

# THE MONTHLY

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## East Bay Life

### Who's Present in Class Today? |

Along with reading, writing and math, East Bay students are learning about mindfulness. | *By Sarah Lavender Smith*

Noises collide in the background of Carla Aiello's classroom at Emerson Elementary School in Oakland, where a group of first-graders sits cross-legged on a rug with their teacher. Doors bang, toilets flush and tension seeps in as an instructor on the other side of the wall raises her voice to warn a kindergartner: "Go to your seat and put your head down! Unless you sit quietly, you're going to get a time-out."

But the noise doesn't rattle these first-graders or Aiello. The students and teacher create an island of calm as they sit perfectly still and listen intently to a visitor known as Ms. Megan, the mindfulness teacher.

Ms. Megan's full name is Megan Cowan, and her striking eyes, wide smile and sporty down vest all look warm and oversized on her elfin body. Holding a brass bowl in her palm and a small wooden stick in her other hand, she tells the kids in a soft voice, "Get your mindful body on and listen to the whole sound of the bell. When you're sure the sound is gone, put your hand in the air." Then she taps the bowl with the stick, and a deep chime resonates. The students close their eyes and listen, barely fidgeting and raising their hands after the chime fully fades away. She instructs them to put their hands on their bellies to feel themselves breathe in and out, then wraps up the lesson asking, "Today, when you're on the playground, stop and close your eyes and see if you can hear some birds. Can you do that for me?" The children nod, say goodbye to Ms. Megan, and seamlessly segue into a reading lesson.

Aiello—looking more relaxed and ready to teach—has what many first-grade teachers struggle to achieve throughout the day: a group of students sitting still, listening and paying attention. "This is really helpful as a tool for classroom management," she says later. Given the curriculum demands, most of the day is "push-push-push." Practicing mindfulness, she says, helps her be a more effective teacher and avoid burnout. "We can stop and take a breath if we're feeling overwhelmed. It brings them back so we can complete a task or a lesson."



Sounds of silence: Students in a first-grade class at Park Day School in Oakland listen to the lingering sounds of teacher Joanie Albertini's metal bowl in one of their regular classes on mindfulness. Photo by David Wilson.



Contemplate the cookie: As part of a mindfulness lesson, children at Park Day hold a cookie in

This school year, teachers at Emerson and about 10 other schools around Oakland will incorporate “mindfulness” into their busy days through the Community Partnership for Mindfulness in Education, a program developed in the spring of 2007 by Park Day School, a private K-8 located a couple of blocks from Emerson on 43rd Street in Oakland’s Temescal neighborhood. The program sends Cowan or another mindfulness instructor into classrooms for 15 minutes, three times a week over a five-week period. It also provides workshops for teachers to learn mindfulness techniques to create a calmer and more cooperative learning environment.

Park Day’s pilot program at Emerson—a public school that serves a low-income, predominantly African-American and Latino student population—proved so helpful that teachers there wanted to keep it going, and other schools wanted to bring it to their campuses.

At a time when schools are under pressure to do more with ever-tighter budgets, and curriculum demands are siphoning away time from art, physical education and recess, it may seem surprising—even counterproductive—to take precious minutes out of the school day to do what looks like doing nothing. But supporters say the program proves the paradox “less is more,” that is, doing less for a moment helps kids learn and behave better later on.

Ed Allen, a fourth-grade teacher who has been at Emerson for the past two decades, calls mindfulness one of the most effective classroom strategies he’s tried yet. “My whole class was just like another world after this. It was like, ‘Wow, what a change!’” he said while monitoring the playground during recess one morning in September. As proof he called over a heavyset fifth-grader who walked with a swagger and wore his cap sideways. He asked the boy, who was his student last year, if he remembered anything from the mindfulness lessons.

“Yeah, two days ago my little brother punched me in the nose and made me bleed,” said the boy, “so I just took 10 deep breaths and closed my eyes and counted from 1 to 10, and then I let go of my fists so I couldn’t punch him.”

Allen beamed as his former student ran off to rejoin a dodgeball game. “Last year, he would tune out in school as far as lessons were concerned and he was a fight a minute,” says Allen. “His skills are still pretty low, but you can see now that he’s focusing and trying.”

But what, exactly, is “mindfulness”? Deceptively simple, it essentially means paying attention to the present moment deliberately and in a nonjudgmental way. “The primary goal is teaching you how to focus,” says Laurie Grossman, the community outreach coordinator at Park Day who spearheaded the program. “Teachers say, ‘Pay attention,’ but so many of us don’t know how. It also teaches us impulse control so that you have time between your emotion and reaction.”

Mindfulness is an ancient concept often associated with Buddhist meditation or yoga, but Grossman emphasizes that the Community Partnership for Mindfulness in Education involves

their hands. They nibble a bite to keep in their mouths. Eventually, they chew and taste the cookie, but not before becoming aware of the smell and texture. Photo by David Wilson..



neither meditation nor spirituality. "We're not doing Buddhism; we're secular 100 percent."

What they are doing, Grossman explains, is helping students—and teachers—develop a lifelong skill to focus on the present moment and manage stress, which in turn can help kids improve academics, cope with difficult emotions and resolve conflicts. Citing neuroscience research that shows how the brain's ability to process information is impaired when someone is preoccupied or worried, Grossman says it can help people from all different walks of life. "We may be stressed about different things—a kid who's going to school in Piedmont may be worried about getting into Harvard, whereas a kid who goes to this school [Emerson] may be really worried knowing they don't have enough money for rent—but stress abounds."

Stress certainly abounds at New Highland Academy, a public school in East Oakland, which brought the mindfulness program to all 16 of its K-5 classrooms last spring. Living in a neighborhood with chronically high homicide and poverty rates, the students bring an array of emotional and behavioral challenges with them into the classroom. Principal Liz Ozol says the mindfulness lessons "were not a magic bullet—I wish I could say it resulted in a radical decline in office referrals and suspensions, but I can't say that—but it was helpful, and we're really committed to trying as many interventions as we can."

She adds, "The three times the mindfulness folks did a training for the adults, everybody loved it. I know I found it wonderful. It kind of brought me back to a calm, centered place and helped me organize my thoughts and feel more equipped to juggle the 100 balls that it's my job to juggle."

A secondary goal of the program is to promote empathy and kindness. After they practice being still and listening, students are told to send out caring thoughts to others and to themselves. When Allen's fourth-graders filed in from recess, for example, he spent a couple of minutes on a mindfulness exercise to quiet the rowdy group. He chose a few students to take turns ringing the brass bowl while the rest of the class sat, many with eyes closed, and listened. "Think good thoughts of your family," said one girl as she rang it. "Think good things of the class," said another. Allen praised them and added, "You just want to breathe, close your eyes and let the good thoughts come out of you. We called it 'vibes' back in the Sixties. They said if you send out good vibes, you get good vibes back."

Vibes? While his off-the-cuff comment doesn't represent what the program teaches teachers to say, it captures a touchy-feely aspect that makes some question whether mindfulness could be a waste of classroom time.

At Prospect Sierra, a private K-8 in El Cerrito, some parents and staff were skeptical when they adopted Park Day's program in their K-4 grades last year. But Sheila Puckett, the head of Prospect Sierra's elementary division, says the skeptics became supporters once they learned more about the techniques used.

Their teachers evaluated the program and “almost all of them had a very positive reaction. Occasionally parents would come to me and say, ‘Oh, this is wonderful, I think I’ll use it with my kids at home.’”

If parents want, mindfulness teachers from the program will set up several parent education evenings to help parents understand firsthand what their children are learning.

Academic and clinical research over two decades has proven that mindfulness can help adults lower stress and alleviate physical and mental disorders such as high blood pressure, chronic pain and depression. Research on mindfulness work and children is scant, however. Recently, researchers at UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center and elsewhere have begun studying the effects.

Gina Biegel, a psychotherapist with Kaiser in San Jose and author of a forthcoming book on mindfulness for teens, plans to research Park Day’s program in Oakland schools starting early next year and hopes to amass data to back up the positive anecdotal reports about it. “No one has actually proven this is an effective program in the schools and for that age group” of grades K–6, she says.

Biegel conducted one of the first major studies on using mindfulness to treat teens with a variety of psychological diagnoses—such as depression, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress—and found the results dramatic. The study’s 102 participants, ages 14–18, completed an eight-week program adapted from the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program that was developed more than 25 years ago by mindfulness pioneer Jon Kabat-Zinn and others at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. (Their program has been embraced by the medical establishment and is now offered at hospitals such as Alta Bates to help patients cope with chronic pain and stress-related ailments.) Three months later, 80 percent of the participants in Biegel’s study had their diagnoses resolved—meaning that many of their symptoms had improved dramatically—compared to just two percent in a control group.

But can the benefits of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program translate from a clinical setting to a classroom full of young kids who are taught mindfulness only a few times a week?

Biegel is optimistic her study will show positive results but cautions that mindfulness “isn’t a quick fix; it’s a set of skills and a way of living that can have beneficial change in one’s life, but it isn’t necessarily going to create a 360-degree change.”

A growing number of schools are willing to give it a try even if the benefits are hard to measure. At public Hillcrest Elementary in the Oakland hills, for example, mindfulness lessons started in their K–8 classrooms in September after a parent brought Park Day’s program to the principal’s attention last spring and the PTA agreed to fund it. (A community-outreach grant allows Park Day to provide the program free to disadvantaged schools, but private

schools and public schools in more affluent neighborhoods pay about \$5,000 for it.)

Hillcrest Principal Beverly Rothenberg isn't sure what the outcome will be, but her hope, she says, is "that the students will end up with a tool they could use so that when things are upsetting, they can pause for a moment, recognize that feeling, know they have ways of dealing with it, and then make a thoughtful decision. That's an amazing thing to ask of a 5-year-old—or an 18-year-old."

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For more information: Park Day School Mindfulness in Education Program, [www.parkdayschool.org](http://www.parkdayschool.org); UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, <http://marc.ucla.edu/>

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