angry.

"I like the snake breath," Isaiah said. "You breathe in and hiss out, and it gets the laughs out. (Yoga) calms people down. You stretch a lot."

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