Yoga and SEL White Paper

Dr. Jen Martin and Dr. Alex Wolfe

Audience: Educators and legislators.

Purpose: To share the benefits of yoga and social-emotional learning (SEL) and to demonstrate the correlation between exercise and increased academic performance.

On January 1, 2025, a new law will take effect requiring that all students in Illinois public schools be provided with 20 minutes per week of relaxation activities, including breathing exercises, stretching, yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness activities, outside of regular scheduled recess. <u>Senate Bill 2872</u> was proposed by <u>Illinois State Senator Rachel Ventura</u> as a way for students to prioritize their mental health. This initiative allows school districts to partner with community-based organizations for this instruction and is aligned with the <u>Illinois SEL Standards</u> and with the <u>CASEL Framework</u>. See <u>Mental Health in Illinois</u> for more information.

Why Yoga?

More than 4.1 million K-12 students in the United States experience anxiety, according to the <u>American Psychological Association</u>. <u>Harvard Health Publishing</u> found that yoga and associated mindfulness practices have been shown to improve the physical and mental health of K-12 students. Such practices can lead to:

- <u>Reduced anxiety and depression</u>.
- Improved balance, strength, and endurance.
- Improved focus, memory, self-esteem, and academic performance. Improve emotional self-regulation and, thus, <u>classroom behavior</u>. Listen to the <u>NPR</u> interview with Dr. Jen Martin and Dr. Ale Wolfe.

Benefits for Teachers

When teachers <u>build community</u> in their classrooms, the benefits include improved academic achievement, enhanced psychological well-being, greater teacher effectiveness, positive school culture (including a reduction in bullying), increased attendance and retention. The inverse of this is exclusion. The consequences of <u>exclusion</u> include lower academic achievement, poor mental health, behavioral issues, negative school climate, and increased dropout rates. The need for community is a core human need. The pain of exclusion follows the same cognitive pathways as physical pain.

What the Research Says

Previous studies have shown that physical activity is positively associated with academic achievement (<u>Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017</u>; <u>Donnelly et al., 2016</u>; <u>Esteban-Cornejo et al., 2015</u>), mental health (<u>Ahn & Fedewa, 2011</u>), and cognitive development (<u>Tandon et al., 2016</u>). Despite the benefits associated with physical activity, only one-quarter (24.8%) of youth meet the <u>Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans</u> (Peircy et al., 2018) Decreased physical activity has

been associated with the U.S. obesity epidemic in youth (<u>19.7%</u>, <u>Stierman et al., 2021</u>) and a decline in youth fitness (<u>Gahche et al., 2014</u>). Moreover, increased pressure to meet high-stakes testing standards and curricula shifts has led to increased instruction time within the classroom and less time dedicated to physical activity engagement within schools (<u>Kern et al., 2018</u>). However, decreasing time allotted to students to engage in physical activity has not shown to improve academic achievement; physical activity may feasibly be implemented within the curricula without reducing time dedicated to academic instruction (<u>Coe et al., 2006</u>; <u>Donnelly et al., 2017</u>).

Physical activity can be described as any bodily movement by skeletal muscle that results in energy expenditure beyond resting levels (<u>Caspersen et al., 1985</u>). This includes, but is not limited to, activities classified as aerobics, muscle- and bone-strengthening, balance, and flexibility. The majority of the literature emphasizes the engagement of aerobic and muscle- and bone-strengthening activity for their positive effects on physical and mental health, but balance and flexibility activities, such as yoga, have also reported positive effects for mental health. <u>Shreve et al. (2021)</u> found that 10 minutes of yoga a day significantly reduced levels of anxiety and improved concentration among primary school children. Similar results were found by <u>D'souza et al. (2021)</u>, who reported a reduction in psychosocial stress in a sample of adolescents.

A recent study by <u>McCurdy et al. (2024)</u> reported that yoga and mindfulness was positively associated with improved coping skills, emotional regulations, and academic achievement in a large sample of children and adolescents. Overall, the current literature suggests that yoga, mindfulness, and other mind-body interventions may be beneficial for schoolchildren and may be feasibly implemented within the curriculum without compromising dedicated time for academic instruction (<u>D'souza et al., 2021</u>; <u>Hart et al., 2022</u>; <u>Jarrava et al., 2019</u>; Shreve et al., 2021). These activities and mind-body interventions have been suggested as a complementary addition to socio-emotional learning (<u>Butzer et al., 2017</u>; <u>Jarrava et al., 2019</u>).

Overall, the current literature suggests that incorporating physical activity within the school day is not only feasible, but also provides several academic, physical, cognitive, and socioemotional benefits for the students. Moreover, empirical evidence supports the idea that reducing the amount of sedentary activity within classrooms has benefits in students' executive function, classroom behaviors, and academic performance (Allee et al., 2023). The physical activity habits that are established during childhood and adolescence track into adulthood (Craigie et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2013; Telama et al., 2014). Educational institutions have the opportunity to provide physical activity opportunities to the largest segment of the U.S. youth population (Welk et al., 2010) to improve their physical and mental well-being and provide them with a feasible strategy to excel academically.

Practical Strategies for SEL and Wellness

We are facing a teacher shortage in Illinois and throughout the nation. <u>Teacher stress and</u> <u>burnout</u> are major contributors to this shortage. Teachers also can benefit from relaxation, mindfulness, and meditative practices. There are institutional and systemic changes

that must be made to improve our public education system in general, but there are things individual teachers can do to help themselves and their students on a daily basis.

1. Community Building

<u>Positive greetings at the classroom door</u> can increase student engagement by 20% and reduce student disruptive behavior by 10%. Research indicates that our brains prefer similarities in order to make connections with others (<u>affinity bias</u>). Teachers must move beyond these differences (real or perceived) to build relationships with students. Find a common interest. Such bonds will improve relationships, build greater self-confidence for students, and improve their grades. Building a healthy and positive classroom community is crucial for mindful movement and sharing gratitude.

2. Mindful Movements and Breathing Exercises

Begin a daily or weekly mindful movement routine based on your students' interests and needs. You can begin with walking and then moving into breathing exercises, creating mantras, manifesting (mudras), and yoga. Students can create their own mantras – maybe a four-word mantra to calm them when they are upset. They can then tap each finger to their thumb while repeating their mantras in their minds. Examples include "I am enough" and "I am so loved." Teachers can create mantra posters to hang around the room to remind students of this practice. Please see the following links for more beginning breathing techniques:

Three collective breaths Dual nostril Breathing Joyful breath

3. Sharing Gratitude

Teachers can facilitate gratitude in their classrooms by walking their students through a guided meditation during which students imagine people, places, and things for which they are grateful. Other activities to center gratitude include thankful thoughts, sending thanks (through writing or drawing), or sharing the positive impact someone has made on our lives. It is helpful (and memorable) to always close a session or a class with three statements of appreciation or gratitude by asking for three volunteers to deliver these sentiments.

Questions to Ponder

How are you facilitating intentional actions as an educator? How can we elevate our relationships with our students to foster belonging? How will you incorporate the tenets of <u>Senate Bill 2872</u> in your classroom or school?

Terms to Know

<u>Asana</u> <u>Mantra</u> <u>Mudra</u> <u>Shavasana</u>

Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Best Practices

All poses and practices should be a choice. Invite students to join you. Students should never be forced to engage in a pose or practice that they do not feel comfortable attempting. Comfort may come in time. Never ask students to hold their breath during trauma-informed yoga.

Best Practices: Elementary Students

When introducing young students to yoga, limit to 20 minutes and build from there. Attention spans may be too short for an hour-long practice. If you have mats, start there. If you have space, think about arranging the mats in a circle so that students are facing one another – no one is behind another person, which may reduce feelings of bodily insecurity. If you do not have mats for all students, chair yoga may be an ideal choice.

Suggested Poses:

Half sun salutation A Warrior 2 sequence (warrior 2, peaceful warrior, extended side angle, low lunge) Tree pose Happy baby

Best Practices: Secondary Students

Secondary students may need to be reminded to focus on themselves and not on their peers. Mats could be spread out around the room so that students feel some privacy and comfort, while still being able to have the teacher in their sight lines.

Suggested Poses:

Sun salutation A Chair yoga (twists) Eagle pose (standing or in chair) Savasana with guided meditation.

Additional Resources

Breathe4Change Chair Yoga Cosmic Kids Yoga Yoga with Adriene

More about Dr. Jen Martin

Dr. Jennifer L. Martin is an associate professor of teacher education at the University of Illinois Springfield. Prior to working in higher education, Dr. Martin worked in public education for 17 years, 15 of those as the department chair of English at an urban alternative high school for students labeled at-risk for school failure in metropolitan Detroit. Dr. Martin's research investigates theory and practice in education through the critical intersectional lenses of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Dr. Martin has co-written and edited nine books and numerous book chapters and has peer reviewed articles. She has been the editor in chief of the Journal of

<u>Urban Learning Teaching and Research</u> (JULTR) since 2018. The journal is dedicated to mentoring novice writers and graduate students as well as showcasing the work of prominent scholars in urban education. Under Dr. Martin's leadership, JULTR has evolved to an online and open access format. She is also the editor of "Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights from the Front Lines of Social Justice Advocacy" (recipient of the 2016 AERA Division B's Outstanding Book Recognition Award). She is the 2019 recipient of the Paula Silver Case Award from the Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership for her co-authored piece, "The Bathroom Case: Creating a Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Students." In 2021, she was awarded the Burks Oakley II Distinguished Online Teaching Award by UIS. Dr. Martin was selected for the 2022-23 cohort for the University of Illinois systemwide Public Voices Fellowship. She was named as a University Scholar, the University of Illinois system's highest honor, at UIS for the 2022-23 academic year.

More about Dr. Alex Wolfe

Dr. Alex M. Wolfe is an assistant professor and program director of Exercise Science at the University of Illinois Springfield. Dr. Wolfe's career in exercise science began as a personal trainer for local community centers, including the YMCA and Five Points Washington (a community for well-being in Washington, Illinois), as well as a sports performance specialist for youth athletes. He served as the program coordinator for the Youth Fitness Invention Program at the Bloomington-Normal YMCA while attending Illinois State University. Dr. Wolfe served as the lead faculty of Exercise Science at Lincoln College until its closure in 2022 and has held faculty positions at Illinois State University, Illinois College, and Heartland Community College. Dr. Wolfe's research focuses on youth fitness, free play during school, and the influence of physical activity on academic achievement.

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