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## Current Issue On Sale Now: September - October, 2006

### Yoga in Schools: Does It Pass the Test?

By Shannon Sexton

On the southwest side of Chicago, in a neighborhood where shootings, stabbings, robberies, and drug deals pepper the night, in the noonday shade of an oak in McKinley Park, a handful of second graders are acting out an imaginary yoga class.

During the day, this community green space is relatively safe, so teachers from the local inner-city school let their students loose on the playground for "gym."

Khameron Cunningham is the accidental guru here. A skinny girl with charcoal skin and braided pigtails, she's looking for some quiet time. Sitting under the oak, she crosses her legs, rests her hands on her knees, and closes her eyes. Within a few moments the tension drains from her face. But soon, she attracts attention. A gaggle of pint-sized yoga teachers crowd around her, offering instructions.

"Breathe in...breathe out..." says one. "Relax your shoulders!" says another. "Relax your face," a third chimes in. "Think of someone you love." Then the tiniest voice pipes up: "Khameron, try to float into the air!" The children coo. Their hands reach out and touch her head, her face, her shoulders. "Float!" they say. "You can do it!" Khameron's eyes flick open like switchblades. "You guys are distracting me," she growls. "Leave. Me. ALONE!" She stomps off, reassuming her pose on a long, low bench. She flips the hood of her windbreaker over her face like a mask and doesn't move. One by one, the little ones sneak across the mulch, slither onto Khameron's bench, and sit in meditation pose. Up go the hoods. Dozens of their classmates swoop down slides, streak across the park, squeal and zigzag through the swings, but this group of six is immersed in the stillness of their yoga class. One lone, little teacher remains. Her hands move slowly, artfully, through space as she instructs her line of little, faceless buddhas: "Be calm, be calm... Let go of your worries." They manage a full minute of stillness, then the buddhas start to move. A hand twitches. An arm moves. A face appears. Then the teacher-girl steps in: Working her way down the line, she gently rubs the scalp and shoulders of each child. Even Khameron surrenders to her touch.

Now it's time for poses. Khameron removes her mask and stands up. Claspng her hands over her head, she plants one foot into the earth and jackknifes into virabhadrasana 3. Others follow. "Tree pose," she commands, and the children obey, folding their lifted leg into half lotus at their hip. They are not

without wobble and squirm, but their poses are impressive for a group of seven-year-olds. They do a few more asanas, then Khameron presses her palms together at her heart and closes the session by saying “Namaste.” “NAMASTE!” the children cheer.

### The Question of Inner Light

Namaste. This Sanskrit greeting (“My inner light salutes your inner light”) is both the name and the theme of Chicago’s innovative Namaste Charter School, created in 2004 to address two alarming, burgeoning trends: childhood obesity and low achievement in inner-city public schools. The problems facing U.S. education are all too familiar, particularly in low-income, urban areas where whole communities are at risk. Obesity; attention deficit disorders; diabetes; violence; gun crimes; widening economic gaps. The standard too many overwhelmed families live by is daily survival, not progress or achievement.

The question is: Can yoga make a difference? Schools like Namaste believe the answer is yes. Its principal, Allison Slade, often cites a 2003 California State University, Los Angeles, study conducted at The Accelerated School (TAS) in South Central LA, which found a positive correlation between yoga-class participation and academic success, physical fitness, behavior, and self-esteem among elementary and middle schoolers. On a daily basis, her school, too, is a yoga performance test.

Both Namaste and TAS take a radical approach to education, infusing yoga—and in some ways, yogic principles—into their staff training, curriculum, and community outreach. They aim to boost the health, happiness, and academic achievement of their students—and hope to improve the lives of their teachers and parents, too. Kids are taught to take a deep breath when they’re angry, relax in child’s pose before a test, try new vegetables on the salad bar—and coax their parents off the couch at night to exercise. Parents and teachers, in turn, can take their own yoga classes, serve on the school board, volunteer in classrooms, learn about nutrition, and join school walking clubs.

But the schools’ vision is a “yoga” that goes deeper. From a young age, children are mentored into a culture of svadhyaya (self-study and self-inquiry). A well-rounded curriculum gives them a broad understanding of the world. And the matrix of health and positive socialization gives these kids—and their families—a window into a healthier, happier life. If only all children could attend schools like these, you may think, for a core tenet of yoga is that if everyone could control their own body and mind, ours would be a peaceful world.

### Charter Schools: A Matter of Choice

Namaste and TAS are charter schools—schools that are underwritten with public funds but run independently from the district. As a result they are free of many restrictions that keep traditional schools from experimenting with new educational tools. Students are admitted by lottery, without academic screening, but charters enjoy a number of luxuries: they can hire their own teachers, write their own report cards and curriculums, shrink class sizes, lengthen the school day, even require parents to be involved in their children’s education. The tradeoff? Charters are held strictly accountable for student achievement; if their students fall behind, the school system can shut them down.

While not all charters are successful, there are signs that on the whole, these independent public schools are closing the achievement gap. Dean Kern, director of the Charter Schools Program (CSP) in the U.S. Department of Education, says in general: “Charter schools enroll higher numbers of the lowest performing students, students in poverty, and students of color. Over time, when you look at longitudinal growth models, they bring students to proficiency and above at a faster rate than traditional schools around them.”

No wonder they’re in demand. Ten years ago, there were approximately 100 charters in the U.S. Today there are over 3,600 (with a 13% increase expected for next year), says Kern, and between one-half and two-thirds of those schools have waiting lists. Over \$600 million has been invested in the CSP, and Bush has allocated \$60 million more to add school facilities.

While it may seem surprising that the Bush administration would back yoga-friendly schools, either accidentally or incidentally, it has done so. When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, the bipartisan education reform bill was meant to support public schools, he said, in “their mission to build the mind and character of every child from every background.” The law states that parents of students in failing schools must have the option to transfer them to another public school in their district, including a charter school. As U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings puts it, “These schools can be lifelines for parents with no other options.”

The young, relatively inexperienced founders of TAS and Namaste were able to get their schools going at specific moments in time, perfect storms of circumstance and visionary leadership.

In two different cities, in two different decades, they dreamed up their schools, got their charter proposals approved against daunting odds, began a frantic search for funding, teachers, students, and facilities—and then, within just a few months, had their schools open. Here are their stories.

### The Accelerated School

A Shining Example in South Central LA

With its new \$50 million campus and long track record of student success, TAS is the Rolls Royce of charter schools. But it didn’t start out that way. In 1993, after only two years of teaching, 24-year-olds Johnathan Williams and Kevin Sved knew there was more to educating kids than what they could do at 99th Street School in South Central LA. Lack of teacher accountability, district-union feuds over wages, and teacher strikes meant, Kevin Sved says, “Kids were lost in the shuffle.”

California’s charter law had just gone into effect in January, and 100 new schools would soon be permitted to operate outside of normal district policies. Sved and Williams opted to strike out on their own.

“We were young enough and dumb enough to think we could actually do it,” Kevin jokes now. He and Johnathan entered the planning stages with a group of 12 supporters, but by the time their charter was approved with just six months left to raise \$200,000, recruit students, and find a home for the school, only the two of them were left standing.

They looked hard for the money. “We probably got 120 official rejection letters,” says Kevin, “and another 120 organizations never responded.” But their perseverance paid off. With last minute funding from Wells Fargo Bank, TAS opened in September of 1994 in two rooms leased from a church. Williams and Sved could hire only two teachers for the 50 students entering K–4th grade. For the next three years, the group broke set every Friday to make room for church services and returned on Sunday to set up blackboards, desks, and chairs for the coming week.

The founders named TAS after the reform plan they based their proposal on: The Accelerated Schools model, created in 1986 by Stanford University Professor Henry M. Levin. As Levin explains: “The idea was to reverse what was, and still is, happening with at-risk students. The standard way of building up their test scores is to dumb everything down and put a lot of emphasis on what is called ‘drill and practice’ or ‘drill and kill.’ But if kids don’t have the skills that are going to be important for their development, we have to accelerate their growth, not dumb things down.” Levin holds that when teachers and parents have high academic expectations for students, the kids rise to meet them. A recent Brown University study comparing Levin’s approach with four other

comprehensive educational reform models and control schools concluded that the Accelerated Schools model was the most effective. Today, over 1,000 schools around the country follow its protocol.

This model also holds that the entire school community—teachers, administrators, families, students—should participate in school decisions and develop a shared vision of student success. At TAS, parents are required to sign contracts vowing to volunteer at the school for 30 hours per year. And teacher pay is linked to student performance. Parents and staff are procedurally involved in decisions ranging from curriculum to nutrition policy.

In their plan for successful learning, the founders made room for smaller classes, healthier food, and more physical exercise. They wove subjects like character development, life skills, and nutrition into their rigorous academic curriculum. And while schools across the country were cutting out programs like art, music, and gym, TAS was putting them in.

Because Williams and Sved knew they couldn't run the school on their expertise alone, they slowly built a strong board of directors with people who knew about the law, finance, fund-raising, real estate, educational policy, and other fields important to TAS's success. And one of their first partners, the Accelerated Schools Center at California State University, LA, introduced them to education philanthropist Tara Guber, who is married to movie producer Peter Guber. She joined the board early on and became a tireless advocate for the school. In 1997 Guber led Williams and Sved to clothing designer Carole Little and her business partner, Leonard Rabinowitz, who were looking to donate their South Central clothing factory, valued at more than \$6 million, to an educational institution. During the 1992 LA riots, locals had protected the factory from arson, and in gratitude, the couple wanted to give back to the community. The gift, according to the LA Times, was the biggest in the city's education history.

Because she had once been a grammar school teacher in Brooklyn, Tara Guber knew what inner-city kids faced in and out of school. A longtime yoga practitioner herself, in 1998 she hatched a plan to teach hatha classes at TAS. Yoga, she thought, would help kids make the mind-body connection and improve their concentration, behavior, and self-esteem. Johnathan and Kevin were intrigued. Tara and Peter financed a one-year pilot project for two grades to have yoga classes twice a week.

"The kids responded, the teachers saw the difference, and the parents were overwhelmingly supportive," Kevin reports. "So that all of our kids could get yoga, Tara increased the funding and we expanded the program." Guber also developed age-appropriate teaching techniques and lesson plans for K–8 students. Three years later, she founded an organization called Yoga Ed, which today trains teachers from around the country.

The yoga program at TAS is now in full force. Some of the students have been taking classes for eight years. PE instructors weave asanas into their calisthenics routine, and most of the classroom teachers have been trained through Yoga Ed's Tools for Teachers workshops.

For TAS third-grade teacher Diane Hackett, Tools for Teachers is a blessing. At her previous inner-city LA school, which she labels "a typical urban school," she says she and other teachers "focused on state testing and on keeping everything under control between 8 and 3 without the help of an instructional assistant or parent helpers. I taught up to 37 kids. I did my own PE, there was no arts instruction, and of course no yoga."

Second-grade teacher Holly Ellman says, "Here, when things get a little hairy, it's really easy for me to diffuse the situation by introducing some yogic breathing." In class Ellman incorporates seated twists, alternate nostril breathing, and sun salutations to help kids transition between subjects, recenter when they're being chatty, and prepare for their weekly timed math test. "Because they go to yoga twice a week, it's natural to do it in my class too," Ellman says. "It's become one of my classroom management tools."

According to Yoga Ed program director Leah Kalish, demand for Tools for Teachers workshops has skyrocketed. In 2003, the organization trained 60 teachers. In 2004, Yoga Ed won a three-year federal Physical Education Program grant to provide yoga-oriented training to teachers and PE instructors. By the end of this year, the teacher-training tally could swell to as many as 9,000.

### Reality Check on Yoga's Benefits

Today, TAS is a pre-K through 12th grade academy that, as parent Mario Ortega once told Time magazine, "is like a \$20,000 private school without the tuition." Although only 60 spaces open each year, nearly 5,000 kids crowd the waiting list. What's more, TAS students like to go to school. Their 94% attendance rate is very high for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

Last year, TAS celebrated the grand opening of the revamped Carole Little site, with its state-of-the-art multiplex of 36 classrooms, a yoga room, art studios, outdoor learning centers, a community garden, a rooftop basketball court, a family health center, a parent center, a publicly accessible library, and an amphitheater. Students learn on flat-screen computers, study capoeira and Aztec dancing in an afterschool program, and eat food cooked from scratch by a seasoned chef.

Outside the gates is another world. In terms of violence, the school is in one of the worst zip codes in the state. According to the LAPD, over 100 crimes take place in a two-mile radius of the school every week—many of them in broad daylight—and many are violent robberies and assaults. It is not uncommon for a student to come to school traumatized after seeing his friend gunned down in gang crossfire or being caught in a convenience store holdup as his family is shopping for food.

That's where yoga can make a difference. As Greg McNair, chief administrative officer of LAUSD's Charter Schools Division, observes: "TAS has kids from all sorts of family backgrounds and neighborhoods, kids who have seen and experienced violence. Giving them an opportunity to focus and calm their minds through yoga can only help.

"It's a positive way to ground them and prepare them for TAS's academically rigorous program," McNair says. "I wish our district schools had more of that."

Kevin Sved agrees. "Some kids come here in the morning and they're mad from what happened earlier in the day or the night before, and it takes time to get them comfortable and refocused. The yoga definitely helps with that." Through Yoga Ed techniques like "Time In," he says, students who are having a hard day are encouraged to tune into their body and breath and do a relaxation or meditation.

There's another benefit to yoga at TAS. According to PE teacher Duane Mayo, the hatha classes bump up the school's state fitness test scores. Compared to other schools in the district, 10%–20% more TAS students fall in the "healthy fitness zone" for aerobic capacity, abdominal strength, and flexibility. Their scores for body composition are a few percentage points better than the district average, too, meaning that fewer TAS kids are overweight than their district peers.

TAS encourages its entire school community to stay healthy and fit. The gym, including a weight room, is open to staff before and after school; weekly yoga classes are available too. As health aide Debra Dunn explains: "If teachers are stressed out, it trickles down to the students." TAS offers health-oriented classes for parents for similar reasons, she says.

Not everyone appreciates the healthy programming, however. As Johnathan Williams observes: "Some kids think the school is too strict. But in this urban,

largely immigrant community, we're trying to teach these kids—and their families—the habits of long-term health. How do you infuse concepts like staying fit for life into a hand-to-mouth reality?" Jonathan answers his own question: "We try to show that they have choices that can help them break the cycles of poverty. It takes time, consistent messages, and models they see and know and love—but a community can change."

Some parents resist the strict academic probation policy. According to supervisor Lennox Trejo, "When some parents say, 'Okay, just let the kids fail,' it means they want their kids here because it's safe." Even if their child has been caught with drugs or fighting on campus, parents know TAS is a lot safer than on the streets.

### **TAS Has Tripled in Size**

In the last three years, TAS has experienced explosive growth, expanding from 300 students to 1,100, thanks to the new facilities. With that comes financial strain. Now, TAS has to raise funds to support 800 additional students in the "extra" programs like yoga and art, plus afterschool, summer school, and tutoring programs.

Such growth threatens the family-style, everybody-knows-each-other environment. TAS parent Tina Verner, whose 8th-grade son and 6th-grade niece have gone to the school for years, says: "I don't like the big new school as much. The parent's voices were heard more before. Now there are more voices and we're less heard."

But TAS families still have it better than in neighboring schools. Says Williams: "The K–5 elementary school up the road has 1,800 students. The high school has 4,000–5,000." He hopes that TAS's active parent body will help brainstorm ways to recreate its small-school environment despite the rapid growth.

According to school officials, between 1997 and 2001, TAS's averaged math and reading scores on the Stanford Achievement Test increased 100%—one of the greatest improvements recorded by any charter school in the state. Recently, scores have plateaued, but for good reason. As Kevin Sved explains: "We've taken in a lot of new students at grades 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9. They haven't been involved in our school community and in our accelerated program for very long." In the last few years, the school's Academic Performance Index ranking has slipped from a "10 out of 10" to a "7 out of 10." In 2005, they missed the English Language Learners target in the federal accountability measure by one-tenth of a percent.

But by state standards, TAS still shines. In 2005, its elementary and middle school students scored 702 on a 1,000-point scale the state uses to compare schools—and had a 39-point increase in a year and a 127-point increase since 1999. As Greg McNair observes: "The Accelerated School is one of the best schools in the district, if not in the state.... [because it] takes students who are similar to those who are attending underperforming schools and is able to get them to perform at a very high level."

And according to Kevin, standardized tests aren't everything. TAS wants to teach its students how to become independent thinkers and problem solvers, not just talented test takers. "Ultimately, what we want to be measured by is: Where are our kids when they're 30 years old? Did they go on to college? Do they have good careers? Are they contributing members of their families and their society?"

Around TAS, families have reclaimed the once gang-ridden neighborhood park, and with the help of the school, have started a community baseball league. Residents with homes near TAS are taking better care of their lawns, and parents want to buy property near the school because they see how it has stabilized the community. These are very good signs.

### **Namaste Charter School**

Making a Start in Chicago

In 2003, when Namaste's young, yoga-practicing founders were drafting their charter proposal, the country was on the alert about an obesity epidemic, and the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (CLOCC) had just released an embarrassing study: Chicago had the fattest kindergartners in the country. It was all over the news—and the school system was partly to blame. It fed students sugary, nutrient-deficient foods, banned recess, and barely offered gym. No wonder 23% of Chicago's young children were overweight, compared to 10% nationwide.

Namaste's founders—Allison Slade, Katie Graves, and C. Allison Jack—wanted something better for the city's kids. They met through Teach for America, an organization that recruits bright, new college grads to work in at-risk public schools across the nation. In an alumni group in Chicago, they would gripe passionately about what was missing in urban schools.

Together, they dreamed up a school based on longstanding educational research and their own ideas about what keeps kids healthy and focused: low-sugar, nutritious meals; small classes with two teachers per room; conflict resolution strategies; parental involvement; and lots of physical activity. They hoped to open a tiny, K–1 school in 2004, adding one grade each year to slowly grow into a K–8 elementary school with 450 students.

The Chicago Board of Education liked their idea. From a field of 25 applicants, Namaste was one of only two new charter schools approved in 2003. The school opened the following fall in a crime-prone neighborhood. Allison Slade became the principal; C. Allison Jack joined the board; Katie Graves signed on as director of operations but left three months later.

Initially, "Namaste"—a reverential gesture used by Hindus and in yoga classes around the world—was just a working title, but in the end, nothing else embodied the depth and mission of their school quite as well. As Allison Slade explains, the gesture (which involves pressing the palms together at the heart and slightly bowing the head) and the translation ("My inner light salutes your inner light") "captured the way we wanted our students to feel about themselves and their peers." Only one of the Chicago Board of Education's seven members questioned its use in a public school, but when the founders assured him that their use of the word was secular, not religious, the name was approved.

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