

Ryan Takes 'Mindfulness' to Inner-City Schools

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By Dan O'Brien

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio -- It's mid-afternoon and a student in Mrs. Evelyn Fisher's kindergarten class at Williamson Elementary School walks quietly to a corner and begins to cry.

Within seconds, five other students surround her. "Breathe in, breathe out," they coach, as they try to console their classmate with gentle pats on the back. A minute passes, her distress evaporates, and she returns to her desk to wait for the next lesson.

"They didn't need our help," observes Martha King, a school counselor at Williamson and liaison for the Youngstown School District's Skills for Life program, which was introduced last year. "Because of this program, they have been given tools that they can use to help them to relax."

Deep breathing exercises, meditation, instructions on how to think before acting, and methods on how to talk through a problem are all part of a curriculum being implemented in specified kindergarten and elementary classes in the Youngstown and Warren school districts. The Skills for Life program was made possible by a \$982,000 earmark secured in 2009 by U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan, D-17 Ohio, for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. Ryan is a champion of the effort and a strong advocate of developing

"mindfulness" for personal and institutional growth in the United States.

Mindfulness includes meditation and reflection as a means to achieve self-awareness and clarity. Since the 1970s, many Western scholars, psychologists and physicians have adopted the practice as a remedy to alleviate illness, stress, pain and anxiety.

Ryan writes about his own experiences in his new book, *A Mindful Nation*, published March 27. The account tells of how the congressman was transformed in 2008 at a mindfulness retreat conducted by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus of medicine and founding director of the Center of Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is among the early advocates of mindfulness strategies as a way to improve one's health, creativity and well-being.

The personal benefits Ryan took away caused him to think: If adults across the world use this method as an effective way to improve their health, reduce stress levels, and enhance their productivity or performance in their careers, why not integrate these principles into the classroom?

"There's a whole body of literature in neuroscience today explaining why this works," Ryan says. "We don't have time to wait. It's changing kids' lives. It's transforming teachers. It's transforming schools. And we see it in our own community now."

The influence was strong enough to push Ryan to secure a grant through the U.S.

Department of Education to fund mindfulness and social and emotional learning programs in Warren and Youngstown. “It gets down to the fundamentals,” the congressman says, “helping kids to balance their emotions, teaching them how to get control over their anger, or fear, and teaching them how to pay attention.”

The Youngstown and Warren school districts are among a host of other school systems across the country that have successfully introduced the elements of mindfulness to their curriculums, Ryan says, but “it’s not been scaled up significantly yet” nationwide, making the Mahoning Valley’s school districts among its early practitioners.

Today, social and emotional learning, or SEL, programs and mindfulness programs are introduced separately in the schools, reports Linda Lantieri, director of the Inner Resilience Program, a nonprofit based in New York that helps train teachers in social and emotional learning and mindfulness methods.

However, she says, the Youngstown and Warren programs are the first to combine the two in a single curriculum.

“It’s been very cutting-edge to put these two dimensions together,” she says. “Social and emotional learning and contemplative teaching and learning are almost on separate tracks. But here they’ve been integrated and I think we need both.”

Corporations such as Google and Target are incorporating mindfulness in their leadership training, and the same skills can be learned in early childhood, laying the groundwork for young people to succeed later in their lives, Ryan says. “I think it all ties together.

It teaches our students how to deal with this high level of stress, the high level of information that’s being downloaded in our brains.”

The program, implemented a second year in some classrooms in Youngstown and Warren, has already shown results.

“The first year we did it, we found that we had a much better behaved classroom than we did the year before,” reports Denise Roberts, a kindergarten teacher at Jefferson Elementary School in Warren. “This is our second year into the program, and what I’m noticing [is] not only do I have a better behaved class, I also have a class that’s reading higher and writing higher than I ever had before.”

Roberts attributes this welcome development to SEL addressing the full spectrum of the students’ needs, especially its taking into consideration the emotional stress many carry as they begin the school day. “When you’re addressing those things, and allowing them to communicate, talk and express themselves and deal with all those issues,” she has found, “that really allows them to learn and excel better than I’ve ever seen students do before.”

One aspect of the mindfulness program is whole-group meditation where kids learn how to relax, clear their minds and calm their bodies, Roberts says. Meditation sessions last five minutes or so, and in Roberts’ class, she and each student lie on the floor and listen to a CD with soft-spoken instructions on relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing.

Also, there is the “Peace Corner,” a partially enclosed corner of the room where students go voluntarily if they feel undue stress.

“If they’re coming in and they’re having a bad day – maybe something happened to them on their way to school – before they start their morning routine, they can go there and calm themselves down,” Roberts says. “If I let them have that five or 10 minutes, then they’re able to come back and learn for the rest of the day.”

Peace corners, an integral component of the program, are filled with items familiar to children such as squeeze toys, small stuffed animals, and writing and art materials. “In the past, when you wouldn’t address these things, you’d have a child whose behavior would escalate throughout the day and would never get to learn anything,” Roberts says.

The principal at Youngstown’s Williamson Elementary, Wanda Clark, reports that the response from the students encourages her to see it introduced and used it in every classroom.

“Students are having dialogue with other students who are not in their rooms,” Clark says. “So, it’s contagious.”

More important, the program has helped raise students’ awareness and academic performance, Clark relates. And, the Skills For Life program includes a component that enlists the support of parents of children in both school systems.

Clark is confident more teachers in her school will want to be trained in the program once it hits its stride. Last year, three teachers at Williamson agreed to participate; this year, the program has seven classrooms. “I believe we’ll have more,” the principal says. “It is contagious when you have teachers going into rooms and they’re seeing positive things going on.”

The Warren City Schools have trained more than 112 teachers in the program, reports Jill Merolla, program coordinator.

“The training spends some time having the teachers look at their own social and emotional health,” Merolla says. “This program recognizes that it’s difficult to be a teacher, and that teachers also need to take care of themselves before they can take care of their own students.”

Teachers are trained in how to manage their own stress and stay balanced, says the Inner Resilience Program’s Lantieri. In late March, Lantieri was in the Mahoning Valley to help conduct workshops with teachers from both school systems as Inner Resilience Program designates were busy at the schools working with teachers in their classrooms.

Lynne Hurdle-Price, a staff developer and facilitator for the Skills for Life program, says teachers are responding very well to the prospect of changing the culture of the school systems. “It’s a four-day training for full days,” she says. “They were really excited about running the Skills for Life program, and once they got back into the classrooms I think they were excited to see that it fit in to what they were already doing.”

Many expressed surprise at how well their students are responding to the program, Hurdle-Price says. “More and more, teachers are telling us how well the students are responding to it,” she notes. “I think a lot of them thought that the students wouldn’t be able to grasp the concepts. It’s actually working very well.”

Hurdle-Price has also worked with schools in New York City where students and teachers face many of the same challenges

as in Youngstown and Warren. “We’re all dealing with a lot of the same issues,” she says. “I think our children are very distracted. They have a lot of social issues. Parents have a lot going on. And we’re finding the same enthusiasm and results in Ohio as in New York.”

Lantieri says the goal now is to extend this program into the higher grades, but it’s imperative that this type of education be introduced at an early stage so it can be reinforced and developed through a student’s academic career.

“We want to keep going,” Lantieri says. “The younger the better, but the neuroplasticity of the brain tells us that we can change by the experiences we have in our environment at any age, including adults.”

Continuing efforts could well depend on more funding, and the initial earmark was limited to two years. The challenge before educators and the congressman is to attract additional funds for the program.

“This is the last year for funding. This is it,” Lantieri says. “We hope to get funding from other places.”

Ryan says that the next step is to engage the foundation community here and nationally to support these programs. “What’s good about this is that after five years, you have all the teachers trained and it’s then self-sustaining,” he says.

The congressman emphasizes that many need to realize the program teaches students critical skills necessary to succeed in their careers. “Look at what you need to succeed,” he says. “About 20% of that is actual knowledge of the industry you’re in.”

The other 80% relates to how an employee can solve problems, work within a team, and how well one can communicate and interact with other employees, Ryan says. “These are skills that are essential to becoming a successful human being, and that’s what we’re teaching these kids. Hopefully, someone will see that and want to continue to support it.”

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