



November 12, 2008

Calming activities make for easier learning

By Lynn Monty, Free Press Staff

Voluntarily sitting in a "time-in" space, coloring wheels with repeating patterns and taking five minutes after recess to breath are exercises used at the Rick Marcotte Central School in South Burlington in an effort to achieve wellness.

Eleven Vermont schools were awarded grants from the Talk About Wellness Initiative, a nonprofit based in Shelburne in an effort to implement calming and relaxation techniques in schools. Shelburne, Hinesburg and Burlington were also awarded grants. Grants ranged from \$200 to \$500.

The Talk About Wellness Initiative was able to offer these grants with funding from the J. Warren and Lois McClure Foundation and the Ferguson Foundation.

"Building Emotional Intelligence" by Linda Lantieri is the book fueling the South Burlington school's effort to teach mindfulness skills to children in kindergarten through eighth grade, Auriel Gray said. Gray has worked for the South Burlington School District for 21 years and is a school counselor at Rick Marcotte Central School.

Gray said some classrooms in the district have adopted quiet transition activities such as breathing exercises. After Jody Smith's kindergarten class returned from recess, students were each given a "breathing buddy" toy to place on their belly. As the stuffed animal moved up and down the children were able to focus on their own breathing. It was a five minute activity.

The mandala coloring books purchased with the grant are popular with the children, Gray said. "Coloring wheels, circular patters and geometric shapes train attention to be focused and calm. Because it's a symmetrical pattern, it's centering."

Smith's classroom also has a "time-in" space, a desk with quiet activities like tracing a finger along a labyrinth or rubbing smooth stones.

"Maybe they are missing a parent or need time to cool down," Gray said. "They can choose to go there. It's a positive opportunity to just pay attention to your own energy."

All of this is to create an inner focus, Gray said. "These techniques are a great infusion for our school. They help children cope and pace themselves. It is so needed."

In Nancy Baker's kindergarten classroom soft music played as the children worked. "The music is playing in the rhythm of a heartbeat," Baker said. "As they work and listen they become very calm and they remain more calm through the rest of the day. It really works."

Baker has been a teacher at the Rick Marcotte Central School for 15 years.