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LEARNING CURVE

In Mass. schools, a focus on well-being

By [James Vaznis](#) GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 05, 2016



First graders in Maria Simon's first grade class took part in a mindfulness meditation at Birch Meadow School in Reading.
JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

READING — The only sound that could be heard in Maria Simon's first-grade classroom one December morning was the soothing hum from a vibrating Tibetan singing bowl. Her students had gathered on a brightly colored rug at the back of the classroom, sitting with their eyes shut, their legs crossed, and their arms extended outward palms up.

Each time a classmate struck the small bowl with a mallet — releasing a low sounding gong — the students breathed in. Then as the sound faded away, they breathed out. The exercise lasted about five minutes, and they started their math lesson.

“It helps give us a few minutes of peace and quiet so we can focus on our work,” said one student, Grace Hayes.

This moment of “mindfulness” in Simon's classroom is part of a broader effort at Birch Meadow Elementary School and Reading's eight other schools to help put students at ease and get them more in tune with their emotions, and one another, so they can concentrate on learning.

Across Massachusetts, schools are devoting more time to address the social and emotional well-being of their students. Educators stress the movement is not simply “feel good” education. They say teaching students at every grade to manage their emotions can help them deal with a multitude of serious issues, including bullying, mental illness, substance abuse, or trauma.

Such problems, educators say, can present immense barriers to learning and, if left unaddressed, could exact heavy tolls like suicides, drug overdoses, or even school shootings.

Reading, a town of 25,000 north of Boston, has emerged as a state leader over the past few years in what is known as social-emotional learning. Like many communities, Reading grapples with students struggling with depression, anxiety, or alcohol use, among other issues.

But the town stands apart because it has devised an aggressive plan to reach out to students before signs of problems arise, and its initiatives go well beyond the school doors.

“You treat every child as if they need a safe and supportive environment,” said Sara Burd, Reading’s district leader of social-emotional learning. “You never are going to know every student in a classroom who is experiencing trauma. They are not going to have a name tag that says, ‘Yes, I have a trauma history.’”

Starting in preschool, instructors lead students in yoga. In elementary and middle schools, teachers gather students in circles to talk about issues on their minds and teach strategies for dealing with certain situations, such as bullying, and they use a common approach to discipline that emphasizes rewarding behavior instead of punishment.

At the town’s high school, teachers embark on more deliberate conversations about students, making sure they know something about everyone and, if not, making a concerted effort to reach out to them.

Educators stress it is a challenging undertaking because it is not always clear which students are experiencing distress. Some may signal they are struggling by acting out in class or bursting into tears. But others can appear well-adjusted — putting on a smile — as turmoil swirls inside.

In one noteworthy endeavor, the town is training more than 350 educators, town librarians, clergy, crossing guards, bus drivers, and police to be “youth mental health first aid responders,” instilling them with the skills to identify students who might be in trouble and the know-how to respond.

Reading officials acknowledge they have not found all the answers. While the school system has seen lower rates of alcohol and drug use among teenagers, it has experienced a slight increase in the percentage of students reporting depression over the last decade, according to a behavior survey of middle- and high-school students in 2015.

Superintendent John Doherty, in a state of the schools address in November, stressed the importance of remaining vigilant. He noted that 55 Reading Memorial High School students had been hospitalized for depression, anxiety, or suicidal tendencies last school year.

In an interview, Doherty said that in many cases the hospitalization rates reflect the enormous pressures many suburban students face to take the most rigorous classes and pile on extracurricular activities — often at the expense of sleep — to get into the best colleges.

“We are trying to do everything we can so students know they have adults they can talk to if they are in crisis,” he said.

With Reading ranking almost at the bottom in the state for per-student spending, the town has relied on three federal grants, totaling about \$2 million, to help support social and emotional programs in school and its communitywide effort to combat substance abuse among residents of all ages.

The growing emphasis on social-emotional learning represents a ground shift in Massachusetts.

For decades, schools had provided some lessons in those areas, especially in the early grades. But many tossed aside or substantially scaled back the lessons to devote more time to boosting standardized test scores in reading and math, in an effort to avoid state sanctions for poor performance.

Many educators saw it as a misguided trade-off: If students are not in a healthy state of mind, they will struggle academically and perform poorly on state tests; more alarmingly, it could set them up for a lifetime of failure.

“People are stepping back on that full focus on reading and math scores and are looking more holistically at all the skills that really matter,” said Sara Bartolino Krachman, executive director of Transforming Education, an education nonprofit in Boston. “Social-emotional learning is not only crucial to academic success, but also career success and lifelong being.”

A landmark study in 1998 often quoted by educators today — the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study — established a disturbing link between childhood trauma and increased risks for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide, severe obesity, and sexually transmitted diseases.

It suggested that participants who had four or more adverse childhood experiences — such as sexual or emotional abuse or living in a household where someone was mentally ill, suicidal, or abusing drugs — had a fourfold to twelvefold increase in the chance that they would experience risk behaviors as adults. [The study](#), published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine, involved 17,000 adults. Almost two-thirds of them had at least one adverse childhood experience.

Social-emotional learning received a boost last year in Massachusetts with the enactment of a gun-control law that called for creating “safe and supportive schools.” The law encourages schools to integrate such initiatives as bullying prevention, trauma sensitivity, dropout prevention, and truancy reduction.

In Boston, Superintendent Tommy Chang added a [Cabinet-level position](#) this school year to ramp up an expansion of programs that address students’ social and emotional well-being.

Over the last five years, Boston has been expanding its programs, raising more than \$1 million to support the effort. But only about a third of the city’s 125 schools offer robust programming in the area, and the school system has only 55 psychologists and 14 social workers to serve 56,000 students.

Many Boston schools taking part in the effort use some similar strategies as Reading, such as gathering students in circles, and have forged formal partnerships with Boston Children’s Hospital and other

medical centers to provide mental health services for students grappling with trauma. Some schools also have teachers fill out behavioral assessments on students to determine whether some need specialized interventions, such as working directly with a psychologist.

In Reading, an uptick four years ago in student hospitalizations for anxiety, depression, and other issues prompted much soul searching.

School officials moved the discussions out of their administrative offices and into the community, kicking off a dialogue by showing a film, "[Race to Nowhere](#)," which explores the lives of students who have been pushed to the brink by pressures to excel.

The community dialogue was a natural outgrowth of an effort the town began about a decade ago to address substance abuse in a public way after a series of fatal overdoses — many involving residents in their 20s or 30s — stunned this bedroom community. That effort led to such changes as requiring teenagers caught with alcohol anywhere in the town to go through an alcohol awareness program.

Conversations about substance abuse, and subsequently those about mental health, were nevertheless tough.

"We faced a lot of denial in the beginning," said Erica McNamara, director of the Reading Coalition Against Substance Abuse, which pushed the substance abuse changes and has been working with the school system on social-emotional learning. "A lot of people moved to Reading because it's a lovely little community. You don't necessarily want to know what happens behind closed doors."

School officials also undertook a review at that time that concluded the district lacked a comprehensive approach to fostering the social and emotional well-being of its students. In some cases, schools lacked programs. In other cases, schools left it up to teachers to craft their own lessons and approaches, creating uneven quality.

The findings prompted school officials to orchestrate an overhaul. They were also encouraged by research that showed the benefits of robust social-emotional learning programs on student performance.

For instance, a 2011 meta-analysis found that well-structured programs not only significantly improved students' social and emotional skills and behaviors, but students also enjoyed an 11 percentile point gain in achievement over students who did not participate in the programs. The [study](#), published in the peer-reviewed journal *Child Development*, examined 213 social and emotional learning programs involving more than 270,000 students nationwide in kindergarten through 12th grade.

The overhaul appears to be paying off. In a [report](#) this fall, the Rennie Center, an education research and policy organization in Boston, highlighted Reading, along with Fall River and Gardner, as glowing examples for their work in student behavioral health, specifically because they made it a community effort rather than just a school initiative.

The Birch Meadow school in Reading, with about 400 students, uses a variety of strategies. A few years ago, the school instituted a common approach to discipline that rewards students at all grade levels for good behavior by stamping paw prints on their hands — giving them immediate gratification. If they get 20 stamps, which they call "yays," they get a brightly colored bracelet.

The school also uses a program called “[Open Circle](#),” which provides students with tips on weathering tough situations and allows them to frankly discuss common problems and break down stereotypes or misconceptions about their classmates.

One Tuesday afternoon last month, fourth-graders in Jolene Tewksbury’s class arranged their blue desk chairs in a circle at the back of the classroom. The topic of conversation: the difference between playfully teasing and making fun of someone.

Students said the conversations were enlightening.

“It’s nice to talk to people about similar things that have happened to you and learn new ways about what you could do differently the next time,” said Kelsey Murphy.

Maria Simon, the first-grade teacher, said she is glad that school systems are realizing education is about more than the MCAS; it’s about nurturing the whole child.

“The amount of academic work we do in a day is really overwhelming to many children and many teachers,” Simon said. “My goal is for them to feel more comfortable in their learning environment and to use mindfulness the rest of their lives so they’re more comfortable with themselves.”

Mary Shanahan, a parent volunteer in Simon’s classroom, said she is impressed with how Birch Meadow has made social-emotional learning part of the school’s fabric, adding that the mindfulness activities have given her daughter, Abby, another way to self regulate her emotions at home.

“Sometimes she will say, ‘Mommy, I’m going to take a moment’ and she will close her eyes,” Shanahan said. “It blew me away the first time she did it on her own.”

James Vaznis can be reached at jvaznis@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@globevaznis](https://twitter.com/globevaznis).