

Wilson PE class first in nation to utilize yoga and meditation techniques

By Janet Goetze
The Southwest Portland Post

About two dozen Wilson High School students enter the classroom in comfortable clothing, take off their shoes and settle on a yoga mat with a round pillow.

Teacher Allyson Copacino begins the class by running a mallet around the edge of a metal bowl to produce a singing tone, a familiar sound in yoga classes.

After a few moments of relaxation, the students rise and begin a series of stretching exercises and breathing techniques, including one that sounds like a cat hiss that makes several students smile.

The class, called "Mindful Meditation," is believed to be the first full-year high school program of its type in the United States, said Caverly Morgan, a contractor who teaches the class with Copacino.

The goal is to help students develop emotional resilience, self-awareness and compassion by using yoga movements and focused meditation techniques, Morgan said.

Morgan, the director of a non-profit organization called Peace in Schools, said the techniques are intended to help students become neutral observers of their thoughts, especially those stressful ones, without using coping mechanisms.

"Eating a whole chocolate cake," she said, is one immediate way to cope with stress, but it can make the eater feel worse afterward.

By examining fears, anger, depression and other emotions, students can bring themselves into the present moment without focusing on what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow.

According to Morgan, by taking deep breaths students can relax as

they examine the emotion.

To help students learn the technique of mental focusing, Morgan rings a small, brass bell. "Raise your hand when your mind wanders from the bell," she tells the class.

Some raise their hands after about a minute while others remain seated with their eyes closed and their faces relaxed.

Then, a truck pulls up outside the open classroom window, and the other hands go up as students laugh at the noisy interruption.

After less than a month of class, several students said the techniques are having positive effects.

A junior, Cassia McIntyre, 16, said, "I hold a lot of tension in my body. I get test anxiety, too. . . I find I'm learning to take deep breaths when I get stressed out."

Senior Ryan Nilsen, 17, practices yoga with his father and sister and was attracted to the class because of its yoga movements.

"I notice that the days I have the class, I can come to class feeling grumpy or sad or angry," he said. After class, he said his mood is brighter for the day.

The "mindful" part of the class has become mainstream in the corporate world where executives and salespeople are learning to be focused and "in the moment" to perform well, said Principal Brian Chatard.

Chatard sat in on one of the classes, which were introduced last school year to Wilson's leadership class and peer counselors.

"I found it beneficial myself," said Chatard, who noted that in his job, he needs to be "in the present" for situations he faces each day, which may include an angry parent or a student or a group of students.

The "mindful" ideas have come from the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, an emeritus professor of medicine at the



Cassia McIntyre, 16, and Ryan Nilsen, 17, demonstrate an exercise used in "Mindful Meditation," a new Wilson High School class intended to help teens reduce stress and gain emotional resilience. By lifting opposing arms and legs, the instructor says, they are using both sides of the brain. (Post photo by Janet Goetze)

University of Massachusetts.

For about 40 years, Kabat-Zinn has studied mind and body interactions in people with chronic pain and stress-related disorders. In 1979, he opened a clinic using what he calls mindful meditation techniques to assist those patients.

Wilson students may take the class for a physical education credit or as an elective, Chatard said. Nearly 300 expressed interest in the program but the three classes accommodate

fewer than 100.

Some may have been attracted to the class for the yoga movements, Chatard said, but others may have been seeking the mindful meditation they saw introduced last school year.

"There is no time that I think is more fraught with distraction than among teenagers," Chatard said. It's the kind of class that can become "an essential part of how to teach a kid to be successful in life. There's more than academics in that."



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