

Dobbs Ferry Super Practices Yoga, Mindfulness in Schools

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by Abby Luby –



Lisa Brady

Ask any parent with children in elementary, middle or high school if their kid is stressed, and most probably their answer will be “yes.” Successfully tackling the problem of student anxiety in the Dobbs Ferry School District has been one of the main goals of Superintendent of Schools Dr. Lisa Brady.

Brady spearheaded an effort to provide time and space for students and teachers to practice yoga and relaxation which has put the district ahead of the curve.

“All you read about is the stress and anxiety kids are under today,” said Brady, who took the helm as superintendent in 2011. “For me, the whole idea of mindfulness, yoga practice, breathing and meditation is how they reduce stress.”

Brady, herself a serious yoga practitioner, set out to shift the academic environment to accommodate practices that would help both students and teachers. Today, teachers can drop into the dimly lit classroom of Dobbs Ferry high school teacher Marion Halberg and meditate. Halberg’s classroom is briefly transformed to a mediation space twice a day. There is also a yoga studio at the middle and high school.

Teachers also use certain techniques to quiet their students.

“When elementary school kids come in from recess they’re totally revved up,” Brady explained. “To get the students calmed down, teachers will use mindful breathing, short yoga stretches, and the kids quickly get centered and can focus on their work.”

This paradigm change didn’t happen overnight. Brady set out to educate parents and teachers in the first nine months of her tenure. She worked with the Dobbs Ferry PTSA (Parent Teacher Student Association) to have “book readings” at several Dobbs Ferry homes. “I would meet several parents in homes all over the district and I brought books about new ap-

proaches to education, including mindfulness and yoga,” Brady recalled. “Because everyone wanted to meet the new superintendent, there was always a huge participation.”

Brady’s early book chats ushered in new ideas and approaches geared to give students necessary life skills. Five years ago, the district moved the middle and high schools’ start time back from 7:35 to 8:15 a.m. “That adolescents and teens need more sleep is a known fact,” said Brady. “By starting later and ending later, we sent a clear message that we are focused on wellness and that we can make good use of time. Many teachers end their classes early and that allows them to have a three-minute meditation to end their day.”

Hand in hand with the district’s new approach to easing student stress has been introducing and upgrading technology — a move which has ushered the school district into the 21st century. For years one computer per classroom was for the teacher’s use only, but now each teacher in the district has a laptop to take home and use for collaboration and creating lesson plans. Also, Dobbs Ferry students in grades 4-12 have Chrome Books to take home and can connect with teachers and mentors.

The intrinsic value of technology’s social component is key for Brady who interacts daily with teachers and administrators on Twitter. “Teachers tweet pictures of elementary kids leading group mediations and pictures of students who incorporate mindful practices into some of their projects,” said Brady, who sees both mindfulness practices and technology as essential for young people to grow. “They use their phones, Instagram and other social media to connect with friends. That’s part of the universe. But it can also be a primary learning tool.”

Because the district's curriculum is the very rigorous International Baccalaureate Program, Brady said that connecting to other students around the world is a key component of the program. "If students are interested in climate change for instance, they need to find out what's happening globally. Their future is going to be defined as to how well they are able to use technology to connect and share ideas," she said.

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