The Atlantic

Mantras Before Math Class

After growing up with Transcendental Meditation as a spiritual practice, the author visits public schools where it's being used as a simple tool for stress-reduction and well-being.

Laura Morton

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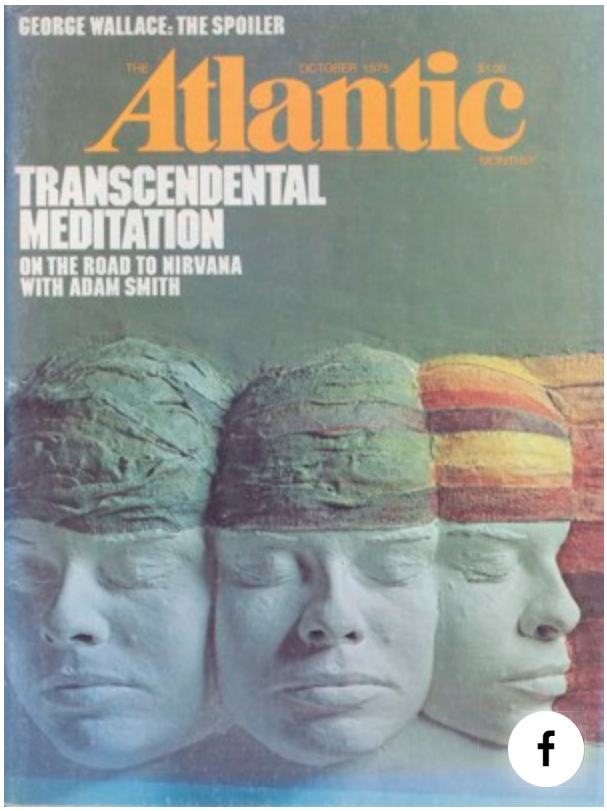
PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON

In 1974, the year before I was born, my parents had a small wedding in my aunt's living room and then spent their honeymoon becoming teachers of Transcendental Meditation. Those were the days when just

about everyone seemed to be doing it. "Plainly," wrote the author Adam Smith in *The Atlantic*'s October 1975 cover story on meditation, "TM was the greatest thing since peach ice cream." Meditation was enough of a cultural phenomenon that Woody Allen could use it as a punch line. The L.A. party scene in *Annie Hall* ends with Jeff Goldblum's character placing a businesslike call to his instructor: "Yeah, I forgot my mantra."

Considering how many 20-somethings learned to meditate in the 1970s, one might have predicted an explosion of meditating schools in the 1980s. Instead, Americans mostly forgot about the trend as they settled into the Reagan era. My parents were exceptions: They enrolled me in a small private school where the day began and ended with TM. It was an idyllic childhood in many ways, but my classmates and I always knew we lived in a bubble. One summer, at a resort in the Catskills, I listened as my aunt tried to explain my upbringing to a couple of her friends.



The Atlantic's October 1975 cover

"Sure, I remember TM," one woman replied. "I guess some people got caught up in meditation, just like some people got caught up in drugs."

"And the rest of us," her husband finished, "grew up and moved on with our lives."

So I was fascinated when meditation recently started becoming mainstream again. Coworkers told me about mindfulness apps they were trying and friends mentioned yoga retreats they were planning to

attend. The general idea seemed to be that meditation was not so much a technique for spiritual enlightenment as a common-sense lifestyle habit, like getting enough exercise or eating green vegetables. The insurance company Blue Shield featured a silhouette of an iconic meditator—legs crossed, hands turned upward on knees—in a recent brochure called "Ways for a balanced well-being." A July *New Yorker* article by Jon Lee Anderson described a Cuban-born Miami entrepreneur as "a man of earnest American discipline. He meditates and does a hundred push-ups each morning." In March, *The Onion* ran an article headlined "Annoying, Well-Adjusted Friend Even Fucking Meditating Now."

Over the past 10 years, small meditation programs have started cropping up at public schools around the country, in major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C. They're most often found in low-income areas, where stresses have a way of compounding. When you spend time in these schools, as I recently did, you meet a staggering number of students who have been abandoned by at least one parent and left with relatives who are either overworked or unemployed. The kids themselves frequently take on after-school jobs and a lot of responsibility at home. One principal told me his students rush to and from school to avoid getting jumped or shot. All of this stress can put kids' minds and bodies on high alert, making them fidgety and uneasy. A 2014 paper from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child compared the overload to "revving a car engine for hours every day. This wear and tear increases the risk of stress-related physical and mental illness later in life."

Laura Osborne, a Quiet Time site leader, rings a bell to signal the end of a session at San Francisco's Phillip and Sala Burton Academic High School.

It's hard to change the circumstances that create this kind of stress, though plenty of people are trying. But if you teach kids to meditate in the meantime, the thinking goes, you can help them reduce the stress itself. That reasoning always made sense to me, as someone who has been practicing TM since childhood and seen the research on adults, especially for stress-related problems like heart disease. Struggling schools need lots of things: better food, stronger math programs, and higher-quality teachers, to name just a few. One of those needs seems to be a way to reduce stress so kids can absorb information and go into the world as well-balanced, successful people.

Still, I had a hard time envisioning how meditation programs actually worked when they were dropped suddenly into public schools. Who were the principals who brought them in—did they have hidden mystical streaks, or were their motivations purely practical? Were the teachers enthusiastic or did they see meditation as yet another gimmick imposed on them from the

outside? And how did the students really feel about it? Did they roll their eyes when the meditation bell rang or did they actually enjoy it? What was it like to grow up with just meditation—and no spiritual trappings surrounding it?

Visitacion Valley Middle School sits at the top of one of San Francisco's dramatic roller-coaster hills. It's a deceptively pretty location: The surrounding neighborhoods, Visitacion Valley and the Bayview, are home to housing projects and the highest rates of violent crime in the city. Eighty-two percent of students at the middle school take part in the government's free- or reduced-lunch program. "This is a neighborhood that's had a lot of murders," said Jim Dierke, the former Visitacion Valley principal, when I first visited a few years ago. "A lot of death, a lot of incarceration, and a lot of poverty and unhappiness." In 2004, two of Dierke's eighth graders found the decomposing body of a 19-year-old stabbing victim lying along the school fence. A few months after that, a gunman burst into the main office, threatening to shoot everybody in sight. Dierke vowed to make his school "an island of safety in a sea of trouble." As he saw it, that meant not only improving their physical security but improving their ability to cope with the violence and tensions around them. That's when he decided his school should try meditation.

Here, it's worth noting that "meditation" is an extremely broad term. In schools, it can be used to describe a breathing exercise, a visualization, a positive affirmation, or even a mindful minute paying attention to the taste of a raisin. Transcendental Meditation is somewhat distinct among meditations because it's a well-defined, trademarked program: Everyone who learns TM gets a mantra (a specific meaningless sound) and the same instructions for using it. Unlike mindfulness, TM doesn't involve actively trying to change your mindset or be in the moment. All you do is mentally repeat your mantra, and it gets subtler and subtler, dissolving into an expansive silence. People describe the after-effects in different ways: In a recent BuzzFeed video, new meditators said they felt more "chipper," less prone to tension headaches,

and better equipped to deal with problems. But TM doesn't involve a conscious effort to achieve any of these things. There's something very automatic about it: You just start your mantra and transcend.

Two students meditate in Burton's Quiet Time office. The site leaders who run the program meet regularly with students in small groups to answer questions about their TM practice.

In public schools, TM is offered through a program called Quiet Time. The meditation itself isn't mandatory: When kids don't want to meditate, or their parents won't sign their permission forms, they can just sit quietly, reading a book or staring out the window. In Northern California, Quiet Time is run by a local nonprofit called the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education, which licenses the TM technique from a central organization and covers the cost of the program. (The fee for learning TM typically ranges from $360 to $960. In schools, it's around $150 per student, including follow-up for the year.)

Dierke first heard about Quiet Time at a 2005 education conference. One of the speakers was George Rutherford, the African American principal who pioneered the Quiet Time program at his school in southeast Washington, D.C. "If you'd asked me 10 years ago if this was a good program to have, I would've looked at you silly," said Dierke, a rotund man with a gray mustache and ruddy cheeks. "But Dr. Rutherford had the same sort of phenomenon going on his neighborhood that I had in my neighborhood. So I had the Quiet Time folks come over to meet my faculty, and the teachers wanted to do it. It's been a very good partnership, assisting all of us in dealing with stress—not only the kids but the adults. My blood pressure got lower. I became less prone to yelling at people. And I see it in the kids. Meditation is kind of like the glue that holds everything together."

Dierke retired a few years ago, but the Quiet Time program he started has carried on. On last year's California Healthy Kids Survey, Visitacion Valley scored higher for happiness than any other school in San Francisco, including much more affluent ones. "A prime source of happiness at Visitation Valley is Quiet Time, a stress reduction program used at several Bay Area middle and high schools," reported the research agency WestEd, which develops and administers the survey for the California Department of Education. In an article for *The San Francisco Chronicle,* a UC Berkeley public policy professor wrote about the happiness survey and other changes at Visitacion Valley: "In the first year of Quiet Time, the number of suspensions fell by 45 percent. Within four years, the suspension rate was among the lowest in the city. Daily attendance rates climbed to 98 percent, well above the citywide average. Grade point averages improved markedly."

As a result of all this publicity, Visitacion Valley has earned a unique reputation among San Francisco educators. A few weeks ago, I watched the current principal, Joe Truss, lead a seventh-grade assembly. "When I meet people out in the community sometimes, they tell me, 'I hear really good things about this school!'" Truss boasted to the students. "And the first thing

they always talk about is Quiet Time. A lot of other principals are trying to copy our style."

One of the first principals to adopt the program after Dierke was Bill Kappenhagen, the principal of Phillip and Sala Burton Academic High School, just down the street from Visitacion Valley. Kappenhagen told me that after he became Burton's principal, he started turning to Dierke for regular advice. "He was the president of the principals' union, an older guy who was revered in the community, revered by the board of education." During one of their phone check-ins, Dierke invited Kappenhagen to an eighth-grade assembly.

A view from the hilltop where Visitacion Valley Middle School and Burton High School both sit. Despite its scenic vistas, the neighborhood is one of the most troubled and crime-ridden in San Francisco.

Kappenhagen welcomed the chance to sell the students on the virtues of Burton. But before he began his pitch, Dierke said he had something to show him. "He turns to me and says, 'Watch this, Kappenhagen!' Then he rings a

little bell—*ding, ding, ding!*—and all of a sudden, all these eighth graders, who are squirrely as all get-out, become really centered and a hush falls over the auditorium. I was floored. I was like, 'What *is* this?'"

At first, Kappenhagen wasn't sure he wanted to bring Quiet Time to his own school. He'd just taken the helm there and he didn't want to change the daily class schedule. But he was reluctant to say no to Dierke right away. So he put the program to a vote, telling his teachers it would extend the school day by 30 minutes. "I never expected them to go for it. But they were *so* interested! I think they were exhausted because they'd been trying all kinds of strategies and nothing yet had stuck. They were like, 'We'll try anything to get these kids to stop fighting and swearing at each other.'" That was in 2009. Since then, Kappenhagen said, "It's a calmer school. And it's not like I have more deans or security guards or teachers. It's the same staffing structure. The school community has been given space to decompress."

Another principal, Miguel Rodriguez at Redwood High School in nearby Redwood City, told me he heard about TM from the previous San Francisco superintendent, Carlos Garcia. "I asked him, 'How do you do good work in this job—but not at the cost of your life or your family, not at the price of a divorce or health issues?'" recalled Rodriguez. "TM was one of the tools he recommended to me."

Last year, Rodriguez brought Quiet Time to Redwood, an alternative public school for kids who are behind in credits at traditional high schools. Most of the students come from high-poverty backgrounds—they share homes with numerous families and work after school to help their parents pay the bills. All of that makes it hard for them to do their homework or stay focused in class. Their fatigue was obvious during the Quiet Time session I observed there: At least two students fell into a sleep deep enough that the teacher had to wake them afterwards.

"The meditation is not just for students, to be honest with you," Rodriguez told me. "It's also for staff. Because this work can be daunting." Rodriguez said he originally went into education instead of going to law school because it seemed like a more powerful form of social-justice work. "It has the power to eradicate the cycle of poverty forever." But at Redwood, he said, "We don't get the kind of gratification that you might get at a lot of other schools: 'Look, Johnny got into UC Berkeley! Woo-hoo!' We don't see a lot of letters of acceptance."

Unlike his students, who get dedicated periods for Quiet Time, Rodriguez has to find creative ways to fit his meditation in. On his way to work each morning, he charges his electric car for 20 minutes and meditates inside. In the evenings, he takes Ed.D. courses at Mills College and squeezes in a meditation during the dinner break. "When I stick to that routine, I'm able to come home and be present for my wife and our little daughter," he said. "I'm able to process the burdens of this lifestyle much, much better."

One of the first things I noticed, after speaking to several Quiet Time students and site leaders, is that inspiring kids to meditate regularly is hard work. The meditation part is opt-in, and students need to bring back signed permission slips if they want to learn. I was told that 95 percent of Burton's freshman class learned it this year. But that doesn't mean they necessarily *do* it. Unlike school mindfulness programs, TM isn't guided through verbal cues. The technique itself isn't difficult; it's not one of those meditations where you're supposed to sit rigidly upright and push away thoughts. But for high school kids, just taking the first step—sitting down and closing their eyes—doesn't always come naturally.

"Whenever Quiet Time actually came around, I was always like, 'Yeah, but there's this really great book I want to read,'" said Samantha Rae Hall, who graduated from Burton in May. "Or I just wanted to stare off into space and contemplate my life. That's something I really like to do."

Samantha Rae Hall, who graduated from Burton in May, is now a freshman at San Francisco State University.

Other kids told me they often felt too jittery to meditate, or they were nervous about closing their eyes. Middle schoolers wondered if someone would stick a pencil in their ear or give them a wet willy. Peer pressure is a big issue: If the person in the next seat doesn't think meditating is cool, that can be a major deterrent. One girl told me she had an unsettling vision of opening her eyes and seeing another student staring at her, the way someone might look at you if you were wearing headphones on a bus and started accidentally singing along. "It's like, what if I was so into it and they were watching me the whole time? What if I had a really weird face on?"

Matt Nguy, one of Hall's former classmates, told me, "I didn't exactly like it at first. It added another 30 minutes to our day. I didn't get into it until sophomore year."

A number of kids told me the same thing: It took them a while to get into meditation. At my school, if anything, it was the opposite: We were especially excited about meditation right at the beginning, when we learned at the age of 10. By then, we'd already spent years immersed in a meditation-centered worldview. We'd seen our parents go off to meditate twice each day, and we were curious to find out what they did when they closed their eyes. I still remember the first time I used my new mantra. I felt like I was riding a bicycle—like I'd turned the pedals a few times and then suddenly taken off with a frictionless momentum, turning deep inside myself.

When kids learn TM at a public school, there's very little build-up. And of course, when they do their twice-daily meditations on weekends or vacations, their parents don't encourage them the way my parents did. "Sometimes my mom would be like, 'Open the door!'" said Hall. "I'd be like, 'I'm meditating.' She'd be like, 'It doesn't matter.' I'd be like, 'Yes it does! It absolutely does matter to me.' So it's a little more difficult to meditate in a place where no one else understands why you do it."

This is one reason the Quiet Time program has full-time site managers, embedded there like guidance counselors or wellness providers. Their salaries come from grants, donations, and private foundations, including the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the 1440 Foundation, and the David Lynch Foundation. Lynch, the avant-garde filmmaker, is one of Quiet Time's biggest supporters nationwide; on November 4, he hosted a Carnegie Hall benefit for the program featuring Katy Perry, Sting, and Jerry Seinfeld. His co-host for the evening was George Stephanopoulos. (When I interviewed Lynch in 2008 for an *Atlantic* video, I asked him to reconcile his interest in meditation with his dark, surreal films. "A lot of artists think suffering is necessary," Lynch told me. "But in reality, the artist doesn't have to suffer to show suffering. You just have to *understand* the suffering. Any kind of suffering cramps the flow of creativity.")

Laura Osborne and Jamie Bowers, a couple in their late 30s who run the program at Burton, told me they became TM teachers after seeing some David Lynch Foundation videos. "You watch these kids talk and you think, 'Wow, I'm going to do that work,'" said Osborne, who learned to meditate with Bowers in Orange County five years ago.

"The results are real," added Bowers. "But you don't know till you get here what's happening behind the scenes."

Osborne answers students' questions after a Quiet Time session at Burton.

Osborne said they spend a lot of time focusing on the most disruptive students, the few kids in the class who make it difficult for the others to meditate during Quiet Time. "We have to redirect them," she said. "We have to say, 'I can see that you're not comfortable. How can we support you?'" They regularly take kids aside in small groups to answer questions about their experiences with meditation. When a class needs extra motivation, they often

host challenges: Students who choose to meditate for three weeks celebrate with a party at the end. "We want them to be intrinsically motivated," said Osborne. "But sometimes we use extrinsic motivators so they'll do it just long enough to see the benefits."

Hall, the recent Burton graduate, started meditating regularly after one of the three-week challenges. "I don't remember anything spectacular happening," said Hall, who now works part-time with the Quiet Time program. "Honestly, it just became a normal routine. And when you do normal routines, it doesn't feel like you're having some kind of change within yourself. But at some point, I realized I had so much more energy than I used to. I felt happier, a lot happier. I had way more self-confidence. And I used to be somebody who holds grudges: 'If you messed up, you messed *up*!" Suddenly I was like, 'You know what? It's okay.' And if I messed up personally, I wasn't down on myself for the entire day. I was like, 'Okay, I messed up on this one thing, but I'm going to be fine now.'"

At a time when school hallways are lined with positive affirmations—"You can be anything you want to be!"—it might seem odd that transcending thought altogether would help improve a student's self-confidence. "We don't tell them anything specific about why they shouldn't get into fights, how to feel better about themselves, or why it is good to be kind to each other," said Laurent Valosek, a former technology entrepreneur who is now the executive director of the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education. "Those changes just start happening naturally when their brains function in a more integrated way." He cited a 10-week study at American University, in which a group of students randomly assigned to practice TM developed more coherence between their left and right hemispheres than students just sitting with their eyes closed. The study, published in 2010, linked this increased brain coherence to a more fully developed sense of self.

Upperclassmen who are particularly enthusiastic about meditation can join a

club called the Advanced Meditators Crew. They play an active leadership role in the day-to-day program, supervising Quiet Time in the various classrooms and giving introductory talks to new students. "I actually feel that they're almost running the program more than we are because the kids respect them so much," said Bowers. "When they go into a classroom, the kids just choose to meditate. It's like a no-brainer."

Ivan Garcia, a recent graduate of John O'Connell High School in the Mission district, helped establish the Advanced Meditators' Crew during his senior year. He told me he was suspicious at first when the Quiet Time site leaders came to his freshman class. "We thought, 'These people are just coming here to feel better about themselves. They don't care about us. They don't know our problems. They don't know the challenges we're going through. They don't know that when we go home, sometimes we don't even have a home to go to. Now they want us to close our eyes and pretend everything's fine?'" That changed with the arrival of Matthew August, a 27-year-old site leader. (August is now 31 and still leading the program at O'Connell.) "He liked to have fun and joke around," said Garcia. "He was honest, not coming from a script. He shared part of himself—that was the biggest thing. After I met him was when I finally started to experience all these beautiful things."

At the end of one meditation, not long before he graduated, Garcia found himself thinking about the abusive father he'd left behind in Mexico City at age 13. "It felt like a huge bag fell off my shoulders. I realized at that moment that my father had done the best he could. He didn't get an education like I was getting. He didn't have the opportunity to talk to anyone who could really listen to him. He definitely didn't have meditation."

As I spoke to dozens of kids about Quiet Time, I found myself wondering whether the program could ever scale up in a big way. San Francisco's superintendent, Richard Carranza, spoke about the Quiet

Time program to the *San Francisco Chronicle* last year, saying, "I'd like to see it expand well beyond a handful of schools." The Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education has a testimonial on its website from the previous superintendent, Carlos Garcia: "Quite simply, Quiet Time should be in every school."

Still, it's hard for any new education idea to enter the mainstream—as evidenced by the fierce debate over the Common Core curriculum—and all the more so when it's something as novel as meditation. Kappenhagen, who was a principal in D.C. before coming to Burton, told me Quiet Time could work at any school in the nation "as long as there's a community that embraces the idea that students should be calmer and more centered and this is one way to get them there." But it's not clear how many school communities currently fit that description.

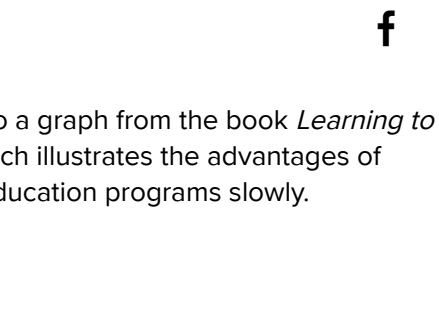
A student meditates in Burton's Quiet Time office.

Quiet Time is also limited by funding: At Burton, one of the more cost-effective schools, the program adds up to $185,000 a year between site-managers' salaries, the TM licensing fees, and occasional off-site retreats for faculty and students. In contrast, most mindfulness programs are run by classroom teachers, with occasional visits from outside experts. August said he couldn't imagine a program succeeding that way at O'Connell. "Consistency is really important for these kids," August told me. "Seeing you in the hallway, just being cool with them—that's how you earn their trust." He added that struggling schools often lack the stable leadership to keep programs going year after year. Visitacion Valley has been through three principals in four years. Kappenhagen was reassigned to another, more troubled school the week after I met him at Burton. And when August described the turnover at O'Connell during his time there, it sounded like he was listing the wives of Henry VIII: "The first principal got reassigned. The second one went back to L.A. for personal reasons. The third one has stayed so far."

Joshua Aronson, a longtime professor of applied psychology at NYU, uses the word "artisanal" to describe school programs that are carefully cultivated by highly trained experts. Aronson helped develop the wildly popular ideas of stereotype threat and growth mindset, but he's been dismayed to watch them reduced to superficial gimmicks: "I go to my kids' school and have the surreal experience of having them telling me about my own work, in a way that is sure to not work." He worries something similar could happen with a program like Quiet Time, which he admires. "When things contain a human element," he told me, "you can scale them up, but if you're not really meticulous about it, you're going to lose a lot of the magic that made them work so well in the initial demonstrations. Even if we write really compelling recipe books, it takes a chef to pull it off. That's the fundamental problem."

I asked Jan Link, a silver-haired accountability supervisor at the San Francisco Unified School District, whether she thought Quiet Time could ever scale up

in a big way. Link, who has been working in the district since the 1980s, got involved with Quiet Time a few years ago after the previous superintendent asked her to evaluate the program. She learned TM herself and was so enthusiastic that she arranged for 96 central-office administrators to learn it as part of a randomized controlled study.



Link points to a graph from the book *Learning to Improve*, which illustrates the advantages of scaling up education programs slowly.

"That's a very, very interesting question," she responded when I asked about the program's expansion. She swiveled in her chair and carefully pulled a book called *Learning to Improve* out of the middle of a tall stack. Then she turned to a graph that plotted improvement against time. On the graph, the programs that grew quickly flatlined more quickly; the programs that grew slowly reached a higher level of improvement.

"This is the way I see it," she said. "From my experience, having done portfolio work in the district, a program grows differently when you let schools approach it from their side—'I'm interested!' When it grows that way, it becomes part of each school's culture. That's what I think is happening now with Quiet Time. There's already a waiting list of schools. Once a school wants to go, the teachers learn first, and then all the students who choose to do it. It's all volunteer. That's a little different than saying, 'We have a professional development called Quiet Time and we want everyone to participate.'"

One reason there's been so much interest is that San Francisco is one of eight major California districts that got a 2013 group waiver from No Child Left

Behind. These districts are now allowed to create new evaluations: Only 60 percent of their achievement needs to be academic. The other 40 percent will be based on social-and-emotional skills and school climate. So far, though, there's been no agreement on how to develop and measure that last 40 percent. Link is working on an evaluation program for San Francisco, using tools like the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory and the DESA Behavior Index. She sees Quiet Time as a good way to develop the skills she's measuring, and when schools inquire about the program, she wants to be able to show that it works.

In April, Link's office and the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education put together a white paper summarizing 17 studies on San Francisco's Quiet Time programs. The studies showed reduced fights and suspensions in the schools that had adopted Quiet Time, along with improved attendance, GPAs, and test scores. The research has certain limitations, as the white paper itself notes. Schools are tricky settings, since they're full of constantly changing variables: new faculty, changing curricula, events in the neighborhood, or other wellness efforts going on at the same time. Some of the studies are more descriptive—that is, they summarize the data rather than digging deeply into what's causing it. Others are more rigorous, with randomized or matched controls. So far, two of the studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals. (One of those was led by WestEd, the independent research firm.) "In aggregate," said Valosek, "this white paper is one of the strongest bodies of research on any meditation in school. The next step is to do studies with thousands of students and see if we find these results again at that level."

Link sees the paper as a meaningful start. "Now you have a superintendent or a board of education who can say, 'Look, you think this is ridiculous? That's fine. Let me show you the data.' You have to honestly say, 'These are the strongest studies, and these are weaker ones.' But it's a good first step. It's a

body of work."

Jamie Bowers helps teach Burton's elective on social and emotional intelligence.

Early on a Thursday morning, I sat in on Burton's elective on social-and-emotional intelligence. The class is taught by Burton's vice-principal, with help from Bowers, who was a classroom teacher before she became a meditation teacher. It's popular enough to have a waiting list. The curriculum focuses on familiar skills like self-discipline, grit, and teamwork. But it's based on the idea that students need to "develop the internal capacity of a calm and alert readiness," as its curriculum states —which is where Quiet Time comes in.

Toward the beginning of the class, Bowers put on a video—the scene from *Kindergarten Cop* where Arnold Schwarzenegger's character walks into his chaotic classroom for the first time. He sees the children painting on the walls, dancing on the piano, and crashing around in a wagon, and he yells

"Shut up!" over and over again. But then he races to his car and comes back with a ferret. Suddenly the kids are quiet and attentive, crowding around him and taking turns petting the animal. "Good," Arnold says. "Now we are having fun."

"So, wait," one of the Burton students asked when the clip ended, "like, in any situation—if we have a ferret, we'll be cool?"

"Of course!" Bowers joked back. Then she explained what the ferret scene represented: Instead of giving in to the chaos, Arnold had taken hold of himself, removed himself from the situation, and come back with an inventive solution. "What we're going to talk about now is how to learn self-control," she continued. "You cannot get things in your life if you don't have self-control. You can't be successful. You're probably going to make some people mad and they're not going to want to give you a chance. If you're someone who just loses their cool, emotions can completely overwhelm you. Completely! So taking care of yourself, getting rid of your stress, it's really important."

Before my visits to the Quiet Time schools, I'd asked Joseph Durlak, an expert on social-and-emotional learning from Loyola University Chicago, whether he thought getting rid of stress could make it easier for kids to master skills like empathy, conflict resolution, and willpower. Durlak wasn't familiar with Quiet Time, but he told me he'd learned TM himself decades ago. "The Transcendental Meditation should put kids at ease," he said. "It should help them relax. It should help them be calmer. And then, hopefully, going beyond that, it should help them just become more reflective people, to be sensitive without overreacting. Once you get into that dimension, then you're probably affecting classroom interactions, relationships with teachers. You're probably helping the child be more open to learning. Still, they have to actually *learn*," he added. "And part of that is learning how to modulate their own behavior. You still have to develop work groups. You still have to help them with

cooperation."

At Burton, the students spent several minutes talking about things they couldn't control (the weather, racism, other people's bad moods) and things they could (their attitudes, their lifestyles). Then they broke into pairs and talked about areas of their lives where they could have better self-control (doing homework, avoiding drugs, communicating more tactfully). At the end of the class, I asked the students why they'd signed up for the elective. A lot of teenagers, I pointed out, wouldn't voluntarily sit in a classroom and have an adult teach them how to behave.

Students in Burton's social-and-emotional-intelligence class take part in a group exercise.

"School is basically to teach you for life after school," said a boy named Leo. (I've withheld the last names of students under 18.) "In this class, we're learning how to become who we want to be. I think it also helps that most of us here meditate."

"Just to build on what Leo said," a girl named Nikki added, "with Quiet Time, I feel like it makes you more self-aware. So it kind of goes hand in hand with learning about ourselves."

What struck me about this discussion, and the class that preceded it, was how pragmatic it all was. When I was growing up, the adults around me shared a certain streak of 1960s and '70s idealism. They actually had a lot in common with the Transcendentalists who'd lived 100 years earlier: They'd done their own version of going off to the woods to live deeply, and they'd found a lot of what they were looking for in Eastern philosophy. Even before my father discovered TM in medical school, he'd studied the Upanishads at Columbia and backpacked around Eastern Europe with a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita. I was raised with the idea that human consciousness is part of something immense and universal. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, an avid reader of Indian philosophy, put it in his essay "The Over-Soul": "Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE." It was a lovely way to grow up, and it shaped me in profound ways. But the Eastern spiritual bent would be entirely out of place at a public school.

I'd gone to the Quiet Time schools wondering whether it was really possible to teach kids to meditate without indoctrinating them, even subtly, in a certain worldview. Candy Gunther Brown, a professor of religious studies at Indiana University, doesn't believe it's possible. She was an expert witness in a recent court case, in which two parents sued the Encinitas, California, school district for bringing in a yoga program. The district argued that it was offering yoga as a simple tool for health and well-being. But Brown, supporting the plaintiffs, pointed out that the program was sponsored by the K.P. Jois Foundation, named for an Indian guru who explicitly taught yoga as a way to achieve union with God.

"If you look at Jois's own words, he said, for example, that sun salutations are

a form of prayer to the sun god, Surya," Brown told me. Even when the sun god is never mentioned, Brown believes sun salutations will always remain an inherently religious practice. She offered this thought-provoking argument: "In the American cultural context today, people tend to work with a pretty Protestant definition of religion, just given how common Protestantism is. And in Protestant Christianity, there's such a privileging of what you believe." In other words, most Americans think there's nothing religious about a practice if no one mentions God. "The issue is that this isn't the case in many traditions, including Hinduism," she continued. "It doesn't really matter if you mention God. The meditation or the yoga posture is meant to give you a direct experience of the divine."

Brown also pointed out that the founders of yoga and meditation programs often use different language when they're talking to different audiences. For example, in a 2011 article for the journal *Contemporary Buddhism,* Jon Kabat-Zinn—the physician who founded Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)—openly described his efforts to secularize a Buddhist practice :

> Why not try to make meditation so commonsensical that anyone would be drawn to it? Why not develop an American vocabulary that spoke to the heart of the matter, and didn't focus on the cultural aspects of the traditions out of which the dharma emerged, however beautiful they might be, or on centuries-old scholarly debates concerning fine distinctions in the Abhidharma? This was not because they weren't ultimately important, but because they would likely cause unnecessary impediments for people who were basically dealing with suffering and seeking some kind of release from it. And, why not do it in the hospital of the medical center where I happened to be working at the time?

The question is really this: Can meditation and other practices from the East be spiritual in one context and totally secular in others? Can one person do sun salutations as a form of devotion and another do them as a form of exercise? Brown says no. The courts that heard the Encinitas case said yes. "To be sure," stated the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, upholding the decision in April, "if the District's program instructed children that through yoga they would become one with God and that yoga could help end the karmic cycle of reincarnation ... we have little doubt that the program would violate the establishment clause. However ... there is no evidence of any religious indoctrination."

Based on everything I observed, I would say the same about the Quiet Time schools. There are people who avoid bacon because they're religious Jews or Muslims. There are other people who avoid bacon for health reasons. In much the same way, there are people who learn meditation in order to develop higher states of consciousness (I've known many of them). But in the United States, at least, there are far more people who meditate for very practical reasons. This is the way TM is taught at Quiet Time schools: as a tool for getting rid of stress, gaining mental clarity, and developing the resources to rise above adversity.

Tony, a Burton senior, says meditation has helped him deal with a “crazy and violent” world.

At Burton, I spent an especially long time talking to Tony, an ebullient 16-year-old who sat in the front row of Bowers’s class. Tony is the president of the Advanced Meditators Crew. He’s also the vice president of the student body and a member of the California YMCA Youth and Government, a mock legislature program for kids from all over the state. He’s actively involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. On top of all that, he plays basketball and has a job outside of school.

At home, Tony takes care of a sick father. “It’s always been just my dad and me,” he said. Sometimes he sees his mother wandering around with other drug users in the neighborhood, but he said he hasn’t spoken to her in 13 years. Before his dad got sick, he worked two jobs, as a Muni bus driver and a bouncer. So starting from the age of 7, Tony came home each night to an empty house. “I was scared of the dark, so I’d sit up all night and really just do nothing,” he said. In middle school, that lifelong feeling of abandonment

started to take its toll. He got into fights and was suspended twice.

Once he started to meditate, he said, "the problems were still there, but I was more calm about it. The world outside might seem crazy and violent. But once you start your mantra, you feel great—you feel all the energy you have inside of you. And afterwards, you can see the bigger picture of things."

As I was talking to Tony, I could almost see the grown-up he was about to become, just under his youthful skin. He seemed extraordinarily well-equipped for the challenges adults face: navigating relationships, juggling responsibilities, weathering successes and disappointments. "I know that as a young African American male, I'm going to be judged about a lot of stuff. But the meditation helps me filter that out and focus on my own goals," he said. Right now, he's in the running for a Posse Scholarship, a prestigious program for college-bound kids from low-income backgrounds. "I want to do all these great things, not for my own personal gain, but so I can help other people going through the same struggles I went through," he told me. "And someday people will say, 'Tony, he was this kid in high school who grew up to inspire a lot of people and really make a difference.'" I can believe it.

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