

“Creating a Culture of Peace in Middle School from the Inside Out”

By Johane Ligondé

It’s a typical morning at John W. Dodd Middle School, and Sarah and her friends are late – again. Even though a shortcut exists, they take the long way, picking their way through main streets and treacherous traffic in order to avoid bullies who’ve previously teased them on their way to school.

Andrew, distraught because his girlfriend’s parents have forbidden his girlfriend from communicating with him, has slashed his wrists, his arms, his thighs.

Joy, a seventh grade student, no longer wants to live. She has swallowed 20 pills from the medicine cabinet before coming to school.

When these students arrive, they join their 1,111 peers who pile into the building. Like New York City subway riders during the early morning rush, their bodies collide. There are stresses and occasional disputes. .

These students’ stories may be extreme, but stress among students is hardly uncommon. Every morning unfolds in an environment of rigorous common core standards, high stakes testing, and academic rigor: the Pythagorean theorem in math class, questioning texts and searching for textual evidence in English, analyzing the reproductive system in science. There is no time to settle in, settle down, or relax.

District and building leadership recognized these impediments to learning. Superintendent Dr. Kishore Kuncham’s vision for the district is to educate the whole child by meeting students’ academic and social emotional learning needs. He has been determined to help students manage the pressures of their personal lives and academic demands through stress management techniques. He encouraged district principals to adopt these practices and even secured a grant that funded professional development for our staff at Dodd Middle School.

Why Breathe?

One of our goals was to help students start their day from a calm and peaceful space. Every morning after the arrival rush ends, Youth Empowerment Seminar (Yes!) teacher, Mr. Juan Mosquera, guides students and staff in a relaxation process during announcements over the loud speaker. Everyone settles into stillness with his soothing voice.

“How are you feeling today? Are you in the red zone and angry? Are you in the yellow zone, over- excited and stimulated? Are you in the blue zone and down, or are you feeling centered and calm in the green zone” he says. “Wherever you are in this moment, see if you can use the breath to come back to the green zone, where we feel and can focus the best.”

After leading students through a series of targeted breathing and relaxation processes, he continues: “Today, please set an intention for yourself and be the best version of those intentions.”

The morning breathing exercises are one component of a bio/social-emotional learning approach to managing emotions and behaviors. This approach taps into students’ physiological abilities to self-regulate through the use of their breath. Consciously breathing in different patterns engages the parasympathetic nervous system to counter the automatic fight or flight response. This mind-body science is coupled with various teaching points that help students manage their stress, develop greater wellbeing, and achieve higher academic success.

Through our practice of eight minutes of daily breathing, we are able to bring awareness to a beating heart and our very own existence beyond the intellect. We tap into the natural mechanism of human biology to control our impulses without much effort. These moments of stillness remind us of who we truly are and who we hope to be. It allows everyone in our school community to feel present, valued, and loved.

The social-emotional practices at Dodd support Invitational Education, a theory of practice which helps create “a total school environment that intentionally summons people in schools to realize their relatively boundless potential (so that) schooling becomes a more exciting, satisfying and enriching experience for everyone involved.” Purkey (1991). As a self-concept approach to school improvement, Invitational Theory provided the Dodd staff with a framework for intentionally choosing words and actions that communicate our belief that everyone is “able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly.” Our inviting messages are helping students, staff, and parents to develop positive self-concepts, and this in turn, leads to positive choices of behavior.

Coping with Stress

On the morning Joy considered suicide, she came to school not knowing what would happen to her. After the morning breathing, she told a trusted Yes! teacher, Ms. Lauren Grieco, affectionately known as Ms. G, what she had done. She immediately received medical attention by the school nurse and emergency medical technician, who escorted her to the hospital. There she spent two weeks addressing the emotional turmoil that had caused her to want to end her life.

Ms. Grieco is one of the Yes! teachers who leads a 5-week intensive, social-emotional learning curriculum in a health class in which all 7th grade students learn safe ways to cope with stress. Through experiential and interactive processes, students become empowered to take responsibility and ownership over their own emotions and actions. For example, instead of learning standard $y=mx+b$ equations, students learn that awareness = energy = breath, unlocking a powerful tool for focus and success. They practice being “button proof”, or retaining their power, rather than being receptacles for other people's taunts.

These points, along with fun games and targeted breathing techniques, create a safe space of connection and learning for students. They also develop the ability to let go of inhibitions and stress. By experiencing a state of inner calmness, outer freedom, and clarity, students like Joy come out of the classroom empowered to address their emotions and challenges purposefully with gratifying results.

The morning breathing and the Yes! Program have transformed our school environment in many positive ways.

Mr. James Hauser, one of our science teachers says, “The building is calmer. I don’t see as much verbal aggression as I used to.”

Assistant principals, Mrs. Paulette Acquavito and Ms. Danielle Ballard, both agree Yes! has given both staff and students a common language by which to better communicate. In addition, students have begun to implement the strategies taught, such as using the victory breath when they find themselves in difficult situations.

Additionally, we have strengthened our mental health support program for students like Joy, Andrew, and Sarah. We now have two full time psychologists, four guidance counselors, one school social worker, and one behaviorist. This year, Dodd Middle School partnered with South Shore Child Guidance Center to acquire a NY state funded grant that will enable us to provide therapeutic, behavioral health services in our school.

Overcoming Resistance

When we first attempted to engage students in the targeted breathing practices, some asked “Why are we doing this? We already know how to breathe,” they said. We responded to their query by inviting students to join a Yes! committee, which students dubbed, *Students Who Aspire for Greatness, (SWAG)*. This committee helped create and administer building-wide surveys that would garner information to inform our decisions as we made these instructional and cultural shifts in the building. The administrative team, faculty, and Yes! staff worked with SWAG to continuously reflect, evaluate and refine the implementation process of these new practices.

Students were also invited to participate as researchers. By measuring the physiological changes in students’ heart rates before and after the breathing practice, the student researchers could use first-hand experience and data to make an informed decision about the efficacy of the breathing practices themselves.

Students were intrigued and signed on for the challenge.

Students Lead Research Efforts

At the end of the 2014-15 school year, 89% of students surveyed expressed feeling significantly calmer, more relaxed, and better able to manage their emotions.

At the October 2015 New York State School Board Association Convention and Education Expo, our students presented their research on the implementation of the Yes! program. In this continuing research study, students now aim to correlate the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire results with the physical changes in heart rate, breathing and body temperature measured before, during and after daily YES exercises. The Pulee Oximeter is used for all classes while the temperature and breathing measurements are taken on an individual basis.

Initial results from the physiological aspects of their study show that students who participate in the morning breathing have lower heart rates than those who do not. Beyond the physiological, we have also tabulated results to measure the impact of these practices on student achievement and disciplinary behaviors. For example, over the 2014-2015 school year, students who participated in Yes! had statistically significantly higher average GPAs in math, social studies, and ELA. What's more, over the course of the two years that the Yes! program has been active at our school, we have seen a 64% decrease in behavioral infractions.

While the initial data gathered seems positive, the most powerful qualitative data comes directly from students and staff themselves.

Joy, now in eighth grade, says things are so much better now than before because of the breathing and social emotional processes she learned in the Yes! curriculum in Health 1. "I'm a different person. I have peace of mind and can remain focused," she says. "People around me say I have changed, and I have."

The implementation of these social emotional learning and physiological processes has given every member of the school community a practical, simple set of techniques to use to manage stress and become more peaceful. It offers an alternative to the unhealthy, automatic response system that takes control, and our own breath becomes the remote control to our emotions. Once this awareness is discovered, positive shifts begin to naturally happen in our lives.

One of our school secretaries, Lori Hagemann, describes her observations: "I have seen a definite shift in the energy in the building since the daily breathing practices have been set in place, from an overall high energy and sometimes frenetic setting to a general calm and balanced setting."

"There is so much stress in the world today; this should be a mandatory practice for all students, who could then continue their breathing practices into adulthood," she says.

"I used to be so stressed," says Sherill Spruill, a Dodd chorus teacher. "When I started breathing, it gave me a peace in my mind. It cleared my head. As I kept doing it, it became part of my personality. So, the way I responded to people changed. I realized that it doesn't have too much to do with them; it has a lot to do with me."

Maha Ghosananda, a Nobel Peace Prize Nominee, once stated, “Great Compassion makes a peaceful heart. A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.”

This represents a paradigm shift in our thinking when we consider how to cultivate a culture of peace in our schools. Peace is often discussed as a separate entity that occupies our schools rather than a vital characteristic of its occupants. Peace is not an external state of affairs but the internal condition of each student, teacher, administrator and parent. This awareness cultivates peace in the self with the potential of creating a culture of peace in our families, schools, communities, nation, and world.

My greatest reward as a principal has been watching my own transformation as well as the transformation of countless students, staff and even parents through the use of targeted breathing practices. Students have shared the strategies they have learned with their parents, siblings, and other family members. Parents have expressed the positive changes they have seen in their children and in themselves after using stress management techniques learned from the workshops offered during PTA meetings.

Engaging in this daily practice has enabled me to maintain perspective and balance throughout the day. I know as I juggle various tasks and tackle the inevitable, unpredictable nature of leading a middle school, I always have the use of this personal and practical tool to bring me back to center. Staff has become more aware of the impact of decisions on others and has grown more compassionate toward students and colleagues alike. Decisions are made from a place of peace, clarity, and intentionality. The breath is the direct pathway to our internal peace. When we are peaceful, everyone we encounter feels that peace. I have seen first-hand the power of this breathing practice in myself, my students, and in my staff and I know it can bring peace, joy, and creativity to America’s students!

*To maintain their privacy, student names have been changed.

Author’s Biography:

Johane Ligondé currently serves as the principal of the J. W. Dodd Middle School in Freeport, New York, a large suburban district with a diverse population. Johane received a B.A. in English from the State University of New York at Albany, an M.A.T. in English Education from Union College, and an Ed.M. in Educational Leadership from the Summer Principals Academy, Teachers College, Columbia University. Johane has worked as an English and literacy teacher in grades 6 through 12, a teacher coach and mentor, Curriculum Director of ELA, Reading, and Social Studies, and as an elementary and middle school principal. Johane has conducted training workshops for administrators and teachers on long term planning, data analysis, social emotional learning, and organizational sustainability. She has presented to members of Congress on practical life skills and tools to effectively combat trauma and stress suffered by students. Johane

believes in creating joyful schools that nurture the heart as well as the brain. Teaching students the mechanism to manage their social emotional well-being is the gateway to academic excellence and life success.