Mindfulness in Schools
Bringing a Proven Approach to Well-Being to Students and Teachers
Introduction

Our country is facing a longstanding and evolving youth mental health crisis. Educational systems, specifically those serving marginalized and systemically harmed communities, often have not prioritized whole-child education and have not provided enough youth-focused prevention and intervention wellness programming and resources to meet their students’ needs. Without quality access to available mental health support, social-emotional learning programming, and wellness resources, cycles of trauma persist in and outside of schools for students, teachers, and families.

Mindfulness, a buzzword that has been used a lot over the past five years, is actually one of the keys to countering the mental health crisis. Mindfulness is being talked about for a reason: because it works. From big technology giants to schools, and from healthcare to carceral systems, when applied with fidelity and hope, mindfulness practice changes lives. It is key that we define the practice and make sure it is implemented in schools with the highest fidelity and with best practices. The future of mental health depends on it.

As the devastating mental health crisis in the U.S. for youth—and adults—continues to grow, our schools and healthcare systems are unable to meet the growing demands and needs with an intervention approach. For the long game, it is clear that we need to focus on prevention just as much as intervention. What better place to create strong prevention and intervention strategies than in elementary, middle, and high schools? With California’s recent investment of approximately 75 million dollars into mindfulness in education, it is vital that it is rolled out effectively. The following lays out what mindfulness is, how it is being implemented in schools, and the key factors that will make it deeply impactful and sustainable.

“Mindfulness—for people who don’t know—could help them with madness, anger, and sadness. It could benefit a lot of people’s lives. Without it, I think I would have been in fights, my peers would be in fights. It’s just an important skill to have in life.”

6th Grader at Mindful Life Project Partner School, Oakland, CA
What Is Mindfulness?

A practice developed over time, mindfulness strengthens one’s mental and emotional health by training the mind to navigate emotions, thoughts, physical experiences, stimuli, and our senses by using nonjudgmental, compassionate awareness. It is paying attention on purpose to the present moment without judgment. Through focused awareness, mindfulness builds skills to navigate and welcome all experiences by strategically living in the here and now with compassion. Just like it takes time and practice to learn how to read or play an instrument, mindfulness takes dedication and time to develop. And while most people think of mindfulness as different from social-emotional learning (SEL), it covers every core SEL competency and is seen as a key component to high quality SEL implementation.

What Does the Research Say?

Through vast research over the past four decades, mindfulness has been scientifically proven to improve the brain’s optimal functioning. Studies show that mindfulness rewires the brain and decreases activity in the area of the brain most affected by chronic stress and trauma. “MRI scans show that after an eight-week course of mindfulness practice, the brain’s ‘fight or flight’ center, the amygdala, appears to shrink. This primal region of the brain, associated with fear and emotion, is involved in the initiation of the body’s response to stress. As the amygdala shrinks, the prefrontal cortex – associated with higher order brain functions such as awareness, concentration and decision-making – becomes thicker.” (Scientific American, June 2014). The research shows that this and all the life-changing benefits of mindfulness go across all age groups. Here are just some of the benefits research has proven:

✔ Higher brain functioning
✔ Reduced stress
✔ Lowered blood pressure and heart rate
✔ Increased immune function
✔ Increased awareness
✔ Increased attention and focus
✔ Improved quality of sleep
✔ Increased clarity in thinking and perception
✔ Reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety
✔ Improved intra- and interpersonal relationships
✔ And much more!

“The mindfulness parent sessions came to me at a time when processing my feelings and experiences felt like walking through chaos and breaking down every time. Sitting through a session and being guided with kindness and patience allowed me to realize that every breath I take could help me collect and process my thoughts and feelings at my own pace and without judgment.”

Parent of Mindfulness Life Partner School Student, Pittsburg, CA
How Is Mindfulness Being Implemented in Schools?

Mindfulness and social-emotional learning are being implemented in schools in a variety of ways. They are most effective when they become an inherent part of the school culture, and teachers and students are brought along the journey of learning and building a consistent practice together. The ability to improve individual and community mental health with a relationship- and trust-based approach is extremely impactful. The main approaches schools and districts are using to implement mindfulness and SEL are described below.

Train-the-Teacher Models

Model 1: School-Wide Curriculum

The approach most commonly used by districts and schools is buying a curriculum and training all teachers to deliver lessons themselves.

Pros

+ Has the potential to provide a school-wide or district-wide approach that reaches all students.
+ Embeds a shared language of mindfulness across teachers, students, and communities to further support sustainability of the practice.

Challenges

− Teachers are often already being asked to implement so much; the more they are asked to hold, the more burned out and overwhelmed they may feel. Just as with bringing art, music, and other non-academic subjects into their classrooms, teachers often don’t receive enough training or have enough mastery to be able to implement additional curricula with fidelity and consistency. Most training on curricula lasts just a day or two, and then teachers are asked to implement.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in Schools

MTSS is a framework that helps educators provide academic and behavioral strategies for students with various needs.

Mindfulness strategies and programs are important, and too often overlooked, parts of a successful MTSS approach.
The high level of turnover of teachers and school administrators, especially in our most underserved communities, makes it almost impossible to grow something over time, and far too often districts pivot to another mindfulness curriculum after a couple of years of first implementation. While this approach might work well in mid- to high-income communities where there is less trauma and teachers and administrators are at a school site longer term, it is the hardest method to implement to reach high impact and sustainability in any setting—and is particularly ineffective in lower income communities.

While a school-wide curriculum might look cost-effective, which is why many districts take this approach, billions of dollars have been spent purchasing curricula and training across the U.S. education system over the years. The cyclical nature of implementing a new curriculum every several years in major school districts points to a tremendous lack of impact and sustainability, and a lot of financial waste.

**Estimated cost**

$5,000 - $25,000, per school and per year

**Model 2: Early Adopter Train-the-Trainer**

Another approach that has been implemented is training teachers in mindfulness, with early adopters at a school being trained first, with use of the curriculum growing as adoption shows success and other teachers are trained.

**Pros**

+ This approach has been shown to create more engagement and sustainability in the classrooms of teachers who are early adopters.

+ The fidelity and quality of impact are significantly higher in the early adopter classes and schools.

**Cons**

− Slower rollout, and it rarely reaches school wide implementation.

− Has not yet reached district-wide implementation in bigger urban school districts.

− Not recommended for schools with high teacher turnover.

**Estimated cost**

$5,000 - $25,000, per school and per year
## Technology-Based Model

In an approach that is rapidly growing, some schools and districts are purchasing apps and videos for teachers to use in their classrooms. Some of these apps and videos come with teacher training or instructional videos on best practices for using the tools.

### Pros

- Lowest cost option.
- Opportunity to provide students with multiple modalities to support diverse learning styles.

### Challenges

- May minimize personal connection. What matters most for teaching or learning something? Relationship, connection, trust, and relevance. With the youth mental health crisis having grown exponentially since the smartphone came out, what our youth need now more than ever is connection to people in “real life”, not on apps or videos.

- Quality of the apps and videos. There are a variety of apps out there, and some have a much better approach to implementation in schools than others.

### Estimated cost

$2,000 - $5,000, most which is upfront with minimal cost for annual app/video upgrades
In-Person Full-Time Mindfulness Teachers

In this approach, school districts employ mindfulness teachers as staff members to lead tier 1 and tier 2 (higher need students) programs, or contract with nonprofits to provide mindfulness instructors at a school full-time.

Pros

+ Builds people power and provides more capacity and integration as these mindfulness teachers become part of the vision and mission of a school/district and are an integral part of the systemic shift to prioritizing mental and emotional health for tier 1 and tier 2 supports.

+ Dedicated mindfulness specialists can provide students and their classroom teachers with the programs and resources they need so they are brought along the journey and then can engage from a place of non-stress without the pressure to hold new programs themselves.

+ Removes from teachers the pressure and stress of having to become mindfulness experts without appropriate training and the time required to do so. When teachers are asked to implement something they haven’t been able to learn, grow, and master for themselves, they are being set up for failure.

Challenges

− Creating the budget to hire a full-time dedicated staff member.

− Finding and contracting with strong community-based partners as a means of embedding the expertise in a school full-time.

Estimated cost

$20,000 - $40,000, per school and per year

“Mindfulness helps me so much because I have a crazy life, so it helps me to stop thinking about what might happen and think about what is happening now. Mindfulness has been a part of my whole life, so it is very important to me.”

4th grader who has been in Mindful Life Project since Kindergarten, Richmond, CA
Like with all student well-being programs, there isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution for mindfulness. Finding the right approach always starts with assessing the needs of students and understanding the capacity and needs of teachers to match the best solution.

**Recommendations and things to consider in selecting the approach for your school/district/county:**

As with anything we try to implement with strong fidelity and integration in our schools, with mindfulness it is key to assess the state of your ecosystem and decide which approach will be most impactful and sustainable. Here are some questions to reflect on when thinking about implementing mindfulness in schools:

- What is the goal for embedding mindfulness into your school or district?
- How long are you willing to work on it and build it into the systems of your school or district?

**Staff**

- How much capacity does your current staff have?
- Do they want to have a personal mindfulness practice?
- Do they then want to teach it to their students?
- Are there other staff with the capacity to implement mindfulness for all students and smaller groups?

**Students and Educators**

- How much of a priority is mental health programming for them?
- How many mental and behavioral health challenges are you seeing in your students and educators?
- How much are you able to invest financially, and if mental health is a priority for your district how can you build bigger and sustainable sources of money to put towards it?

“This was the best program that I’ve had in my many years in education. It was transformative in so many ways, and I love that it helps me in my mental health as much as it helps my students. I cannot say enough good things about it!”

*7th Grade Teacher, Antioch, CA*
Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the above questions and the experiences of Mindful Life Project over the past 11 years.

Train-the-Teacher Model

If your district/school has long-term leadership and teachers who have been in their positions at their sites for a long period of time and have had success implementing an SEL or character development/anti bullying curriculum, then your site might be a good fit for the train-the-teacher model. However, it is key that the training not stop at one or two sessions and then is left up to the teachers to implement.

The best train-the-teacher model includes trainings over multiple days across several months or throughout the year. It should also include student-facing demo lessons from the trainers so that classroom teachers and school staff are able to observe how to best implement mindfulness with their students. This helps build confidence and ownership.

Since the key of all work is relationship-building, it is important that you find an organization with experience building and collaborating with a specific focus on what your district or school might encounter so that it becomes integrated and successful both short- and long-term.

A complementary aspect to this approach might be apps/videos that teachers who are having a hard time leading the mindfulness practices can use as a way for the students and teacher to practice and be “learners” together. This model would not be recommended for communities that have high trauma and chronic stress.

Building in Mindfulness Professionals or Partnering With an Organization

If your district/school has students with significant trauma and toxic stress it is highly recommended that you create mindfulness professional positions or partner with an organization that provides mindfulness instructors.

Cultivating relationship-based mental health and mindfulness in these communities is key to mitigating the trauma and stress students, teachers, and families are encountering. The mindfulness instructors ideally lead tier 1 and tier 2 programming for students at each site as well as staff mindfulness and family sessions. This way the mindfulness teacher can provide mental and emotional health programming to all in the school/district ecosystem and bring everyone along on the wellness journey.

If the school/district does not have the ability to invest in a full-time mindfulness teacher or partner with an organization, it is recommended that they work with an organization that can provide consistent in-person mindfulness assemblies and in-class sessions as well as live virtual programming. This way, students, staff, and families can build a strong relationship with the provider as they can bring everyone along the wellness journey and help plant seeds for a community of practice and ownership.
Conclusion

Mindfulness in education for the students, teachers, and school staff has the potential to profoundly and positively alter our country’s mental health. Providing students from TK-12th grade and their teachers mindfulness programming can help transform schools that far too often have been stress-inducing and trauma-escalating spaces to become places of healing and empowerment! In order to thrive, both academically and socially, our youth need to have a foundation of strong mental and emotional health.

In this time of great need, let’s invest in approaches that have the highest impact and are the most systemically sustainable. While as in all business decisions—and let’s be clear that schools are businesses—the immediate impulse is to go for the cheaper option or the one that on paper looks simplest to implement, it is critical that we make decisions based on their potential impact and sustainability as well as their ability to meet the needs of students and educators. Especially now that we are in a mental health crisis, this is the time—the only time we can be alive, as we learn in mindfulness—to make it count!

Mindful Life Project is an educational nonprofit that supports schools nationwide through highly impactful mindfulness-based social-emotional learning programming. Our comprehensive approach supports the mental and emotional well-being of students, teachers, staff, community leaders, and families and helps transform schools from the inside out. This is done with the intention to create cultures and climates where mental and emotional well-being is the foundation of everyone’s experience.

Mindful Life Project’s goal is to provide everyone the skills and practices to thrive, leading to everyone feeling a deep sense of belonging and connection to themselves and each other.

mindfullifeproject.org
The California Children’s Trust (CCT) is a statewide initiative to reimagine our state’s approach to children’s social, emotional, and developmental health. We work to transform the administration, delivery, and financing of child-serving systems to ensure that they are equity driven and accountable for improved outcomes. CCT regularly presents its Framework for Solutions and policy recommendations in statewide and national forums.

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