

Meditation helps some students

By Dana Micucci



Students mediating at the Nataki Talibah in Detroit, where the practice has been popular for the last seven years

NEW YORK—New research appears to be strengthening the case for teaching transcendental meditation in U.S. schools, showing it to be a means to improve the concentration of students and a way to enhance their physical and mental well-being.

Proponents say that students who meditate daily are calmer, less distracted and less stressed and less prone to violent behavior.

A study conducted at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, Georgia, which will be published in the April issue of the *American Journal of Hypertension*, found that transcendental meditation reduced high blood pressure in African-American teenagers. The study tracked 156 inner-city black adolescents in Augusta, Georgia, with elevated blood pressures. Those who practiced 15 minutes of transcendental meditation twice daily steadily lowered their daytime blood pressures over four months compared to non-meditating teens who participated in health education classes and experienced no significant change.

The technique was developed 50 years ago by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and consists of silently repeating a mantra for about 20 minutes a day. It found its way into classrooms 30 years ago after Robert Keith Wallace, a medical researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, published the first study on its positive physiological effects.

Since then, studies at universities like Harvard, Stanford and UCLA have shown that transcendental meditation can ease stress and enhance both physical and mental health and behavior.

Bolstered by these studies, groups of educators, parents and physicians across the United States have turned to transcendental meditation as a possible antidote to rising anxiety, violence and depression among students. Committees for Stress-Free Schools were established last year in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities. These committees serve as information resources about the potential benefits of meditation for students and teachers.

"Transcendental meditation is a simple mental technique that can have profound physiological effects," says Gary Kaplan, a neurologist and clinical associate professor of neurology at New York University School of Medicine and chairman of the New York Committee for Stress-Free Schools. "It produces a state of restful alertness that provides the body with deep, rejuvenating rest and allows the mind to reach higher levels of creativity, clarity and intelligence."

However, initial efforts to introduce the teaching of transcendental meditation in

schools were controversial. Opponents criticized it as a religious practice and in the mid-1970s a group of citizens brought a lawsuit against several New Jersey high schools, forcing them to withdraw their programs. At the time, a New Jersey court ruled that transcendental meditation had religious overtones and therefore could not be offered in a public school.

"The challenge lies in educating people that although transcendental meditation is rooted in the Indian Vedic spiritual tradition, it is not a religious practice," says Kaplan.

At the Fletcher-Johnson School, an elementary and junior high school in a rough Washington neighborhood, meditation has been reported to help to improve student performance and reduce fighting. George Rutherford, the principal who introduced transcendental meditation 10 years ago, said, "We saw immediate results."

He added, "There was a lot of violent crime around the school. But after we trained our students in transcendental meditation, they were calmer. There was less fighting, and attendance increased. Students scored better on standardized tests. Transcendental meditation helped to remove a lot of their stress."

Now, as principal at Ideal Academy in

Washington, Rutherford is training teachers in transcendental meditation to combat teacher burnout.

At the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse in Detroit, an elementary and middle school, students and teachers have been practicing transcendental meditation twice daily for the past seven years. Carmen N'Namdi, co-founder and principal of the school, says that "given the enormous stresses of today's world, children, like adults, need to learn how to rest and relieve tension."

Recent research spearheaded by Rita Benn, director of education at the Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the University of Michigan, found that meditating students at Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse were happier, handled stress better, had higher self-esteem and got along better with their peers than non-meditating students at another Detroit school.

In addition to improving the emotional and social development of children, meditation can also be effective in treating brain disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, according to a study conducted in April 2004 at Chelsea School in Silver Spring, Maryland, a private school for children with learning disabilities.

"We compared students before and after they learned transcendental meditation," said the principal investigator, Sarina Grosswald, president of S J Grosswald & Associates, a consulting firm in medical education in Alexandria, Virginia. "Kids who practiced transcendental meditation for 10 minutes twice each day for three months reported being calmer, less distracted, less stressed, and better able to control their anger and frustration."

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