

# At a school in Baltimore, mindfulness proves more effective than punishment

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.17.16

Word Count **751**



Seven-year-old Payton Taylor tries to calm down in the Mindful Moments room at the Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 2, 2016. Linda Davidson/Washington Post

BALTIMORE, Md. — At many schools, the third-grader would have been sent to the principal's office.

Instead, the boy who tussled with a classmate one recent morning found his way to a quiet room that smelled of lemongrass. It was a safe place where he could breathe and meditate.

Robert W. Coleman Elementary is located in a tough neighborhood in west Baltimore. The school has moved away from detention and suspension to something educators hope is more effective. Instead of punishing misbehavior, the school is encouraging students to practice mindfulness.

When they misstep or need calming, students are sent to the Mindful Moment Room. It's a space decorated with bright curtains, cushions and beanbags. Staff members there ask the students to explain what happened, to talk about their feelings, to breathe deeply.

## **Deep Breathing Instead Of Harsh Words**

The third-grader who scuffled with a classmate broke into tears. Staff member Oriana Copeland held his hand as they talked. There were no harsh words. He came around slowly.

"Inhaling deep," she guided him. "Exhale and out."

Mindfulness practices encourage people to become aware of their feelings, stay in the present and use better ways of breathing to relax. They're part of a school-wide program at Coleman that has changed how students are treated when they get in trouble. The program is also affecting the school's culture. It is part of a larger effort by the nonprofit Holistic Life Foundation to bring mindfulness into Baltimore city schools and beyond.

Principal Carlillian Thompson said the practices help the school's 378 students leave behind the worries of their lives. Mindfulness helps them clear their minds so they can get ready to learn.

## **A Safe Place For Children To Reflect**

"When children come here, I want them to view this as a safe place," Thompson said.

As mindfulness has become part of the school's approach, Thompson said she has seen signs of success, including more reflection and awareness. "Children are more willing to take responsibility for their behaviors," she said.

Schools across the country have increasingly embraced yoga and mindfulness practices. But few have done so with the whole-school approach Coleman is using, Tamar Mendelson said. Mendelson teaches at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Research about the effect of mindfulness practices on children in school settings is still in its early stages. However, there have been promising signs of social and emotional benefits. A few studies have pointed to academic improvement, Mendelson said.

## **Starting The School Day With Mindfulness**

"The program seems to be working particularly well at Robert Coleman," she said. "It is very powerful to hear students and teachers talk about positive effects, not only for the individual students but for the school community and climate as a whole."

The effort at Coleman started about eight years ago with an after-school program, which was expanded in 2014. Now school days start with a recording over the public address system guiding students through breathing exercises. It's 15 minutes of mindfulness at the beginning of school and 15 minutes more when the day ends.

"It makes you calm down and have a great day," said Jada Hinton, 6.

The Mindful Moment Room was another addition, a dedicated space to help students calm down, work on breathing and collect themselves. It provides 15 to 20 minutes out of the classroom to reset emotionally.

## **Many Coleman Students Have Tough Lives**

In their daily lives, many Coleman students see drug dealing and hear sirens or gunshots. Some don't have stable housing, and some worry about relatives getting locked up.

"These children face a lot of situations that most youth don't have to deal with," said Andy Gonzalez, who helped start the original mindfulness program with brothers Ali and Atman Smith. All three were students together at the University of Maryland in College Park. They hope the program will help students be happier and have more focus and self-control.

At Coleman, the Mindful Moment Room was visited often in October, with Holistic Life staff member Jamar Peete counting 256 referrals to the room that month. On one day in November, a dozen children visited.

One was the third-grader who had scuffled with a classmate.

By the time he left, another boy had walked in, then another. Just before 11 a.m., four boys were sitting on the cushions and beanbags, with two staff members.

One began the breathing exercises they all have come to know.

"Inhaling deep," he said aloud. "Lock your chin to your chest. Exhale and out."

## Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Starting The School Day With Mindfulness" that explains how the mindfulness program at Coleman began.
  
- 2 Which sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] suggests that other methods of improving student behavior have not worked?
  - (A) At many schools, the third-grader would have been sent to the principal's office.
  - (B) Instead, the boy who tussled with a classmate one recent morning found his way to a quiet room that smelled of lemongrass.
  - (C) The school has moved away from detention and suspension to something educators hope is more effective.
  - (D) When they misstep or need calming, students are sent to the Mindful Moment Room.
  
- 3 Based on the sections "A Safe Place For Children To Reflect" and "Starting The School Day With Mindfulness," Tamar Mendelson would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?
  - (A) The approach to mindfulness appears to be improving the overall mood of the school.
  - (B) It is important for all students in elementary school to learn how to practice yoga.
  - (C) The mindfulness program would not work if the school did not also have the Mindful Moment Room.
  - (D) It has been proven that mindfulness teaches students to have social and academic responsibility.
  
- 4 Which of the following MOST influenced Coleman school officials to implement a mindfulness program for its students?
  - (A) Teachers at Coleman began seeing more behavior problems in students than they had in the past.
  - (B) Many Coleman students have trouble focusing because of stressful conditions where they live.
  - (C) Students asked for the mindfulness program in order to focus better on their schoolwork.
  - (D) Mindfulness practices have been proven to increase academic performance.

## Answer Key

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Starting The School Day With Mindfulness" that explains how the mindfulness program at Coleman began.

**Paragraph 13:**

**The effort at Coleman started about eight years ago with an after-school program, which was expanded in 2014. Now school days start with a recording over the public address system guiding students through breathing exercises. It's 15 minutes of mindfulness at the beginning of school and 15 minutes more when the day ends.**

- 2 Which sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] suggests that other methods of improving student behavior have not worked?

- (A) At many schools, the third-grader would have been sent to the principal's office.
- (B) Instead, the boy who tussled with a classmate one recent morning found his way to a quiet room that smelled of lemongrass.
- (C) The school has moved away from detention and suspension to something educators hope is more effective.**
- (D) When they misstep or need calming, students are sent to the Mindful Moment Room.

- 3 Based on the sections "A Safe Place For Children To Reflect" and "Starting The School Day With Mindfulness," Tamar Mendelson would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?

- (A) The approach to mindfulness appears to be improving the overall mood of the school.**
- (B) It is important for all students in elementary school to learn how to practice yoga.
- (C) The mindfulness program would not work if the school did not also have the Mindful Moment Room.
- (D) It has been proven that mindfulness teaches students to have social and academic responsibility.

- 4 Which of the following MOST influenced Coleman school officials to implement a mindfulness program for its students?
- (A) Teachers at Coleman began seeing more behavior problems in students than they had in the past.
  - (B) Many Coleman students have trouble focusing because of stressful conditions where they live.**
  - (C) Students asked for the mindfulness program in order to focus better on their schoolwork.
  - (D) Mindfulness practices have been proven to increase academic performance.