

# Take a deep breath and say YES!

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Dodd Middle School students are learning more than reading, writing and arithmetic. They are learning how to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. It's all part of the school's social and emotional learning curriculum called the Youth Empowerment Seminar, or YES, which offers students practical tools for a healthy body, mind and lifestyle.

The hallways at Dodd Middle School hummed with youthful energy as students rushed to get to their homeroom by the 8 a.m. bell one morning last month. But a sea of calm soon replaced the frenetic energy when teacher Juan Mosquera led the student body in the morning's mindfulness practice. His soothing voice came over the loud speaker. "Center yourself, stay focused," he said. "How are you feeling today? Are you in the red zone and angry? Are you in the blue zone and down or are you feeling centered and calm, in the green zone?" he asked. A series of targeted breathing techniques followed and then questions aimed at getting students to reach for their full academic potential. "Set an intention for yourself," he urged. "How will you be your best? What do you hope to accomplish today?"

YES was incorporated into the health program at Dodd during the 2014-2015 school year. The curriculum has three modules: healthy body, healthy mind and healthy lifestyle.

"Last year we had some students who were not interested. 'Say no to YES,' was



**MEMBERS** of the Kings Wheelchair Basketball team pose with Dodd students, administrators and Herald reporter Laura Schofer.

their slogan," Johane Ligondé, principal of Dodd Middle School joked, "but most students have seen how it helps them and they practice the breathing exercises to reduce stress, anger and anxiety," she said. "They are learning how to better articulate and control their feelings."

"We've seen a huge shift this year," Katherine Hoffman, health teacher said. "Last year they were more hesitant but as we introduced YES, they became more excited about it. I do the victory breath multiple times a day and it calms me down."

"I decided to give the program a shot," Mason Bazemore, an eighth grader, said. "YES has helped me in many situations. I have many little brothers and they destroy items in my house. I want to tackle them, but with YES, it calms me down," he said. "I feel proud. I used to yell at them and then feel guilty. Not now. And YES helped me get through a difficult time when a cousin passed."

Proponents of social and emotional learning say these skills are critical to being a good student, citizen and worker. Many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying and dropping out) can be prevented or reduced when multiyear, integrated efforts are used to develop students' social and emotional skills.

A study in the journal Child Development called "Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School Based Universal Interventions," found that students who participated in SEL programs demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior and academic performance that reflected an 11 percentile point gain in achievement. This study included 213 school-based programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students.

The YES program at Dodd is currently undergoing rigorous study at UCLA and Stanford University. To date, researchers at UCLA have shown the program reduces impulsive behavior in 14- to 18-year-olds using the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale.

At Dodd, students are conducting their own study to determine if the YES program is successful by measuring both physical and emotional changes in students. YES combines mindful practice with simple breath practices that are shown to influence the brain, the autonomic nervous system, stress hormones, the immune system and health behaviors.

Students Rosa Medina, Hannah Robin-



**ROSA MEDINA** and Hannah Robinson are student scientist testing the efficacy of the YES program. Not pictured is Brian Perez, another student scientist involved in this project.



**MASON BAZEMORE**, a student at Dodd Middle School, believes in the YES program.

lum. In addition to the mindful breathing practice, the program encourages physical activity that includes exercise to stretch and strengthen the body, including the practice of yoga. YES teacher Lauren Grieco led the class in a series of 12 movements. "Use the sun salutations to release stress and increase flexibility," Grieco told her students.

The class continued with a discussion about neuroplasticity, followed by a video called "Famous Failures," that enforced the idea that people who were successful in their field "first failed, at least once, but kept going," one student said in class.

"It's about having a growth mindset and your belief system," Grieco told students. "You believe you can grow and you start by making it a habit."

Students agreed and then offered examples of how to have a growth mindset.

"I'll do better next time," one boy said. "Keep trying," said another student. "Don't give up," a third student said.

YES also encourages pro-social behavior and cooperation and teaches empathy. The Nassau Kings Wheelchair Basketball team made a visit to Dodd. During gym class students sat in wheelchairs and learned about the challenges these athletes face. It was also a lesson in overcoming despair and focusing on ability not disability.

Student Jasmine Figueroa summed up the YES program. "I'm a different person. I have peace of mind and can remain focused," she said. "People around me say I've changed and I have. Things are so much better now than before."



**DODD STUDENT** practices the tree pose in health class.

son and Brian Perez, under the direction of teacher Tom Doyle, are conducting the research. "In Mr. Doyle's homeroom we are measuring student changes in heart rate before and after the breathing practice," Medina said.

"Heart rate is down after breathing," Robinson said.

"We also have a control group that doesn't participate [in the mindful breathing] and their heart rate stays the same," Medina added.

Students concluded that during the 2014-2015 school year YES indicated 89 percent of students surveyed reported feeling significantly calmer, more relaxed and better able to manage their emotions. A presentation of their findings was presented at the New York School Boards convention. The Freeport School District was one of five New York State school districts asked to present at the 2015 conference in October.

The study continues this year. Students were given the TEIQue-SF questionnaire to measure emotional intelligence at the beginning of this school year and will take it again at the end of the YES program.

The five-week YES program is part of the seventh-grade 10-week health curricu-