

MINDFULNESS: CHANGING THE CULTURE AND CLIMATE OF A SCHOOL

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“A Journey of a thousand miles begins with one small step”

According to Dr. Addie Wootten, over the past 5 years, support for mindfulness programmes in curriculum has grown significantly among educators. Dr. Wootten says that, while interest from individual teachers is important, research indicates an entire school participating in mindfulness techniques will “positively affect students, the culture and climate of the school, and teacher wellbeing.”

Educating students in STEM has become the major focus of most school systems but Dr. Wootten contends that supporting this with mindfulness programmes improves “students’ ability to perform in an academic context” given the focus on ensuring that minds are ‘calm’ and therefore optimized by improved mental health. She adds, “the future of work will rely on our ability to adapt, innovate and work creatively without defined borders or even stable workspaces.” Mindfulness skills “underpin essential social and emotional learning” students will need. Dr. Addie Wootten is a well-known leader in delivering innovative programmes to promote wellbeing. (From an article published by CMRubinworld).

Many principals want to change the culture and climate of their schools but are not sure how to make this actually happen. Mindfulness Practice seems to offer a way but we wonder: will staff have to take special training? Will we lose precious class-time? Will teachers and students find it too difficult? For the past two years, Grenville Elementary School in Grenville, Quebec has found answers to these questions in a recording called the “*2-Minute Mindfulness Bell*”.

The recording consists of a collection of original pieces of music- each lasting 2 minutes. It is programmed into our computer system and broadcast over the P.A. system throughout the entire school three times a day. One of the pieces is played at 8:45am following morning announcements; another piece at 10:50am following mid-morning recess and a third piece at 1:20pm following lunch break.

This is what the students and staff hear: A Tibetan bell is struck followed by 8 seconds of silence during which time students put down work and sit up straight. The words “We breathe in...we breathe out...” are heard four times over very soft music. This is followed by 90 seconds of instrumental music featuring Celtic harp. The session ends with a final “We breathe in...and we breathe out...” and the strike of the Tibetan bell. Class work resumes. To maintain a sense of calm awareness, the spoken word and music are matched and timed to 60 beats per minute.

To the question: Will this take special training? The answer is – No special training is required of the teachers – just a willingness to model, for the class, the directions given: sit-up straight and feel the breath.

As for losing class-time, the recording’s two-minute duration of each piece is more than compensated by a calm and focused class that results from listening and following the simple instructions. We have found that the recording provides a necessary transition from the excitement and agitation of the playground to the calmness needed for productive class work.

It is important to note that staff 'buy-in' is crucial to the success of the programme. If teachers see the importance of it, then their students will respond in kind. We are very fortunate to have a staff that foresaw the potential of the project right from the beginning.

As to the question: Will teachers and students find it too difficult? – everyone is told: Sitting quietly and feeling the breath will be the easiest thing you have ever done... and the hardest thing you will ever do.

To determine the efficacy of the project, questionnaires were circulated to the staff and students at the end of the first year. Here is some of what was said:

What teachers are saying:

Kindergarten: *"Students respond very well to the routine and regular breathing. Good reminder to pause and breathe". "Even my little ones look forward to the recording each day".*

Grades One and Two: *"Very broad range of levels of engagement, distractibility and excitability; but overall beneficial.*

Grades Three-Four: *"Really helpful to settle and calm after recess". "I notice a difference in focus after 'the Bells'. Would be happy to try this again in September."*

Grade Five: *"In the past, I would turn lights off, read to them, etc. just to calm them down. I always found the students very 'wound up' after our Recess and Lunch. I now enjoy the 2-Minute Mindfulness Bell and find it provides a moment of silence. All the students know what is expected of them".*

Grade Six: *"As a re-enforcement – a gong/bell in the classroom as an attention grabber would be something I'd add to next year's routine". "The experience has been positive!"*

What students are saying:

In response to the question "Did the Bells and music help to make you calmer?"

79% responded YES; 11% responded NO; 8% responded NOT SURE.

"I like when we do it (listen to the bells) because it calms me down".

I like the music because I fell like it helps me use my imagination".

When I hear it I feel good. The bells are the best part of my day".

A comment from one students: *"ahh, I needed that."*

General reflections:

After surveying students and staff, the majority feel that this practice has given them an effective strategy to calm their emotions and as a result focus on the learning. Of special note – one teacher commented, "I like to hear my students use the strategy at other times". **We have found that 55% of students use this 'quiet breathing' in places other than school.**

Since September 2018, Arundel Elementary School (Arundel, Quebec), Lachute Adult Education, (Lachute, Quebec), Pleasant Corners Public School, (Vankleek Hill, Ontario), St. Jude Catholic Elementary

School (Vankleek Hill, Ontario), Maxville Public School (Maxville, Ontario), Russell Public School (Russell, Ontario), Central Public School (Cornwall, Ontario), and Eamer's Corners Public School (Cornwall, Ontario) have incorporated the *2-Minute Mindfulness Bell* into their daily schedule. There are now over 3000 students taking part in the project.

The originator, composer and performer of the *2-Minute Mindfulness Bell* recording is Ian Hepburn, who has worked with our schools in several capacities over the years. The recording is part of a larger project called the O P E N S P A C E project. Details on the *2-Minute Mindfulness Bell* may be found at his website www.openspaceproject.ca.

Author Bios

Nancy Bennett has been the principal of GES for nine years. She graduated in 1971 from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec and began her teaching career in Hull, Quebec for the Western Quebec School Board. She was engaged by the Laurentian School Board in January of 1973 and taught at Laurentian Regional High School for a period of eight years. She interrupted her teaching career to have a family but stayed active in the educational field during this period. In 1988, she re-entered the teaching field and taught at Grenville Elementary School where she was Head Teacher for ten years. In 2008 she became Principal of this school and currently maintains this position.

ian hepburn holds Piano Performance and Piano Pedagogy diplomas from the Royal Conservatory of Music. He has taught piano and harp privately for more than forty years. Ian is a certified Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy practitioner and teacher. In 2016 he completed the 'Mindful Schools' course. He has taught courses at Algonquin College in Ottawa on the use of harp in hospitals, long-term residences and hospices. He has worked in elementary and high schools for the past 8 years – working with large groups and one-on-one with children with difficulties. He is deeply committed to promoting Mindfulness Practice in schools. The creation of the *2-Minute Mindfulness Bell* and related aspects of the OPENSACE project are the realization of that commitment.

Grenville Elementary School is one of the smallest schools in the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board - enrollment 87. The Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board is the third largest English school board in the Province of Quebec. Its territory comprises the administrative regions of Laval, Lanaudiere, and the Laurentides, spanning over 35, 000 square kilometers. The student population is over 14,500 students, attending classes in 26 elementary schools, 9 secondary schools and 5 Adult Education and Vocational Training centres.