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At Little Flower in Wading River, a mindfulness lesson for students who have dealt with trauma



Little Flower employees do a mindfulness and emotion regulation exercise during a training to help students mitigate trauma. Credit: Morgan Campbell

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On a sprawling campus in Wading River geared toward students who have experienced trauma, Little Flower school staffers huddled in a music classroom on a recent Thursday to put themselves in the shoes of students in crisis — and to learn the tools to help the children manage it.

Staffers had a lesson in “dynamic mindfulness,” which incorporates centering, breathing regulation and movement to help manage stress and trauma. And by engaging in techniques such as poses that involved at least one staffer leaning forward with a lifted leg to increase focus, they learned the tools that could help students who may be feeling anxious or agitated stay in the moment.

It's a way to “bring them into what's happening right now,” said Jessica Frost, a school psychologist who helped teach the session. “Let's focus on what we have control over.”

The Little Flower Union Free School District, which has about 120 students, some of whom live on campus, is rolling out this program with a roughly \$55,000 grant from the state Office of Mental Health to teach some of the region's most at-risk young people how to work through adversity by using mindfulness techniques.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **The Little Flower Union Free School District**, which has many students who have experienced trauma, is rolling out a mindfulness program after receiving a roughly \$55,000 grant from the state Office of Mental Health.
- **Across the state, 42 school districts** received funds from the Office of Mental Health “to help school districts implement training and curricula that enhance a school’s ability to respond to and address trauma.”
- **Some research has shown that** mindfulness can help reduce suspensions and increase focus.

Mindfulness helps keep people in the moment and give the brain a break using methods that may include breathing and movement, experts say. When experiencing sadness or aggravation, students can use the breathing techniques or stretches to help bring about a sense of calm.

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The Office of Mental Health said it awarded funds to 42 school districts across the state to help them “implement training and curricula that enhance a school’s ability to respond to and address trauma.” Other Long Island school districts that received the funds include Bay Shore, Greenport and Patchogue-Medford.

Experiences can impact adulthood

Adverse childhood experiences, such as seeing violence or being abused, can impact the person's "life opportunities" in adulthood and increase their likelihood of developing conditions such as diabetes and cancer, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

By instilling students with mindfulness techniques, leaders hope to change those trends. Some research has shown that mindfulness can help reduce detentions.

"Students are able to recognize when they need to address something, have resources to address it, and they're able to do so quickly," said Little Flower Superintendent Harold Dean, who has a doctorate in educational administration.

And that holds particular resonance for the Little Flower district, which has students from third to 12th grade, or until they turn 22.

Sixty students live in cottages on campus while others live at home, coming back and forth to the school that offers immersive educational services and therapeutic treatment. Many of the students have experienced traumas that include domestic violence and sex trafficking.

Class sizes are smaller than the average general class, the superintendent said. The staff includes cottage personnel, teachers, aides and a crisis support team.

"Students don't have to wait to see somebody; there's usually someone waiting to see those students," Dean said.

At the school, mindfulness work involves identifying the emotion the child may be feeling, whether that's agitation from bullying or anxiety about not being able to go home during a holiday.

Students can work through poses. One was a chair jump, where a seated child jumps up with hands above the head to get a release. The pose is connected with different types of breaths, including rapid ones and deep inhalations and exhalations.

Using techniques solo or together

Eventually, students who use the program will be able to use the techniques in daily activities and share them with friends and families. Support for the program could include video lessons, books and coaching.

Dr. Vera Feuer, associate vice president of school mental health and director of emergency psychiatry for Northwell Health, said these types of techniques give the brain a break so that it can recharge, which is important for treating chronic stress and trauma.

“When you're overwhelmed with anxiety and stress or different, you know, just rapid emotions, your brain cannot function as well cognitively. You cannot learn as much,” she said.

Nearly 90% of the 4,500 students at 39 K-12 schools said the program helped them manage stress and anxiety, according to the Niroga Institute, a nonprofit that designed the training.

One study in the Journal of Applied School Psychology looking at roughly 50 students attending schools that used mindfulness training saw a decrease in anxiety and depression. However, the study did not see “significant improvements” in physical conditions such as headaches brought on by psychological turmoil.

Still, mindfulness work is another tool for students who come to the school with difficult stories.

This tool is something that will help students “write the next chapters” in their book, said Dean, the superintendent.

“We respect everything that's happened, but we also want them to know that this doesn't define you if don't want it to,” he said.



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Tiffany Cusaac-Smith came to Newsday in 2023 after being a race and history reporter at USA TODAY, where she wrote enterprise and spot articles examining how the past shapes the present. Previously, she worked as the race and justice reporter at the USA TODAY Network of New York, covering issues such as criminal justice reform, housing, environmental justice, health care and politics. At The Journal News/lohud.com in Westchester County, she covered Yonkers, the state's third-largest city. She also worked at The Associated Press in Atlanta.

Honors and Awards:

Criminal justice reporting fellowship with the National Press Foundation; New York News Publishers Association award for distinguished investigative reporting; Contributed reporting for Best of Gannett honor; Member of Table Stakes, a program funded by the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund and managed by the American Press Institute to transform local news.

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