

Meditation transforms roughest San Francisco schools

David L. Kirp

Published 6:37 pm, Sunday, January 12, 2014

At first glance, Quiet Time - a stress reduction strategy used in several San Francisco middle and high schools, as well as in scattered schools around the Bay Area - looks like something out of the om-chanting 1960s. Twice daily, a gong sounds in the classroom and rowdy adolescents, who normally can't sit still for 10 seconds, shut their eyes and try to clear their minds. I've spent lots of time in urban schools and have never seen anything like it.

This practice - meditation rebranded - deserves serious attention from parents and policymakers. An impressive array of studies shows that integrating meditation into a school's daily routine can markedly improve the lives of students. If San Francisco schools Superintendent Richard Carranza has his way, Quiet Time could well spread citywide.

What's happening at Visitacion Valley Middle School, which in 2007 became the first public school nationwide to adopt the program, shows why the superintendent is so enthusiastic. In this neighborhood, gunfire is as common as birdsong - nine shootings have been recorded in the past month - and most students know someone who's been shot or did the shooting. Murders are so frequent that the school employs a full-time grief counselor.

In years past, these students were largely out of control, frequently fighting in the corridors, scrawling graffiti on the walls and cursing their teachers. Absenteeism rates were among the city's highest and so were suspensions. Worn-down teachers routinely called in sick.

Unsurprisingly, academics suffered. The school tried everything, from counseling and peer support to after-school tutoring and sports, but to disappointingly little effect.

Now these students are doing light-years better. In the first year of Quiet Time, the number of suspensions fell by 45 percent. Within four years, the suspension rate was among the lowest in the city. Daily attendance rates climbed to 98 percent, well above the citywide average. Grade point averages improved markedly. About 20 percent of graduates are admitted to Lowell High School - before Quiet Time, getting any students into this elite high school was a rarity. Remarkably, in the annual California Healthy Kids Survey, these middle school youngsters recorded the highest happiness levels in San Francisco.

Reports are similarly positive in the three other schools that have adopted Quiet Time. At Burton High School, for instance, students in the program report significantly less stress and depression, and greater self-esteem, than nonparticipants. With stress levels down, achievement has markedly improved, particularly among students who have been doing worst academically. Grades rose dramatically, compared with those who weren't in the program.

On the California Achievement Test, twice as many students in Quiet Time schools have become proficient in English, compared with students in similar schools where the program doesn't exist, and the gap is even bigger in math. Teachers report they're less emotionally exhausted and more resilient.

"The research is showing big effects on students' performance," says Superintendent Carranza. "Our new accountability standards, which we're developing in tandem with the other big California districts, emphasize the importance of social-emotional factors in improving kids' lives, not just academics. That's where Quiet Time can have a major impact, and I'd like to see it expand well beyond a handful of schools."

While Quiet Time is no panacea, it's a game-changer for many students who otherwise might have become dropouts. That's reason enough to make meditation a school staple, and not just in San Francisco.

David L. Kirp, a professor of public policy at UC Berkeley, is the author of "Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School District and a Strategy for America's Schools."

© 2014 Hearst Communications, Inc.

HEARST newspapers