

# Mindfulness in Education

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Extensive research exists on the benefits of practicing mindfulness, particularly within the field of medicine. However, it has only been recently that researchers have begun to document the many positive effects of mindfulness in education. One individual committed to bringing this growing body of knowledge to the mainstream is **John Meiklejohn, LICSW**, lead author of a newly published white paper entitled, *Integrating*

*Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students*. In it, Meiklejohn and his coauthors detail the outcomes of a host of the most promising studies of this kind to date.

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I was extremely fortunate to get to speak with Mr. Meiklejohn recently about the specific benefits teens can derive from bringing mindfulness into the classroom, at which time I posed to him a single question. Below is my question, followed by John Meiklejohn’s insightful and informative response:

*Q: What is mindfulness and how can it enrich the educational paths of high school students in today’s increasingly complex world?*

A: High school students, like students of all ages, may come to school with stressors arising from many sources including family-system disturbances, peer conflicts, socio-cultural challenges, and vulnerabilities to physical and mental health problems. Combined with the challenges of learning and achievement, these sources of stress can, at times, be toxic to a student’s learning and development. Research suggests that excessive stress impacts the developing brain. Sustained stress in childhood and adolescence is likely to impact well-being, general functioning, and factors specific to learning such as executive function and working memory. Given that many youth exhibit learning, behavioral, attentional and/or mental health problems that are stress-sensitive or stress induced, the school setting offers an ideal environment for utilizing interventions that promote healthy brain development and function, and foster stress resilience. Evidence is accumulating that

mindfulness training is one effective and cost-efficient way to achieve this goal.

*“There is increasingly convincing data that mindfulness improves health and well-being by: reducing stress, anxiety and depression; enhancing immune system function; increasing motivation to make lifestyle changes; and fostering social connections.”*



Mindfulness has been described by **Jon Kabat-Zinn** as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment”. It is a fundamental component of human consciousness and a mental capacity that can be strengthened through a variety of training methods. For over two thousand years, numerous secular and religious traditions across many cultures have cultivated the discipline of mindfulness. In the US, from its initial applications in adult medicine at the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, mindfulness training has spread into the fields of psychology, healthcare, neuroscience, business, the military and education. An extensive peer-reviewed empirical literature now exists exploring the nature, application and potential efficacy of mindfulness-based practices. There is increasingly convincing data that, in adults, mindfulness improves health and well-being by: reducing stress, anxiety and depression; enhancing neuroendocrine and immune system function; altering perception of pain; increasing motivation to make lifestyle changes; and fostering social connections. These findings are inspiring inquiry into how this reflective mind-body discipline might be adapted to the developmental needs of children and youth. Consequently, within the past 5-10 years a nascent field of research and program development is emerging involving the integration of mindfulness training into K-12 education for the benefit of both teachers’ and students’ resilience and well-being.

For high school students, as for adults, mindful awareness emerges when they intentionally focus attention on their present moment experience while maintaining receptive attitudes of acceptance, kindly curiosity and non-judgment. Although it varies with different developmental ages, practice might typically consist of initially directing attention to a specific focus, such as the breath, a sensation, a feeling (e.g. loving-kindness) or other attentional ‘anchor’. As one practices, it becomes apparent that the mind will repeatedly drift off the chosen ‘anchor’ into spontaneously arising thoughts, memories, feelings or images. One learns to recognize this mental drifting, accept it without judgment and let it go, returning one’s attention to the ‘anchor’ of chosen focus. The practice of mindful awareness allows students to relate to their internal and external experience in ways that are present-centered, objective and responsive, rather than in ways that are past or future-focused, subjective or reactive. In turn, this strengthens innate capacities to self-regulate both emotion and attention. Emotional self-regulation is nurtured via the ability to be non-reactively aware of emotions and to modulate the intensity and duration of emotion-laden arousal. The skill of self-regulating attention is gradually enhanced through repeated and intentional focusing, sustaining and shifting of attention. In short, the research to date points to the possibility that through this experiential practice students learn an attitude – a way of being – in their day to day living that broadens the skill sets of attention, balance and compassion and reduces the universal human tendency under stress to become reactive and impulsive.

Innovative programs in the U.S. and elsewhere are now offering mindfulness training to elementary, middle-school and high school students, their teachers and, in some cases, parents as well. A few examples include:

- [The Inner Resilience Program \(NY\)](#)
- [South Burlington Wellness and Resilience Program \(VT\)](#)
- [Mindful Schools \(Oakland, CA\)](#)
- [Learning to Breathe \(PA\)](#)
- [Mindfulness in Schools Project \(UK\)](#)
- [Still Quiet Place \(Menlo Park, CA\)](#)
- [Stressed Teens \(Bay Area, CA\)](#)
- [Wellness Works in Schools \(PA\)](#)

Some of these programs, as well as others, also offer programming at the elementary and middle school levels. These initiatives utilize two main methods for bringing mindful practices to students. The first is by having individuals who are trained mindfulness teachers guide the mindful practices either in the classroom or in after-school programs. The second is to train classroom teachers to guide students. This raises the question of who is best suited to teach mindful awareness practices to youth and what role should classroom teachers play in this process.

K-12 teachers, like their students, need and deserve supports to flourish, professionally and personally. In an era of high stakes testing, tightening budget constraints and other increased pressures, K-12 educators all too often encounter a cascade of stressors and warrant interventions that support their resilience and social-emotional competencies. Such interventions can lower the risk of professional languishing and/or burnout due to emotional exhaustion. An extensive body of medical, neurological and psycho-social research data supports the contention that mindfulness training holds promise for being one such intervention for teachers. Teachers who are supported by being offered the opportunity to learn this shift in attitude towards a more mindful way of moving through their day, often begin inquiring how they might teach these same practices to their students. In this way classroom teachers first learn to embody a more mindful way of being for their own sake; in turn, this allows them to authentically embody the teachings they wish to impart about mindfulness to their students. What better way to allow a school community to organically grow the skills of attention, balance, compassion and resilience?

-John H. Meiklejohn