

Yoga for Youngsters: West Tisbury School Pilot Program Begins

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A voice on the intercom at the West Tisbury School announces that a copier is broken. Children squeal in the hallway outside.

But in 4S, Rebecca Solway's fourth grade classroom, yogis and yoginis settle into a strong seated position and begin to practice balloon breathing. They inhale and exhale slowly, before transitioning into bumble bee breath, filling the room with a humming sound.

Photo: Yoga instructor Scarlet Jarrell leads kindergarteners at the West Tisbury School in a yoga practice - Mark Lovewell



Photo: West Tisbury kindergarteners meditate at school with teacher Teri Mello. — Mark Lovewell

These fourth graders are participating in a six-week, school-wide yoga pilot program which began in early March. The program was funded with a \$22,000 grant from the Sound Foundation of West Tisbury, created and operated by Scarlet and Rex Jarrell, also of the Yoga Barn. It aims to expose students from kindergarten to eighth grade and their parents to the calming, energizing and attention-building properties of yoga practice.

Yoga can be fun for kids, but it's also a chance to learn strategies to combat a growing issue in their lives: anxiety.

"More and more kids are dealing with stress and anxiety at a younger age," said school principal Donna Lowell-Bettencourt.

Later in the session, students are asked to think of moments at school when a yoga practice might serve them.

The answers come free-flowing: "during math," "open responses," "at MCAS."

The first round of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests begin this week, and the faculty will be watching to see if students draw upon yoga techniques to calm themselves.



Photo: Scarlet Jarrell: "It's exciting to be involved in something that can be useful for all people on the Island." — Mark Lovewell

"We are going to watch very carefully to see if they employ these skills," Ms. Lowell-Bettencourt said. "We are curious to see if they use these and other skills in the toolkit."

Students and teachers will be surveyed along the way to evaluate the pilot project.

"We are looking at providing students another strategy to gain focus, to energize themselves if they are lacking in energy, and to relax themselves if they are feeling stressed," Ms. Lowell-Bettencourt said.

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Yoga is a tool the kids can call upon anywhere, she added.

Fourth grade teacher Rebecca Solway said the program was not far enough along to evaluate its effects, but she sees its potential.

"We'll be looking for increases in positive attitudes and focus," she said. "The big thing is for kids to be able to have strategies or tools when they feel anxious or stressed."

The pilot program involves full teacher participation and is designed to impact the school and Island community for years to come.



Photo: Yoga is a tool the kids can call upon anywhere. — Mark Lovewell

The principal said this particular curriculum, Yoga 4 Classrooms, was chosen for its relative ease of introduction to teachers and its potential for long-lasting effects. Students and teachers can call on the practice spontaneously, whether they have two or 20 minutes to spend, she said.

openness to trying it out.

The idea was first advanced by the school's wellness committee and Rex and Scarlet Jarrell, who commended Ms. Lowell-Bettencourt for her

"We knew her just enough to know she was a forward-thinking leader and was receptive to change, and to the idea of yoga," said Mr. Jarrell, one of the pilot program instructors.

“We have been working in the field of yoga and mindfulness for a few years, and we are clear that the mindfulness approach has many benefits that are scientifically documented,” he said.

Mr. Jarrell said he is not aware of another yoga program being implemented in kindergarten through eighth grades in the commonwealth.

“We have huge gratitude for the community here,” added Scarlet Jarrell. “It’s exciting to be involved in something that can be useful for all people on the Island.”

- See more at: <http://mvgazette.com/news/2014/03/17/yoga-youngsters-west-tisbury-school-pilot-program-begins?k=vg532911a056563&r=1#sthash.UlRdyLfw.dp>