

More US schools are taking breaks for meditation. Teachers say it helps students' mental health

August 4 2024, by Sharon Johnson



Malachi Smith meditates during a mindfulness session in his classroom at Roberta T. Smith Elementary School, May 14, 2024, in Rex, Georgia. School districts across the U.S. have been introducing yoga, meditation and mindfulness exercises to help students manage stress and emotions. Credit: AP Photo/Sharon Johnson

The third-grade students at Roberta T. Smith Elementary School had only a few days until summer vacation, and an hour until lunch, but there was no struggle to focus as they filed into the classroom. They were ready for one of their favorite parts of the day.

The children closed their eyes and traced their thumbs from their foreheads to their hearts as a pre-recorded voice led them through an exercise called the shark fin, part of the classroom's regular meditation routine.

"Listen to the chimes," said the teacher, Kim Franklin. "Remember to breathe."

Schools across the U.S. have been introducing yoga, meditation and [mindfulness exercises](#) to help students manage stress and emotions. As the depths of student struggles with mental health became clear in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last year endorsed schools' use of the practices.

Research has found school-based mindfulness programs can help, especially in [low-income communities](#) where students face high levels of stress or [trauma](#).

The mindfulness program reached Smith Elementary through a contract with the [school system](#), Clayton County Public Schools, where two-thirds of the students are Black.

GreenLight Fund Atlanta, a network that matches communities with local nonprofits, helps Georgia school systems pay for the [mindfulness program](#) provided by Inner Explorer, an audio platform.

Joli Cooper, GreenLight Fund Atlanta's executive director, said it was important to the group to support an organization that is accessible and

relevant for communities of color in the Greater Atlanta area.

Children nationwide struggled with the effects of isolation and remote learning as they returned from the pandemic school closures. The CDC in 2023 reported more than a third of students were affected by feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness. The agency recommended schools use [mindfulness practices](#) to help students manage emotions.



GreenLight Fund Atlanta executive director Joli Cooper sits in her office in Atlanta on May 22, 2024. GreenLight Fund Atlanta, a network that matches communities with local nonprofits, helps Georgia school systems pay for a mindfulness program for its' students. Credit: AP Photo/Sharon Johnson

"We know that our teenagers and adolescents have really strained in their mental health," CDC Director Dr. Mandy Cohen told The Associated Press. "There are real skills that we can give our teens to make sure that they are coping with some big emotions."

Approaches to mindfulness represent a form of social-emotional learning, which has become a political flashpoint with many conservatives who say schools use it to promote progressive ideas about race, gender and sexuality.

But advocates say the programming brings much-needed attention to students' well-being.

"When you look at the numbers, unfortunately, in Georgia, the number of children of color with [suicidal thoughts](#) and success is quite high," Cooper said. "When you look at the number of psychologists available for these children, there are not enough psychologists of color."

[Black youth](#) have the fastest-growing suicide rate among racial groups, according to CDC statistics. Between 2007 and 2020, the suicide rate among Black children and teens ages 10 to 17 increased by 144%.

"It's a stigma with being able to say you're not OK and needing help, and having the ability to ask for help," said Tolana Griggs, Smith Elementary's assistant principal. "With our diverse school community and wanting to be more aware of our students, how different cultures feel and how different cultures react to things, it's important to be all-inclusive with everything we do."

Nationwide, children in schools that serve mostly students of color have [less access to psychologists and counselors](#) than those in schools serving mostly white students.

The Inner Explorer program guides students and teachers through five-to-10-minute sessions of breathing, meditating and reflecting several times a day. The program also is used at Atlanta Public Schools and over 100 other districts across the country.

Teachers and administrators say they have noticed a difference in their students since they've incorporated mindfulness into their routine. For Aniyah Woods, 9, the program has helped her "calm down" and "not stress anymore."



Aniyah Woods meditates during a mindfulness session in her classroom at Roberta T. Smith Elementary School, May 14, 2024, in Rex, Georgia. School districts across the U.S. have been introducing yoga, meditation and mindfulness exercises to help students manage stress and emotions. Credit: AP Photo/Sharon Johnson

"I love myself how I am, but Inner Explorer just helps me feel more like myself," Aniyah said.

Malachi Smith, 9, has used his exercises at home, with his father helping to guide him through meditation.

"You can relax yourself with the shark fin, and when I calm myself down, I realize I am an excellent scholar," Malachi said.

After Franklin's class finished their meditation, they shared how they were feeling.

"Relaxed," one student said.

Aniyah raised her hand.

"It made me feel peaceful," she said.

© 2024 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: More US schools are taking breaks for meditation. Teachers say it helps students' mental health (2024, August 4) retrieved 4 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-08-schools-meditation-teachers-students-mental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.