

Mindful Awareness Education In Schools: Creating Programs Of Integrity

A Statement of Recommendations

On June 13th-14th 2016 a group of experts from the fields of education, mindfulness, social-emotional-learning, social-justice, law, and religion gathered together at the Omega Institute to discuss mindfulness education in public school settings. As a rapidly growing field, mindfulness education or mindful awareness education, is becoming more widely available and requested in public school settings. We gathered to develop guiding principles and standards for teaching these programs in public schools. The following notes are recommendations for schools and organizations when teaching mindfulness education in the public school setting.

Our Services and Purpose

Mindful awareness education teaches skills to improve stress management, emotional regulation, improve attention, focus and concentration, as well as foster health, well-being and a more positive outlook. Preliminary research indicates that cultivating these inner skills can improve interpersonal relationships, develop empathy, increase awareness of assumptions and biases, and help to nurture global stewardship. The intended purpose of providing mindfulness education in schools is to enhance inner resilience, self-awareness, self-regulation and health and well being in students and staff, while creating safer, kinder, healthier, more supportive and productive schools and communities.

Recommendations for Programs

- Research Based - Utilize the most current research regarding effectiveness of mindfulness education for attention, self-regulation, health and well-being. Use care not to overstate the benefits identified in the literature. Ensure program content is well grounded in theory and in the evidence-base of what works.

- Science Based - Utilize knowledge from current scientific research and professional literature to support program content. Ensure the purpose and intention of exercises and activities used in the classroom are well founded in this knowledge. Be prepared to clearly communicate this information to facilitate better understanding of what is being taught, and why it is being taught in the classroom.
- Developmentally Appropriate - Understand the developmental stages of students and adapt teaching material, activities and exercises to meet specific developmental capacities.
- Connected to Standards - Link the specific content of mindful awareness education programs to state and national standards, such as Common Core.
- Aligned with Social-Emotional Learning - Demonstrate how the content of mindful awareness education programs align with the five social-emotional learning competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills).
- Well-Trained Instructors – Ensure instructors have a broad base of knowledge and experience working with children and adults. Personal experience and training in mindful awareness and in teaching mindfulness to adults and children is essential when working with an entire school. Religiously based or affiliated training programs or practices must not be requirements for eligibility to teach in a public school setting.
- Trained School Staff - Provide education and training for school teachers, staff and administration. Mindfulness education is much more effective when school staff understand it, support it, and model it from their own experience.
- Involving Parents/Guardians - Provide opportunities for the community to learn about the program being provided. Classes for teachers, parents/guardians and other community members help to increase understanding, and build support for the program within the community.

- Universal Language - As with all school programs, ensure that words and actions are meaningful to all people. It is important for all who teach in public schools to not make implicit or explicit references to their personal spiritual or religious beliefs or practices. Examples of words that might relate to one's own personal beliefs are: bless (blessing, blessed), Amen, Namaste, Om, God, heaven/hell, sin, karma, prophet, Christ, Buddha, prayer, Jesus, chanting or mantras. Also, avoid actions such as prayer hands, mudras, bowing, sign of the cross or other religiously based hand signs.
- Not Imposing Religion - It is important for all those in public schools to not implicitly or explicitly teach about their own personal religion or belief systems. Do not use props or objects that could be associated with organized religions. For example, do not use sound bells, bowls or cymbals that are typically used in religious ceremonies.
- Not Limiting Religion - Be inclusive in the way we teach, make sure to never limit or invalidate the belief systems of others.
- Not Imposing Belief Systems - Be conscious to not implicitly or explicitly impose worldviews or particular cosmologies.
- Diversity Conscious - Be aware of teaching in such a way that all students will find the material being taught as accessible. Ensure awareness and sensitivity to cultural and linguistic differences.
- Trauma Informed - Have knowledge of and education regarding the impact of trauma. Be familiar with the types of stresses and/or traumas that students or entire communities may be dealing with now, or in the past. Be familiar with how to flexibly arrange and scaffold activities and explore content when working with particular groups that are likely to have greater exposure to trauma.
- Awareness of Resources - Have knowledge of contact with support service providers within the school. Ensure students who may need an increased level of support have access to services.

- Aware of Systems - Be aware of systems of oppression and power dynamics so that mindfulness education is never utilized as a way of perpetuating a system in which students are suppressing their emotions and being quiet in the face of injustice.
- Empowerment not Behavioral Modification - Mindfulness education is not a curriculum to be imposed. Teachers and students are offered instruction in mindful awareness as a means for empowerment; skills that they can access internally by choice.
- Never Mandatory - Students and teachers are offered the option of not participating, or of observing the activities and exercises without participating. Ensure this possibility can occur without stigmatization or other unintended consequences.
- Due Diligence- As with all school programs, establish and sustain mutual expectations through legal contracts or Memorandums of Understanding and clear communications. Provide a hard copy of your student curriculum to school administration. Be aware that all email and written correspondence are public documents.

Recommendations developed by Sunny Wight of Mindfulness First, Fiona Jensen, Adria Kennedy, Katie Medlar of Calmer Choice and Daniel Rechtschaffen. Summit attendees and contributors included Ali Smith of the Holistic Life Foundation, Laura Bakosh and Janice Houlihan of Inner Explorer, Dr. Clemens Bauer Hoss from MIT, Jane Hsu and Tom Roepke from the NYC School System, Leslie Booker from the Lineage Project, Lori Gustafson from the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Sheryl Petty of Movement Tapestries, Dr. Michael Crowley from Yale University, Randy Fernando, Dr. Christopher Willard, Dinabandhu Sarley of the 1440 Foundation, Larry Brown from Cape Cod Academy, Michael Craft from the Omega Institute, Reverend Samuel Speers from Vassar University and Susan Kaiser Greenland.