

# *A Mindful Nation* *How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit*

By Congressman Tim Ryan

Hay House, Inc., March 2012



## **About The Book**

*"In one of the most optimistic books to come out of Washington during these trying times, Congressman Tim Ryan presents us with an inspiring and hopeful view of our country's future—and a roadmap for how to get there. Across America, people are feeling squeezed, exhausted, and running faster and faster while falling farther behind. The economy continues to struggle, wars rage on, and every week brings news of another environmental disaster. Everything seems broken and people feel helpless to make a difference. Despite this bleak outlook, there are strands of quiet hope and confidence. People are beginning to take action in a new way: they are slowing down, paying attention, and gaining an awareness of the inner resources at their disposal."* –[www.amindfulnation.org](http://www.amindfulnation.org)

Excerpt from Chapter 4: *How Mindfulness Can Increase Our Children's Attention and Kindness*, pp. 70-75



*Students doing a 4 R's lesson in Warren City School District.*

Should every school district teach this approach to every student in the country? It seems so simple and inexpensive, and its effectiveness is backed by scientific research. What would it look like if we created a curriculum around this research? In fact, several organizations around the country have developed curricula for teaching mindfulness and what is called Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Social and emotional learning focuses on developing emotional resilience skills that, when lacking,

can cause poor education outcomes and disrupt the school environment. A student having regular tantrums, bullying, or being bullied is not going to get a good education.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) out of Chicago is one of the leading organizations promoting SEL and forms of education that promote resilience in children. The Hawn Foundation is another, and Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) at the Garrison Institute in upstate New York, is yet another. These initiatives have produced very encouraging results with teachers and with students. Their programs focus on developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

One of the topics Jon Kabat-Zinn and I discussed in depth after the Power of Mindfulness retreat was parenting and education. Jon and his wife, Myla, wrote a book on mindful parenting called *Everyday Blessings*, since the education and upbringing of children are a significant interest for them. Jon told me that one of the leading figures in the area of mindfulness and schools is Linda Lantieri, who has been an educator in New York City for 40 years. She is one of the most influential people in CASEL, which I learned about for the first time that day. Jon also gave me the book Linda wrote together with Daniel Goleman: *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner*

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*Strength in Children.* After reading just a few pages, as a member of a House subcommittee that deals with education, I knew I had to meet Linda.

Linda was asked by the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund to help the schools at Ground Zero recover from the trauma of the event. She decided to integrate the teaching of mindfulness practices with SEL, which was already happening in many of the schools, and give these skills first to the teachers and parents, and then to the students. One can only imagine the trauma a child would have experienced being close to the twin towers on that fateful day. Linda understands that many children experience traumas in their daily lives that are almost as intense. They grow up in low-income, high-crime areas. They often live in households that have experienced job loss or in which one or both parents are abusive. Over time these stressors have a debilitating effect. These children see so much bad that their brains are in a constant state of anxiety. They're frustrated the way Mason was when he was trying to read, but much more so. The stress for many children is constant, and it is often intensified through physical abuse. Based on her experience in the Ground Zero Project, Linda decided to start the Inner Resilience Program. According to Linda, this program is about cultivating the inner lives of students, teachers, and schools by integrating social and emotional learning with mindfulness practice. This is a program not only for the disadvantaged; it's for all children –every child in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century lives with lots of pressures. Mason has all the advantages in school and in life, and yet stress can still decrease his ability to learn. I had all the advantages too, and stress made it hard for me to read. No one ever presented an alternative. Linda and her

colleagues are committed to giving our children tools that help them find inner resilience and thrive amidst these pressures.

I was so impressed with Linda Lantieri's work that I invited her to testify before our House Appropriations Subcommittee on Education. After learning more from her about what SEL combined with contemplative practice can do for children, my committee directed almost one million dollars in federal money to two school districts to implement mindfulness and SEL, and evaluate its effectiveness. She is currently working in Ohio, and I predict we will see a transformational shift in the Youngstown and Warren city schools. Why do I feel that way? Because I've been seeing firsthand what this program can do.



*Congressman Ryan joins students in an exercise to calm the body and focus the mind.*

I attended the fourth day of a five-day training that Linda was giving to the teachers in our Youngstown/Warren program. I'll never forget walking into the hotel conference room that day. Linda asked me to stop by and say hello. I must admit I was a bit apprehensive. This SEL/mindfulness program for these schools had been completely my idea. I had

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talked the superintendents into doing it. Now I had to go and see if the teachers were actually responding to it. I was concerned some of the teachers would view this as a well-meaning, do-gooder, tree-hugger approach to teaching that would never work in the heart of inner-city Youngstown. Or that the Warren teachers didn't have time away from their already overburdened lives.

As I noticed these thoughts, I started to do a little walking meditation. I focused on my breath and feet as they touched the ground. I focused on not bringing my insecurities to this moment and on just dealing with the situation as it presented itself. I was glad I did, because what I saw inspired me and opened my heart.

As I entered the conference room I could feel a palpable sense of calm. The teachers were on a break and it was quiet. There was not the kind of chatter one would normally hear at a conference coffee break. No one was looking at their watch or the clock. I saw Linda in the lobby and asked her how it was going. "Amazing," she said. The training really resonated with the teachers. I asked a few of the other trainers, and they all said the same thing. Then Linda introduced me to share a few words, which I did briefly.

As I finished up, Linda asked me to stay for one of the exercises. She pulled out a large stuffed globe. Next she asked the teachers to raise their hands and share with the group of 60 teachers, and me, an awareness they discovered during the week of training. Teacher after teacher stood up, was tossed the globe, and as they held it, poured their heart out. One said, "I've already started treating my own children differently." Another said, "I've been looking for something like this for 30 years." Yet another said she finally realized her problem was that she never took time to care for herself ... so how could she possibly be

there for her kids? She was excited to start school the next week. Another said she felt reborn as a teacher, returning to why she got into the profession in the first place. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had a huge lump in my throat thinking how what had just transpired in that week will transform our schools and community. Then one of the three male teachers caught the globe. I braced for some criticism and my neck stiffened. Maybe this did not touch the men in the room the way it did the women. I was wrong. He talked about going to his son's soccer game the night before, and he said that he was actually *at* the soccer game. His mind was not somewhere else. He was with his son. He said he looked at the beautiful sky and the clover grass and found a real sense of peace. It hit me how potent SEL/mindfulness is. It even resonates with ordinary American guys like me and the male teachers I met in Warren, Ohio.



*Congressman Ryan joins students in an exercise to calm the body and focus the mind.*

We couldn't get these kinds of results without lots of local support, and when it comes to public education, union support is vital. Two of the biggest advocates for our local SEL program are the head of the teacher's union in Youngstown, Will Bagnola, and his

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wife, Lori. Youngstown has a long history of union membership. As the industrialization of this country grew in the steel belt, unions protected and empowered workers, and made the workplace safer and more humane. The unions were made up of hard-nosed, hard-working people who were willing to fight, and even die, for social justice, fair wages, and safe working conditions. Why would a 50-year-old lifelong union man be so high on SEL/mindfulness? It's because he carries with him the heart of the industrial union movement: better lives for everyone. Will agrees with me that SEL makes the workplace a safer and more humane place. The face of the union movement is changing, and I believe Will is going to be lauded as one of the most progressive leaders because of his support and advocacy of SEL/mindfulness. And other unions will follow Youngstown's lead. Eventually, unions will be negotiating for SEL/mindfulness throughout the country.



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