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Mindfulness Program at John Adams Middle School Enhances School Climate

District Works to Enhance Campus Life at All School Sites

Santa Monica, Calif. – Every day, students at John Adams Middle School (JAMS) take a moment to stop, breathe and practice presence. The sixth- through eighth-graders at the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified school are participating in a Mindfulness Program, which is a part of the SMMUSD’s initiative to enhance school climate at all sites.

“Studies have shown that improving the quality and character of campus life leads to higher student achievement, increased teacher retention, lower dropout rates and stronger interpersonal relationships,” Superintendent Sandra Lyon said. “We are so impressed with the staff, teachers and team who have successfully incorporated this program at JAMS – and perhaps, more notably, we commend each student for embracing this new practice so that they learn to be in control of their actions and reactions, allowing the campus to be a more positive place.”

The program, a District pilot, not only seeks to teach students how to be focused, calm and present, but also provides a community building component that affects the whole campus, including teachers and staff.

Mindfulness is a practice rooted in techniques like meditation and controlled breathing. The idea is to calm the mind and its tendency to make quick judgments or reactions so that respectful and effective responses emerge. The results are heightened awareness, reduced stress or anxiety and a boost in overall academic performance.

“The qualitative data at our school has been overwhelmingly positive – suspensions have seen a dramatic decrease, referrals are down and we anticipate that academic curriculum will also be positively impacted,” JAMS Principal Steven Richardson said. “The program truly unifies our school under a positive concept that builds a sense of belonging – a vital element in the life of a middle-schooler.”

The program, funded by the Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation (SMMEF) with the collaboration of the YES! for Schools organization, began in August 2014 after teachers selected mindfulness training as a way to build on the school’s social curriculum. Teachers were trained in summer 2014 with the help of a District partner; classified staff are undergoing training now; and more training is planned this summer.

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“Without the unwavering and steadfast support of our teachers and staff, who have all really rallied behind the program, it could not be as successful as it has become,” Richardson said. “I’m so proud of our staff for being so receptive and willing to embrace it.”

Once teachers were versed in how to fold in breathing techniques that can either calm or energize, depending on the time of day, physical education teachers were tasked with daily implementation of the six core values of the program.

The six values are: build a relationship with a teacher; create a sense of belonging; make a new friend; act, don’t react; respect for others is self-respect; and always be present.

“It really is quite remarkable to see our middle-schoolers, who are typically high energy, pause to get present before a test, remind each other to ‘just breathe’ or lead their class in a breathing exercise,” Richardson said.

Earlier in March, students participated in a full day of team-building and mindfulness exercises and activities with their teachers and peers.

Additionally, students partake in 13 hours of training throughout the school year in P.E. that helps to incorporate strategies of breathing, coping and mindfulness into areas like test-taking or problem-solving and conflict resolution, and fosters a sense of compassion and community.

Other District elementary and middle schools are working to incorporate similar programs on their campuses, with high schools in the District implementing Restorative Justice – a program that emphasizes collaborative and cooperative conflict resolution.

Photo Captions:

JAMS Mindfulness1: Every day, sixth- through eighth-graders (Shirley Tarpley’s sixth-graders pictured here with Yes! for Schools lead Justin McGurrin) at John Adams Middle School take a moment to stop, breathe and practice presence through the Mindfulness Program, which is part of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District initiative to enhance school climate at all sites.

JAMS Mindfulness2: Every day, sixth- through eighth-graders (Shirley Tarpley’s sixth-graders pictured here with Yes! for Schools lead Justin McGurrin) at John Adams Middle School take a moment to stop, breathe and practice presence through the Mindfulness Program, which is part of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District initiative to enhance school climate at all sites.

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As a community of learners, the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District works together in a nurturing environment to help students be visionary, versatile thinkers; resourceful, life-long learners; effective, multilingual communicators and global citizens.