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Latest Way to Cut Grade School Stress: Yoga

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

Fourth graders at the Rosa Parks Elementary School have various classroom jobs: line leader, attendance taker, door locker, yoga monitor.

"When you're mad you go do yoga and you feel much better," said Frederick Nettles, 10, a monitor who was coaching first graders in the intricacies of the "new moon," a forward-bending yoga posture. "It calms your nerves."

At seven public schools here -- with more on the way -- the "yoga break" has taken its place beside typical school rituals like recess and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Yoga Journal, a Berkeley bimonthly, calls it "om schooling." Besieged by budget cuts -- most of California's elementary schools no longer have physical education teachers -- schools like Rosa Parks are finding their own center. With free teacher training by Tony Sanchez, a yoga master, yoga is becoming an integral part of the physical education classes and the regular classroom as well. Mr. Sanchez founded the United States Yoga Association, a nonprofit organization.

Students in Elaine Gee's fourth-grade Chinese bilingual class spent 10 minutes the other day doing yoga before a big grammar test. A favorite is the "cocoon," which involves relaxing the head, spine, arms and legs on the floor and breathing to release tension.

"It helps them concentrate, especially on rainy days when there's a lot of nervous energy," Ms. Gee said. "These students are under a lot of pressure to succeed. Testing is coming up, reports are going home, so we're doing more yoga."

Rosa Parks Elementary is worlds away from the universe inhabited by yoga devotees like Madonna and Sting. All students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch.

Mr. Sanchez, with the help of a small stipend for teachers from the San Francisco Education Foundation, has trained 60 classroom teachers citywide in hatha yoga, which concentrates on athletic postures and breathing techniques.

Yoga is not common in the American classroom yet. But it is increasingly becoming part of the physical education curriculum nationwide, along with other nontraditional activities like weight training, biking and in-line skating. It has recently been introduced to adolescent inmates on Rikers Island, where "we've found it teaches concentration, self-control and discipline," said Tim Lisante, New York City's deputy superintendent for alternative, adult and continuing education.

In Chamberlain, S.D., Ronda Klein, the school nurse, recently began teaching yoga to students at St. Joseph's, a Catholic boarding school for American Indian children.

In Seattle, 15 of 97 public schools have yoga as a warm-up in gym class, and it is an elective for high school students, said Bud Turner, the physical education coordinator.

"Physical education is moving in the direction of lifetime activities like toning, swimming and yoga," Mr. Turner said. "We're getting away from traditional team sports dominated by three kids in the athletic elite."

A nonprofit group called Yoga Inside, founded three years ago in Los Angeles, sponsors classes in 31 states, many in schools in poor urban neighborhoods.

San Francisco's yoga-in-the-schools program was prompted by the failure of 74 percent of California public school students to meet state fitness requirements, said Gloria Siech, a physical education content specialist for the San Francisco public schools. "We felt elementary school kids were more receptive and there was a lot of need," she said.

To avoid potential controversy, she said, the program focuses solely on the physical aspects of yoga. There is no Sanskrit or mention of Hindu deities.

The Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles, an acclaimed public charter school, introduced yoga classes for all students last year. Kevin Sved, the school's co-founder, said a few parents declined to have their children participate for religious reasons. "The tricky part is that some of the teachers want to connect spiritually," Mr. Sved said. "But this is about the physical, mental and emotional aspects of yoga."

The San Francisco schools have gone further than most by training teachers to include yoga as a regular part of the day -- "in the classroom, when they're scrambling," said Sandy Wong Sanchez, program director for the United States Yoga Association.

At the James Lick Middle School, Adiam Aklilu, 11, had just come out of "the tree," an elaborate pose in which she placed the inside of her right foot on her left thigh and then balanced. "It gets me pumped," she said. "It makes me feel like I did a lot of work."

At Rosa Parks, there are signs that students are bringing their yogic karma home. Danny Washington, said his daughter Ariel, 9, is "a lot calmer now in different situations."

Tea-shall Britton, 9, taught yoga to her mother, Tawanna Granger, a freelance nurse, and now they do it together in their living room in Chinatown. "We become partners," said Ms. Granger, a single mother. "It helps us focus."

When she received a paycheck in the mail the other day that was less than she expected, her daughter knew what to do. "Mommy," Tea-shall commanded. "Do your cocoon."

Correction: March 29, 2002, Friday An article on Sunday about yoga instruction in some San Francisco schools misstated the name of the organization that provided a stipend to train teachers in hatha yoga. It is the San Francisco Education Fund, not Education Foundation.