

Stretch Goals

Yoga lessons enhance fitness, focus, and school success.

By Grace Rubenstein

In a handful of schools across the country, students are trying a new twist on traditional physical education -- one targeting fitness of mind as much as firmness of body. The new drill is yoga, and it's a far cry from the classic run-a-mile-and-do-pushups PE class.

In Pittsburgh, yoga instructor Joanne Spence has launched a yoga pilot program at three urban elementary schools, supported by a \$35,000 grant from the Grable Foundation. Using curriculum from the Los Angeles-based Yoga Ed. organization, she begins a typical thirty-five-minute session by playing music to which the children sing along.

After that, the children practice breathing exercises and explore how to change their feelings by changing their breathing. They do simple yoga poses, such as the downward-facing dog and the bound angle. They chant self-esteem boosters ("I am smart, I am love") and play kinesthetic games. To conclude, the students lie down while Spence and her assistant dim the lights, play soft music, and give each child a personal message about how well he did that day or how she could improve.

Anecdotally, at least, the program is producing positive effects at the Helen S. Faison Arts Academy, the Urban League of Pittsburgh Charter School, and the Pittsburgh Urban Christian School. Spence says teachers tell her their students are more calm and focused after yoga, and the children say it makes them feel more peaceful, smarter, and "like a nice person."

At the Accelerated School, in LA, where Yoga Ed. began a program in 2001, teachers have found their students better able to concentrate and work through problems after yoga class, says Kevin Sved, cofounder and director of the preK-8 charter school. A 2003 study of the program's impact by researchers at California State University, Los Angeles, found a correlation between yoga participation and better classroom behavior and grades. Also, children in yoga were significantly more physically fit than the school district average, based on scores from the annual California Physical Fitness Test.

Yoga is still a rare activity in school PE programs -- a fact Sved attributes to the current emphasis in schools on testable skills, and the lack of yoga expertise among credentialed PE teachers. But there is evidence, says Yoga Ed. program director Leah Kalish, that yoga is being introduced into schools as an elective or after-school activity.

In fact, Kalish and her Yoga Ed. colleagues have noticed a sharp rise in their business -- an indication that yoga may become a PE staple. Since its launch in 2001, the company has trained more than 120 yoga instructors in more than twenty states, says Kalish. Yoga Ed. has also trained thousands of teachers on simple breathing techniques, as well as poses designed to help restore children's focus with a quick five minutes of in-class exercise -- the emotional equivalent of the power nap.

But not everyone is keen to have downward dogs in the PE workout. The programs have rankled religious parents who consider yoga a spiritual practice with no place in public schools. At Aspen Elementary School, in Aspen, Colorado, a 2003 pilot run of the Yoga Ed. program provoked protest from parents who argued that yoga exercises and language inherently reflect a Hindu worldview. "There's no difference between meditation and prayer," says one of the protesting parents, Stephen Woodrow, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Aspen. "You're dealing with something that's transcendent; therefore, you have a spiritual content."

In 1996, parents of three Catholic families sued the Bedford Central School District, in Westchester County, New York, for activities -- including yoga classes taught by a Sikh minister -- that they argued promoted satanism, paganism, and "New Age spirituality"; the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit dismissed the parents' claims. Advocates of in-school yoga insist that the practice is nonreligious, but to prevent such firestorms from recurring, the authors of the Yoga Ed. curriculum removed the few Sanskrit words from the thirty-six-week curriculum.

Whether school yoga catches on across the country, practitioners where it is thriving are happy with the results. Susan Brownlee of the Grable Foundation is thrilled with her Pittsburgh experiment: She reached more than 500 students, and believes that, for many of them, yoga provided relief from the tensions of living in impoverished areas with high crime. Namaste.



Credit: Getty Images

Article appeared on the <http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/> website at the following link:
http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1432&issue=dec_05