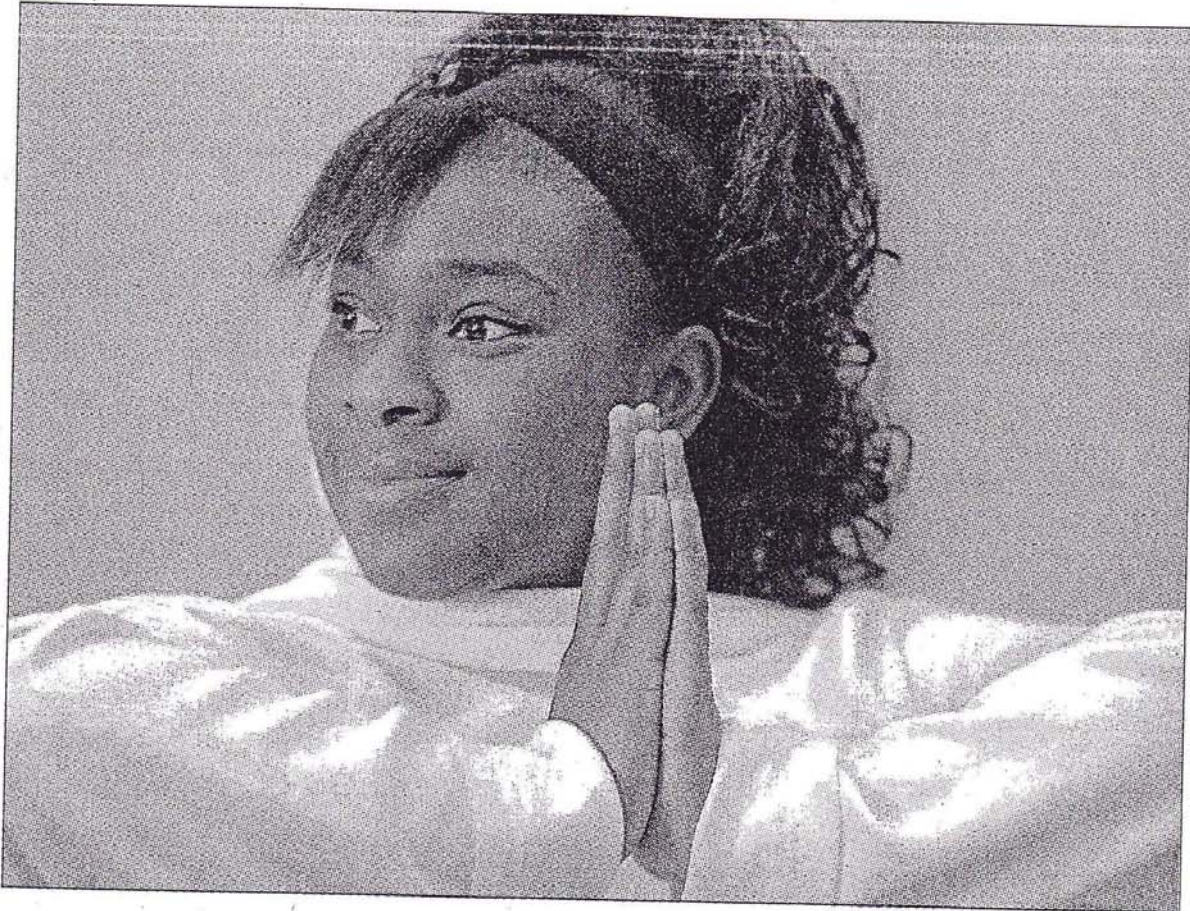


Breathing room

Wellness works wonders for SDL



Jeff Ruppenthal / Lancaster Newspapers photos

Student Jalisa Johns takes a Wellness Works class at McCaskey East High School this summer. School District of Lancaster was mentioned

in a New York Times article about a handful of districts using mindfulness training to improve students' discipline, self-esteem and grades.

BY SUSAN E. LINDT
Intelligencer Journal Staff

The teacher walks in. Her T-shirt message in tiny letters, "Life is good," seems to mock her students' situation: It's June. The sun's blazing outside — it is summer vacation.

But they're in here, a dark, overly air-conditioned room at McCaskey East, making up for earlier grade infractions.

Class has just started, and the students are restless, itching to get out, visibly unimpressed when teacher Wynne Kinder whips out her tiny Tibetan chimes and kindly smiles in spite of their snickers.

Disaster impends. They might have Kinder for lunch and be done with it. And that's before she even starts her pitch about "breathing."



Teachers Wynne Kinder and Christen Coscia of Kinder Associates lead a summer class at McCaskey East High School, where students are learning self-discipline through focused breathing and stretching.

"They roll their eyes at us sometimes, but they try it," Kinder said of her growing list of students at School District of Lancaster. "There are some tough characters in some of these

classes. We work really hard to connect with kids. We try to learn their names by the first class."

The curriculum is called "Well-

Please see **WELLNESS**, page A4



Jeff Ruppenthal / Lancaster Newspapers

Student Anthony Bryan buys into the principles behind his Wellness Works class at McCaskey East High School, although he said

most students aren't likely to admit focused breathing and stretching can make a difference in their lives.

Wellness

Continued from A1

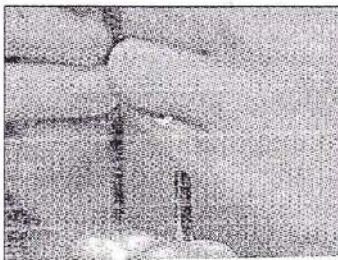
ness Works" — teachers were told by an SDL superintendent not to use the words "yoga" or "meditation" — but many of the concepts overlap.

"We use many approaches to positive mental health: Tibetan chimes, breathing, consciousness, physical flexibility," Kinder said. "We get them sitting up, tall and dignified. It's amazing how many of these kids are fighting every system in their lives, and then they try this. We just tell them, 'This posture can change your attitude, your outlook, your focus.'"

On this June day, it's hard to tell what's sinking in with six students reluctantly going along with the breathing exercises Kinder leads with Darry Starliper. They're both with Kinder Associates, a Lancaster wellness consultation firm Wynne Kinder runs with her parents, Midge and Rick Kinder. The kids seem to want to try it, even if they have to come up with a cool excuse to do what might be deemed uncool by their peers: "I gotta try



Kinder Associates' teacher Christen Coscia leads a Wellness Works session at McCaskey East High School, where classes include focused breathing and stretching to strengthen self-discipline.



with our students. Sometimes we have to give students the tools to show them they can respond and behave in a proper way."

Kinder Associates' instruc-

this one! It's like skateboarding!"

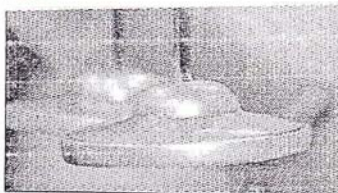
Kinder doesn't ask the students to succeed — she knows that approach might even turn off some kids. She just asks them to give the motions a chance to have calming effects. It hardly seems possible such a sublime approach could make a dent, but as Kinder asks students to visualize a wave receding over a beach to a blue ocean as they concentrate on their breathing, the class cool kid mumbles, "Does anyone have a pillow?"

No one laughs — the others are engaged by Kinder's beach scene. The cool kid's eyes meet Kinder's glance — he's dying to know if he rattled her with his pillow comment. She doesn't miss a beat as she puts an index to her lips for his silence.

The cool kid isn't mad. In fact, within a few seconds, his eyes are closed and he's falling into blissful silence under the air conditioner's white noise.

Kinder has 16 years' classroom experience, which serves her well in these situations. Still, she's baffled by how simple exercises mysteriously calm kids hypercharged from hours with computers, Mp3 players, TVs, video games, cell phones and a million other real-time distractions.

"I don't know how it works, but it works," she said. "By the end of class, they don't even have half the frenetic behavior they came in with. But the real test comes for these kids later, when they meet up with someone who's trying to mess with them. Can they step back and take control? We've taught them something valuable that society hasn't even caught onto yet."



Kinder Associates' Wynne Kinder begins and ends each Wellness Works class with the clear resonating tone of Tibetan chimes — a sort of analogy for clarity in action and thought that can be learned with training.

Kinder's parents were teaching yoga workshops at a local health campus years ago when two school principals in the class asked if they'd consider developing a pilot program to ease SDL students' tension during days of state-mandated testing. Six years later, the Wellness Works curriculum is taught by Kinder Associates instructors in more than 25 sessions a week at eight schools, including special education, emotional and learning support classes; detention and suspension programs; and targeted student groups, such as student parents or young men needing anger management. Some classes even include training for students' parents.

In fact, SDL's investment in mindfulness training is so far ahead of the curve that a recent New York Times article about its use in schools identified Lancaster as one of the nation's most successful leaders.

"We've had good results here. You have to actually see it to believe the kind of changes that can take place in students," said Hand Middle School Principal Larry Mays. "This year, we saw more than a 30 percent increase in grades across the board and a decrease in discipline problems. This has helped tremendously

tor Darryl Starliper was a physical education teacher for seven years in Lancaster schools before joining the Kinders. He admits he was skeptical when he first met them — they'd come to teach Wellness Works at SDL's Phoenix Academy, an alternative education program for students at risk of dropping out.

"Can you imagine the distance between these students and these teachers?" Starliper said. "But the students took it in, and they got so much from it. There's a truth to it and an honesty that it's going to be beneficial. I can't explain it more than that except to say it happens in every school we go to — not to every student, but every time."

Last month, as Wynne Kinder packed up her Tibetan chimes and her six students filed out of class, they were poker-faced — hardly a ringing endorsement for focused breathing.

"I want to do this more often," someone mumbled very quietly.

Pressed, junior Anthony Bryan stepped up. "It was cool. It helps you relax ... No one will admit that," he said, "but it's true."

As it was for so many programs, funding for Wellness Works was cut at Hand Middle School. But Mays said he's looking for grants and fellowships to make up the difference.

"If I could expand it to have a teacher whose sole responsibility is to work with students a few times a week, I would do it," Mays said. "I know that might sound radical to the general public, but I would train all my teachers if I could. I really believe it has the potential to change the entire school culture."

E-mail: slindt@lnpnews.com