A school chooses to teach students mindfulness instead of punishing them

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.17.16
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Baltimore, Md. — Most schools would have sent the boy to the principal's office. Instead, the boy was sent to a quiet room where he could take a moment to breathe and relax. He had gotten into a fight with a classmate.

The boy is a third-grade student at Robert W. Coleman Elementary, a school in Baltimore, Maryland. The school is trying something new. Instead of putting kids in time-out, it's encouraging them to practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a state of mind or way of thinking. A mindful person is able to give complete attention to what they are doing at the moment. At the same time, they do not try to block their worries and fears. They try to recognize and accept them.
The Mindful Moment Room

When they need calming, students at Coleman are sent to the Mindful Moment Room. It's a space decorated with bright curtains and beanbags. Staff members there ask the students to explain what happened. They encourage them to talk about their feelings and take deep breaths.

The boy who fought with a classmate broke into tears. Staff member Oriana Copeland held his hand as they talked. He came around slowly.

"Inhaling deep," she guided him. "Exhale and out."

Mindfulness exercises are part of a new program at Coleman. It has changed how students are treated when they get in trouble. The program is part of a larger plan to bring mindfulness into Baltimore city schools and beyond.

Helping Students Clear Their Minds

Principal Carlillian Thompson said the exercises help her students clear their minds. Afterward, they are more ready to learn.

Since the school started the program, she has seen signs of success. There is more reflection, more awareness. "Children are more willing to take responsibility for their behaviors," she said.

The effort at Coleman started about eight years ago with an after-school program, which was made larger in 2014. Now school days start with a recording over the loudspeaker. It guides students through breathing exercises. Each day begins and ends with 15 minutes of mindfulness.

"It makes you calm down and have a great day," one student said.

Many Students Have Tough Lives

Many Coleman students come from neighborhoods with high crime and poverty. Their lives are not easy. Some don't have stable housing, and some worry about family members going to prison.

"These children face a lot of situations that most youth don't have to deal with," Andy Gonzalez said. He helped start the mindfulness program with brothers Ali and Atman Smith. All three went to school together in Maryland. They hope the program will help students be happier and have more control over their lives.
Practicing Breathing Exercises

At Coleman, many students have gone to the Mindful Moment Room. On one day in November, 12 children visited.

One was the third-grader who had fought with a classmate.

By the time he left, another boy had walked in. Just before 11 a.m., four boys were sitting on the cushions and beanbags with two staff members.

One began the breathing exercises they all have come to know.

"Inhaling deep," he said aloud. "Lock your chin to your chest. Exhale and out."
Quiz

1. Select the sentence from the article that BEST explains why it is good to practice mindfulness in schools.
   (A) Instead of putting kids in time-out, it’s encouraging them to practice mindfulness.
   (B) The program is part of a larger plan to bring mindfulness into Baltimore city schools and beyond.
   (C) "It makes you calm down and have a great day," one student said.
   (D) "Inhaling deep," he said aloud. "Lock your chin to your chest. Exhale and out."

2. Which sentence from the article helps you understand that Coleman Elementary students have stressful lives?
   (A) A mindful person is able to give complete attention to what they are doing at the moment.
   (B) Staff members there ask the students to explain what happened.
   (C) Since the school started the program, she has seen signs of success.
   (D) Many Coleman students come from neighborhoods with high crime and poverty.

3. Why does Principal Carillilian Thompson think the mindfulness exercises help her students?
   (A) because they stay in the room all day long
   (B) because they have written her notes and letters saying so
   (C) because they are calmer and more aware of their actions
   (D) because they never have problems anymore

4. Which section of the article explains HOW the mindfulness program was first started at Coleman?
   (A) "The Mindful Moment Room"
   (B) "Helping Students Clear Their Minds"
   (C) "Many Students Have Tough Lives"
   (D) "Practicing Breathing Exercises"
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