

The Boston Globe

Saturday, May 6, 2006

Conference Promotes Meditation in School

By Cristina Silva, Globe Staff

Twenty minutes of silence twice daily can help boost students' grades, improve their social skills, and ignite their creativity.

That's the message Transcendental Meditation practitioners brought to more than 100 Boston-area educators yesterday during a three-hour conference on how to help students overwhelmed by social pressures and the stress of getting into college.

The concept excited many attendees, who took notes intently and walked out chatting animatedly about how they might introduce the program to parents and students.

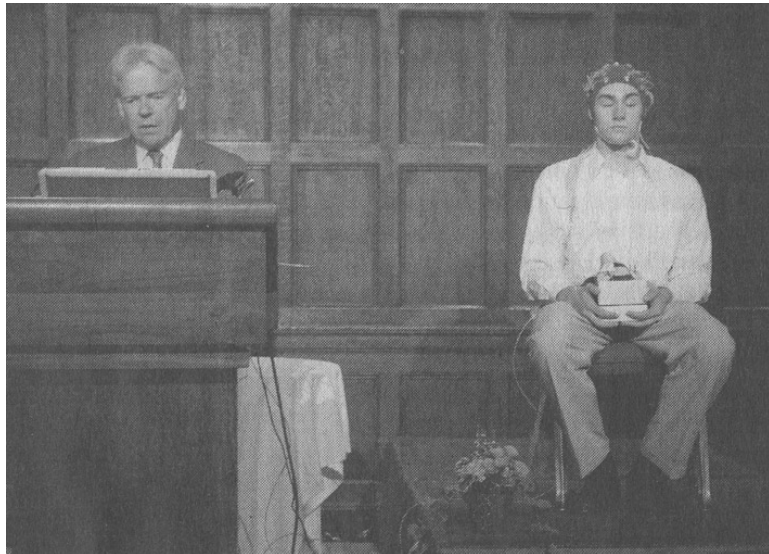
"It sounds very powerful," said Jose A. Solis, a counselor at Madison Park Technical-Vocational High School in Boston. "I think it could work."

Donald Brown, principal of Roxbury Charter High Public School, said he was already considering creating a pilot meditation program for ninth-graders.

"I had never heard of it before this," he said. "We all talk about how we want to create an environment conducive to learning. This sounds like this is it."

Maryalice Foley, assistant principal of B. F. Butler Middle School of Technology in Lowell, said the school had begun experimenting with different ways to reduce student stress this year over the rise of gang violence.

"Anything that can bring cohesiveness to the brain, that can calm them down, is good," she said.



Dr. Alarik Arenander demonstrates the integrated functions of the brain on student David Glueck during the New England Conference on Children's Health and Education yesterday.

She said she thought some parents might be concerned about the unusualness of the practice.

“I don’t know if we would immediately call it Transcendental Meditation,” she said.

Organized by the New England Committee for Stress-Free Schools, the nonprofit group of educators and meditation practitioners has launched a two-week tour across the region to promote the benefits of meditation. In the past week, they made stops in Fairfield, Conn., and Providence.

“There’s an exorbitant amount of pressure on kids today,” said G. Anthony Ryan, director of the Massachusetts Committee for Stress-Free Schools, a meditation group, before the conference began. “Bullying, academic problems, drug use, this is a mechanism to combat all that.” Ryan is assistant superintendent of the Hampshire Regional School District in Western Massachusetts.

During yesterday’s conference at the Harvard Club, educators heard testimonies from principals in Detroit and Washington, D.C., who said they had successfully introduced meditation in their schools and neurology specialists who said meditation stimulated the brain.

Transcendental Meditation is practiced in at least 15 schools nationally, according to the committee. Supporters believe the program, which requires participants to sit quietly in a deep rest for 20 minutes at the start and at the end of the school day, allows the brain to tap into a reservoir of energy and intelligence.

The Transcendental Meditation program is a nonreligious practice started by the East Indian spiritual leader Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Its most famous students include the Beatles, who made the practice popular in the late 1960s.

At the conference, 17-year-old Owen Stowe said he loved art, but after transferring from a school that used meditation to Buckingham Browne & Nichols private school in Cambridge, he felt too stressed out to draw.

Three years ago, Stowe decided to return to the Maharishi School, a private school in Fairfield, Iowa, and live with family friends. The school encourages students to meditate twice a day.

Since then, the high school junior says he is so inspired he can’t stop doodling in class. “I’m a whole lot happier,” he said.