

Jefferson County elementary students learning to Bloom through mindfulness

By **Jacob Perkins** - November 19, 2019

Students in the Bloom Elementary (Jefferson County) mindful drumming group perform for their peers. The group was designed for students that can't stay after school for extracurricular activities. Submitted photo

- *Cindy Plappert began implementing mindfulness strategies in her classroom eight years ago.*
- *Plappert was part of the original group of JCPS teachers that were trained as part of the Compassionate Schools Project – a partnership between the University of Virginia and Jefferson County Public Schools that provides support for students in various forms – including academic achievement and mental health.*

By Jacob Perkins

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How mindful are you? Are you taking time to reflect during the day? Are you making sure that during the day you make time for calming breaths? An elementary school in Jefferson County is putting a focus on these skills and it has led to a school-wide culture change.

“It’s a life skill that (the students) are learning,” said Cindy Plappert, mindfulness coach at Bloom Elementary (Jefferson County). “It’s not big and flashy, it’s not going to jump out at you, but they use the techniques and they need them.”

Plappert is a 20-year educator, the past 10 years being at Bloom. It was at Bloom where she began to implement mindfulness strategies, including calming breaths and periods of reflection, in her classroom after she noticed some of her 3rd-grade students were struggling with anxiety.

“If you have that intentional awareness and you can recognize and name a feeling, you can then start to take care of yourself,” she said. “I tell the kids, once they’re doing that, it opens them up and allows them to be available to show compassion and be available for other people as well.

“This kind of culture builds the capacity for compassion. It builds the capacity for kids to be more resilient. Those hard feelings are not going to stay; we talk about that a lot. The feelings are there and they’re there for a reason, and that’s okay.”

Implementing these strategies in her classroom led to Plappert taking on this new role as mindfulness coach four years ago. The position was created after Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) partnered with the University of Virginia to create the Compassionate Schools Project, which provides support for students in various forms – including academic achievement and mental health.

Plappert meets with each class for 30 minutes every week. In her sessions, she teaches her students various mindfulness techniques, including how to effectively take calming breaths, the importance for students to write down their thoughts or draw in a journal and mindful movements – which includes yoga positions that the students have learned. As students get into the higher grades, Plappert introduces more of the brain science behind mindfulness.

Plappert says that the decision to only meet for 30 minutes a week was a deliberate one. Throughout the rest of the week she meets with small groups of students that have similar needs and even has “check-in” time where students can meet individually with her.

With the help of Bloom’s music teacher Michelle Lewis, Plappert has even started a mindful drumming group. The group meets in the morning and was designed for students that can’t stay after school for extracurricular activities.

“On Mondays, those kids meet from 9 to 9:30,” she said. “It makes them feel more a part of the school. They have an activity they can do as well.”

*Cindy Plappert leads a mindfulness lesson with students from Bloom Elementary (Jefferson County). Plappert is a 20-year educator, the past 10 years being at Bloom. It was at Bloom where she began to implement mindfulness strategies in her classroom.
Submitted photo*

The partnership between JCPS and the Compassionate Schools Project provided funding for the first two years of a mindfulness coach. Since then, the position has been funded directly by JCPS on a year-by-year basis. Bloom Elementary Principal Jack Jacobs said schools have many options to bring in a mindfulness coach for their students.

“Some schools have the flexibility to budget a position from their school’s budget,” Jacobs said. “Some schools could collaborate with their PTA to fund a part-time mindfulness coach. There are often grants which, I would assume, could be applied to fund to a mindfulness/compassion coach.

“The good news is that it’s an easy sell. This work is key; mindfulness is key for all students’ success.”

While Bloom isn't the only school to utilize mindfulness strategies, Damien Sweeney, program coordinator for comprehensive school counseling at the Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Career and Technical Education and Student Transition, said the work is important. According to America's Health Rankings (2019), 30% of Kentucky's youth (ages 0-17) experience two or more adverse childhood experiences, which are traumatic events that occur before a child turns 18.

"Mindfulness has been proven to improve the mental health of students and educators," Sweeney said. "Our students in Kentucky come to us with a tremendous amount of trauma. This trauma isn't only on the shoulders of our youth. Our school staffs interact with our students and work to motivate, inspire and care for our traumatized youth day in and day out. As a result, our staffs are often enduring secondary trauma. This can lead to stress, anxiety, burnout and much more."

Plappert was part of the original group of JCPS teachers that were trained as part of the Compassionate Schools Project. Jacobs said without Plappert's effort and knowledge of mindfulness, he wouldn't be able to call Bloom a compassionate school.

"Ms. Plappert is key to our mindfulness and compassion work at Bloom because of her knowledge and her personality," he said. "The bonus for Bloom is Cindy. She is so comfortable with the research, the skills, practices and knowledge, but more importantly she is passionate about it and her personality matches mindfulness and compassion perfectly."

MORE INFO ...

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Compassionate Schools Project

Trauma Responsive Educational Practices Project

TIPS FOR HIRING A MINDFULNESS COACH

Damien Sweeney, program coordinator for comprehensive school counseling from the Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Career and Technical Education and Student Transition, provided some tips for schools that may be considering hiring a mindfulness coach:

- Be able to write an appropriate job description that addresses the most common issues you are seeing in your school.
- Educate your staff, students and school community on this role and the need for it.
- Designate a specific space (unshared) so students feel safe and comfortable emoting.
- If you have multiple periods in the day, ask your mindfulness coach to be visible during breaks and at lunch as a reminder to kids who may need him or her that he/she is available to help.
- Have your mindfulness coach offer your students lessons. We know that at times, our students who need a mindfulness coach may not utilize this opportunity. By having your mindfulness coach in classrooms, he or she will be able to build a rapport with students that can help them see her or him as a safe person who wants to help.
- Take advantage of your resources. Having a mindfulness coach/teacher is not the end all, be all. If you have a person in your school who is practicing mindfulness, they may be able to implement curriculum for a mindfulness room. There are several apps that educators can use in their classrooms as well, including Mind Yeti, Calm for Educators (free for educators) and Headspace (free for educators).