

# Ditching Detention for Yoga: Schools Embrace Mindfulness to Curb Discipline Problems

By Sasha Jones May 23, 2019



Treasure López, 8, stretches during yoga club after school at Doull Elementary School in Denver. In addition to yoga club, the school uses “reflection yoga” twice a week as a replacement for after-school detention for students who misbehave.

—Rachel Woolf for *Education Week*

## Swapping punitive discipline for yoga

In many schools, when kids consistently see their behavior card

flipped from green, to yellow, and finally, to red, they know to expect some punishment. For some, that discipline may come in the form of after-school detention, a math worksheet, or staying in for recess.

At Doull Elementary in Denver, when students misbehave repeatedly, they are assigned to a new after-school activity—yoga.

Doull's version of alternative discipline is part of the school's embrace of social-emotional learning and is emblematic of the growing trend of K-12 schools to cultivate school environments that are attuned to the social and emotional well-being of children. For many schools, the pursuit of social-emotional learning often starts with overhauling traditional approaches to student discipline and misbehavior.

One way they are doing so is through the use of mindfulness-based interventions in an attempt to tackle the reasons behind the disobedience.

At Doull Elementary, when a teacher notices that a student is constantly misbehaving, the student is referred to the after-school program, working with parents to make sure students' schedules allow them to attend the yoga classes.

"What we love about yoga is that they leave with some actual skills that can help them in life," said Doull Elementary Principal Jo Carrigan. "Doing a math sheet or handwriting sheet didn't help them solve a problem, didn't help them recognize what anger feels like in their body."

## **Spread of Mindfulness in Schools**

The new form of discipline led to fewer students skipping out on detention, and the yoga program also began drawing interest from students who weren't ever likely to be referred for behavior reasons, Carrigan said. Demand became so great that the school added an extra day for students who wanted to join yoga as a club activity.

Before students get assigned to yoga for misbehavior, however, teachers first try to address the issue by sending them to the school's "cool-down room," where they can do breathing exercises and talk to a staff member about what might be bothering them.

Carrigan was inspired to replace detention with yoga after reading about Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore, where a partnership with the Holistic Life Foundation, a nonprofit that works with over 40 schools, had brought meditation to the classroom and a "mindful moment room," where disruptive students can go to meditate and calm themselves.



Keyla Huerta, 8, puts her hands to her heart during yoga club at Doull Elementary School in Denver. After the school replaced after-school detention with "reflection yoga" twice a week, the principal added yoga club for students who also wanted to take part in the practice.

—Rachel Woolf for *Education Week*

Andres Gonzalez, Holistic Life Foundation's co-founder and director of marketing and communication, said that he saw the impact that yoga and meditation had on what were previously seen as "problem kids" in the school.

"Instead of us picking up 10 kids from detention, we were picking seven, then we were picking up five, and soon, we weren't picking up any kids," Gonzalez said.

Schools' move toward efforts to foster positive school environments

seem to be finding favor with the public. According to a [2019 Gallup poll](#) conducted on behalf of Communities in Schools, 54 percent of 1,000 American adults surveyed said most teachers are “unprepared” or “very unprepared” to handle discipline. But when asked which solutions would be effective in addressing discipline issues in schools, 90 percent said increased efforts to foster a positive school environment would be somewhat or very effective, while 86 percent said focusing more resources on students’ social and emotional development would be somewhat or very effective. Alternatively, 55 percent said that stricter disciplinary practices, such as more detentions, suspensions, or expulsions, would be equally effective.

## **Research on Effectiveness Is Mixed**

Despite anecdotes from schools that have seen positive results from using mindfulness practices, the research on its effectiveness is varied and lacking.

In [a 2018 study](#) by researchers Anna Long, Tyler Renshaw, and Devon Camarota, a sample of 73 predominantly African American 5th graders from an urban, high-poverty alternative school were managed using either behavioral or mindfulness-based approaches. One group was managed using the good behavior game, which reinforces positive behavior through either earning or losing privileges from a student-generated list, including snacks, a preferred activity, or small trinkets. In the other group, students were taught mindfulness skills and encouraged to restrain themselves from participating in inappropriate behavior by stopping, taking three deep breaths, observing themselves and others, and proceeding positively.

The results found that neither strategy was notably more effective than the control group, in which students received a warning after the first infraction, a seat change after the second, and a phone call home or office discipline referral after the third. However, those in the mindfulness group indicated that the practice was slightly therapeutic.

In [another 2018 study](#) by Kansas State University professor Tonnie Martinez and graduate student Yuanyuan Zhao, a small sample of 7th and 8th graders who averaged five or more discipline referrals to the principal's office for two consecutive semesters completed a series of guided meditations using the Muse headband and app, which measures users' brain waves. For those who participated in meditation, office referrals dropped significantly, from 6.33 to 1.78 between September 2016 and April 2017. Those who did not participate in meditation saw a slight increase in referrals from 4.22 to 4.44 in the same time frame.

A [2016 meta analysis](#) by researchers David Klingbeil, Aaron Fischer, and Renshaw of 10 single-case studies related to the impact of mindfulness on disruptive behavior found such interventions overall have a medium effect. The report concluded that "school psychologists are likely to find [mindfulness-based interventions] as feasible interventions—with these results providing initial support of their effectiveness in reducing problem behavior."

Long, an assistant professor of school psychology at Louisiana State University, said that although her study did not show benefits of mindfulness-based interventions, other research suggests that the practices have potential to make a positive impact in the classroom.

"I think where the disconnect may occur is helping parents and schools understand the differences that there might be between where these interventions have been researched and their own setting, as well as what it actually means to get something implemented properly," Long said.

Trying such tactics for managing behavior won't be effective unless schools are thoughtful about training teachers to deploy them effectively and in a consistent, sustained way, Long said.

## **Concerns Over Discipline Disparities**

Many educators and civil rights advocates have been pushing policymakers and schools to turn to alternative discipline. Data has consistently shown that black and Latino students and students who are in special education are disciplined with suspensions and expulsions at much higher rates than their white and Asian American peers. For example, in 2015-16, black students made up 15 percent of K-12 students nationwide, but 27 percent of those restrained at school and 31 percent of school-based arrests and referrals to law enforcement, [according to federal civil rights data](#). Black boys, specifically, made up 25 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 23 percent of expulsions, despite being only 8 percent of the student population.

Using meditation as alternative discipline can go beyond teaching students breathing techniques, said Raisa Martinez, the New York-based senior manager of education for the David Lynch Foundation, which works with schools, prisons, veterans, and other groups to reduce stress and trauma through the practice of meditation.

Alternative discipline can build trust between students and staff that traditional discipline can fracture, according to Martinez.



Yania Gonzalez, 7, carries her mat to yoga club at Doull Elementary School in Denver. The school offers after-school yoga three days a week—twice a week as a replacement for detention and once a week as a club for students who want to participate. The school’s use of yoga is part of its larger efforts to meet the social and emotional needs of students.

—Rachel Woolf for *Education Week*

“Students don’t feel as much as targets [because] they realize that teachers are seeing them more as humans,” Martinez said.

However, a 2018 review of 183 peer-reviewed articles and studies on school discipline issues found that alternative approaches to discipline do not effectively reduce discipline disparities.

Furthermore, there is little research that explores the long-term



benefits of mindfulness, including if and how students are using the practices in their daily lives outside of the classroom.

“Sometimes we take for granted how hard it is for people to change their behavioral habits, so we might be hard on teachers that are having a hard time implementing something new, not appreciating how difficult it is for them to do something new, and I think that we’re hard on students as well when they’re not changing their behaviors as quickly as we want to see,” Long said. “Anybody who has made a New Year’s resolution will let you know that the behavior change didn’t happen as readily as they had hoped.”

Many groups rely on research to convince wary parents and teachers. Holistic Life Foundation has gone as far as to partner with Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Penn State University, Loyola University, and the University of Baltimore to conduct research on the effects of mindfulness on classroom environments, grades, brain activity, and depression.

## **Skepticism About Mindfulness in Schools**

Still, research is only one part of the puzzle. There’s also skepticism and reluctance on the part of teachers and parents to endorse mindfulness practices in schools.

When yoga was first introduced at Doull, many teachers and parents were worried that the practice may be religious, and therefore had no place in the schoolhouse, Carrigan said.

“Hindsight is 20-20, and I do wish we would have called it something like reflection, or deep breathing after 3 o’clock. Anything but yoga,”

Carrigan said.

But for Maleah Kagan, a teacher who uses a mindfulness curriculum and breathing exercises to help prevent disruptive behavior in the classroom at Pearl Cohn High School in Nashville, Tenn., implementing mindfulness was less about the specific techniques and more about finding a way to introduce social-emotional learning to her students.

“When you become a teacher, social-emotional learning feels like this big beast where you’re like, ‘I’ve studied English and I’ve studied pedagogy, but psychology might not be my wheelhouse,’” Kagan said.

Even so, Kagan said that mindfulness practices are not one-size-fits-all. While one student may enjoy mandala coloring—the activity of using colors related to the emotions that a student feels—another may become frustrated with the process. The key, according to Kagan, is understanding your students and reading the energy in the room.

“I have some kids that love it, that talk about it ... I have other kids that were in the exact same class and paint a very different picture of it, the breathing doesn’t feel good to them,” Kagan said. “It’s about finding a strategy that works for them.”

While using yoga after school as an alternative to detention is a major plank in Doull Elementary’s effort to foster a positive school climate, the school is using many other strategies as well. Before students even enter their classrooms, they are greeted by multiple adults to ensure that they are ready for the day.

First, administrators meet them at the entrance, as they’re dropped off by their buses and parents. Then teachers greet them as they come

into their classrooms. Lastly, before students start learning, they eat breakfast as a class, and have a “mindful moment.”

“You can spot a mile away the kiddo that’s coming in with their head down and their shoulders down,” Carrigan said.

For Carrigan, it’s about pinpointing students before they misbehave and providing them with the right tools for the next time that they are upset.

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