

Mindfulness Strategies in the Austin Independent School District (AISD)

What is mindfulness?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer of mindfulness research, defined mindfulness as one's ability to be purposefully aware in the present moment without judgment (2012). Several studies have demonstrated the health benefits of mindfulness in adults, including improved self-regulation skills, well-being, ability to cope with stress and anxiety, and working conditions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt & Walach, 2004). More recently, researchers (Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Zelazo & Lyons, 2012) have studied the effects of mindfulness in children and found that age-appropriate exercises that teach children to reflect on moment-to-moment experiences not only are fun for students but also improve their self-regulation skills, decrease anxiety and stress, and improve reading and math skills (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). Additionally, mindfulness techniques have been shown to help students who have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems, anxiety, or poor academic performance (Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008; Greenberg & Harris, 2011). In 2016, recognizing the benefits of mindfulness for students, and seeing mindfulness as a strong complement to the Austin Independent School District's (AISD) Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Program, AISD hired a mindfulness specialist to bring mindfulness to all students in AISD.

How was mindfulness implemented in AISD?

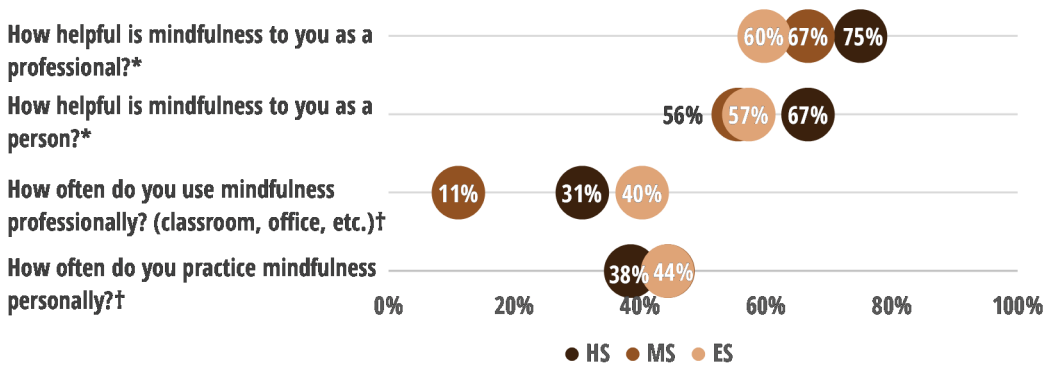
In the 2016–2017 school year, AISD's mindfulness specialist set out to provide professional development opportunities to staff at all 130 AISD schools. By the end of the school year, this goal was met with trainings extending to AISD's central office staff. During these professional development opportunities, staff learned specific mindfulness strategies to use in the classroom, office, or home that typically took 5 minutes or less. In an effort to increase participation, teachers were encouraged to use these techniques during naturally occurring times, such as before students transitioned from the classroom to the lunch room, before tests, or at the beginning or end of class. Teachers were trained differently, based on the students they served. For example, at the elementary school level, professional development sessions were provided during faculty meetings, whereas at the secondary level, professional development sessions were often provided during team meetings or through the Peer Assistance Leadership and Service (PALS) program. In addition to these professional development opportunities, AISD's mindfulness specialist helped some schools create mindfulness rooms for students to use throughout the school day, managed a mindfulness newsletter offering support and resources for district staff, and modeled lessons with

students. It should be noted that not all staff were implementing mindfulness strategies; however, at least one person at each school who served as a mindfulness champion. These champions will help grow the program in the coming years.

Who had participated in mindfulness training?

During the 2016–2017 school year, 489 AISD staff, trustees, and community stakeholders participated in some form of mindfulness training. Most staff trained were elementary school teachers (69%), 53% of whom were pre kindergarten through 2nd-grade teachers. Of the 489 staff served by mindfulness training, 176 participated in a follow-up survey. It should be noted that most survey participants (55) were elementary school teachers, while 13 were high school teachers, and nine were middle school teachers. The remaining survey participants (99) were other district employees (i.e., administrators, central office staff) and community stakeholders. Responses were compared, based on school level (other district employees were left out of the analysis), but due to the small number of respondents in each school level, no test for significance was conducted. More than half of teachers who received mindfulness training and participated in the follow-up survey felt that mindfulness was very helpful to them professionally and personally (Figure 1). Interestingly, a higher percentage of high school teachers than of elementary and middle school teachers felt that mindfulness helped them professionally and personally (Figure 1). Also of note, far fewer middle school teachers than elementary and high school teachers reported using mindfulness in the classroom.

Figure 1. More than 50% of AISD teachers trained in mindfulness strategies who participated in the follow-up survey found mindfulness very helpful both personally and professionally.



Source. Follow-up mindfulness survey
Note. Percentages reflect agreement with *very helpful* or *every day*.
 * response options ranged from 1 (*not so much*) to 5 (*very helpful*)
 † response options ranged from 1 (*haven't started*) to 5 (*every day*).

What were benefits of mindfulness in the classroom?

While some schools fully embraced mindfulness and created mindfulness rooms, other schools only had one teacher championing the mindfulness movement. According to AISD’s mindfulness specialist, schools where mindfulness was really taking off had a principal who believed in it. Importantly principals do not “need to practice [mindfulness] for an hour, but they have to have seen [mindfulness] help kids and

Data in This Report

In Spring 2017, staff who had participated in mindfulness training were sent a follow-up survey asking about their experiences with mindfulness in the classroom and at home. Of the 487 staff trained in mindfulness, 176 responded to the follow-up survey. Participants provided open-ended responses describing changes they had seen in their classroom or office believed to be a result from mindfulness, and challenges they faced while implementing mindfulness strategies. Teachers asked their students to describe changes in their behavior because of mindfulness. Open-ended responses were coded for themes.

Mindfulness Resources

Want to bring **mindfulness to your classroom or home?**

Here are some resources to help get you started:

- [Stop, Breathe & Think](#)
- [Calm](#)
- [Settle Your Glitter](#)



teachers” at their school. Additionally, schools where mindfulness is more embedded also have strong SEL implementation and leaders who approach their work with “an SEL lens and are more inclined to go deeper [into SEL].”

Regardless of how well mindfulness was integrated at a school, those practicing it with their students and staff saw the benefits. For example, elementary school teachers talked about observing an increased sense of calmness in their classrooms, an increase in students’ ability to regulate their emotions in stressful situations, and an increased focus on activities. Some teachers observed their students using mindfulness strategies on their own, and improving academically. One teacher stated, “I have seen significant changes in classroom management and [in] negative behaviors in my classroom. Additionally, one of my 5th-grade students has significantly improved academically and behaviorally because of mindfulness techniques.” At the secondary level, teachers talked about how their students had experienced a reduction in stress and anger, while at the same time experiencing an increase in their ability to empathize with others. Several teachers also discussed the positive benefits of mindfulness they experienced personally and in their teaching practices. Many discussed using mindfulness strategies to help address discipline in their classroom. Additionally, an elementary school principal believed that as a result of using mindfulness strategies in school, “our staff is calmer and more centered, which in turn helps the students be calmer. We are all beginning to use the same language with students, which gives them continuity and a sense of safety. Common language also helps students hear the same message from multiple sources, which helps them retain and practice the strategies.”

What challenges were associated with embedding mindfulness strategies in the classroom?

When asked what challenges teachers had faced with implementing mindfulness in their classroom, teachers across all grade levels mentioned lack of time as the biggest obstacle impeding them from fully integrating mindfulness into their classroom. This perception was also the biggest obstacle AISD’s mindfulness specialist faced while teaching AISD staff how to integrate mindfulness strategies into their classroom. For example, teachers commonly stated that they did not have enough time to add mindfulness into their schedule or to integrate it fully into their busy schedules, and they found it difficult to add something calm to a busy classroom environment. Teachers saw mindfulness as something additional to their workload that would take up valuable instructional time. These sentiments were particularly common at the secondary level. To address these concerns, AISD’s mindfulness specialist urged teachers to use techniques that take 5 minutes or less, do not require intense training, can be integrated into curriculum/class practices/rules, or can be practiced during transition times (e.g., transitioning into and out of classrooms, transitioning to a new lesson, before exams). Routinely embedding these brief practices can teach students self-regulation and strategies to cope with stress and anxiety. Some teachers discussed feeling uncomfortable with mindfulness and were frustrated with the lack of immediate results in their students’

[After embedding mindfulness strategies in my classroom], I've seen an emerging independence in my students in their ability to deescalate situations and calm down strong feelings.

~ Elementary school teacher

Finding time in our schedule every day was a challenge at first, but then my students came to expect to practice mindfulness after lunch. They helped me to develop our schedule.

~ Elementary school teacher

behaviors. In response to these concerns, AISD’s mindfulness specialists stated, “The great thing about mindfulness is that anyone can do it!” Additionally, although mindfulness has been shown to effectively increase students’ self-regulation skills and provide students with proactive solutions for dealing with stress that might cause behavioral problems, these changes take time and practice (Greenberg & Harris, 2011; Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). However, if teachers routinely use strategies that take 5 minutes or less, they should see the benefits of the practice. If teachers do not allow the time and space for these skills to be learned and practiced, it is unlikely that students and teachers will see the full benefits. Finally, several teachers requested that AISD provide strategies to teach mindfulness in Spanish. This would be helpful for AISD’s growing Spanish-speaking student population (in 2015–2016, 34% of AISD students were identified as Spanish speakers).

What did students see as benefits from practicing mindfulness?

Teachers participating in the follow-up survey asked their students to talk about their experiences with mindfulness. Across grade levels, students most commonly talked about how mindfulness helped them calm down, think, relax, and prepare for learning. For example, a 9th-grade student stated, “I think mindfulness is very helpful. It helps me feel calmer and concentrate better.” A 7th-grade student felt that mindfulness “helps me calm down and do my work.” A pre kindergarten student liked “calming down and breathing so things don’t bother you.” Many elementary school students also talked about how much fun doing mindfulness was, one said, “I like mindfulness and it makes me feel better when I’m mad or sad. We do a lot of fun stuff with mindfulness. Breathing is fun.”

I absolutely love mindfulness! It makes me aware of my surroundings and helps calm me down when I am in stress. I have had a tough year, but one thing I can always look forward to was going to Mindful Friday, and taking some time, even though it was only 5 minutes, to sit and relax. High school needs some more mindfulness.

~ High school student

What is the future of mindfulness in AISD?

In the coming year, to address AISD’s suspension ban for pre kindergarten through 2nd-grade students, SEL Program staff will work with the mindfulness specialist to continue to develop integrated, proactive mindfulness strategies to help students learn how to work through emotions before they escalate. The mindfulness specialist will work with schools participating in the Kellogg grant, which serves the north east part of Austin (for more information on this grant, visit: <https://www.austinisd.org/dre/programs>), to integrate with PALS to ensure high school mentors integrate mindfulness strategies with their elementary school mentees, and work with middle and high school athletes to infuse mindfulness strategies into their practice.



Lindsay M. Lamb, Ph.D

Department of Research and Evaluation



1111 West 6th Street, Suite D-350 | Austin, TX 78703-5338
512.414.1724 | fax: 512.414.1707
www.austinisd.org/dre | Twitter: @AISD_DRE

August, 2017

Publication 16.38 RB

References

- Beauchemin, J., Hutchins, T. L., & Patterson, F. (2008). Mindfulness meditation may lessen anxiety, promote social skills, and improve academic performance among adolescents with learning disabilities. *Complementary Health Practice Review, 13*(1), 34-45.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(4), 822-848.
- Greenberg, M. T., & Harris, A. R. (2011). Nurturing mindfulness in children and youth: Current state of research. *Child Development Perspectives, 6*(2), 161-166.
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research 57*, 35-43.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment—and your life*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.
- Zelazo, P. D., & Lyons, K. E. (2012). The potential benefits of mindfulness training in early childhood: A developmental social cognitive neuroscience perspective. *Child Development Perspectives, 6*(2), 154-160.

