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SCHOOL TOUTS MEDITATION

By LORI HIGGINS
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It's 8:30 on a misty Wednesday morning, and at Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit, many of the older students are performing a twice-daily ritual that's rare in American schools.

Sitting down against blue floor chairs, the students fold their arms against their green school shirts, close their eyes and focus their minds.

Then they meditate.
"It dissolves stress," said Jane Pitt, a Birmingham woman who helps teach transcendental meditation to the school's teachers and staff. "It's easier to make the right choices when you're thinking clearly."

So for 10 minutes — before the students set off for an academics-filled day — they relax in the calm of the room, which is silent except for the whir of an overhead ceiling fan and the frequent click of a photographer's camera.

Seventh-grader Kenia Bradley describes the feeling like this: "It puts you into this deep coma," said Kenia, 12. And afterwards? "You feel refreshed."

But does it really make a difference?

Early findings of research by the University of Michigan's Complementary & Alternative Medicine Research Center suggest it does, at least in improving students socially and emotionally. Students meditate to reduce stress; not to improve test scores, Principal Carmen N'Namdi said.

When compared to students from another Detroit charter

school — where students don't meditate — researchers found the Nataki students were happier, have higher self-esteem, get along better with fellow students and handle stress better.

Dr. Rita Benn, the researcher who conducted the study, cautions against drawing too many conclusions from the data, because she wasn't able to study the students before they began meditating.

"The results look promising. Meditation seems to affect emotional and social development. Future research that's more rigorous will need to test that out," said Benn, director of integrative medical education at the U-M research center.

Benn is doing that additional research, studying 22 Nataki fifth-graders before they began meditating, and then three and six months later. They're being

TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

Transcendental meditation is a mental exercise that people practice for a few minutes twice a day to help settle the mind and body and create a deep rest state. Its purpose is to reduce stress.

compared with 22 Nataki fifth-graders who are not meditating.

Christiana Turner, 12, says she can see the difference. She said meditating "makes you more aware" and that those who don't practice it tend to be "more ram-bunctious."

"They're not as focused as we are on schoolwork," said Christiana, a seventh-grader.

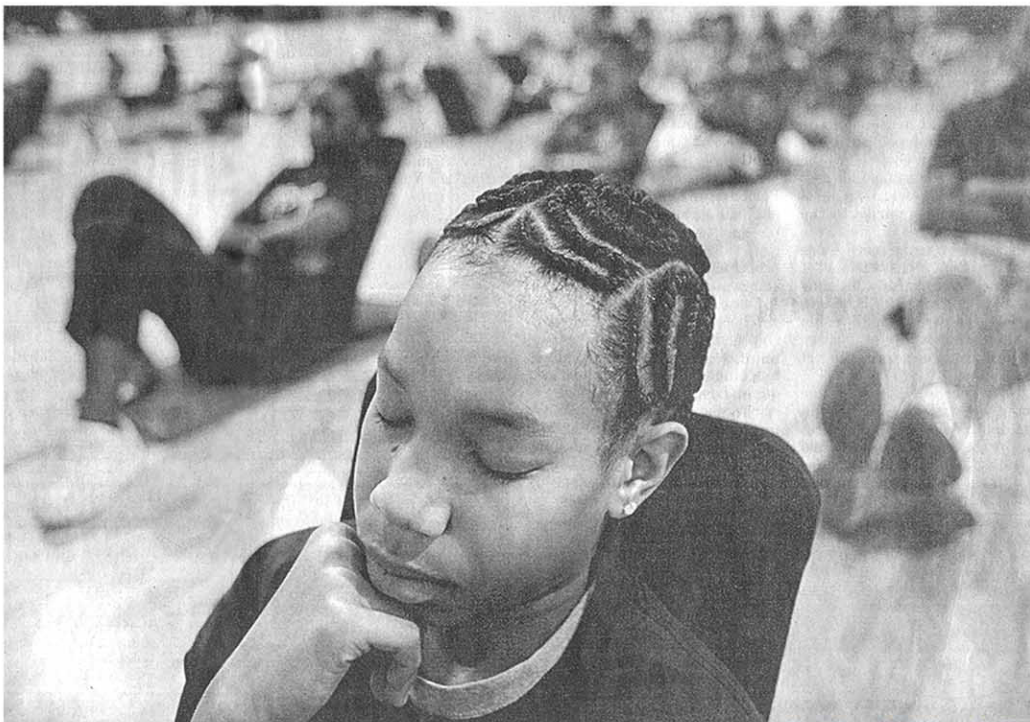
About 10 families have opted not to participate, N'Namdi said. The school enrolls 500 students.

Nataki, a K-8 school in Detroit's far northwest, was founded by N'Namdi and her husband, George, nearly 25 years ago as a tribute to their daughter, who died accidentally in 1974.

Nataki began as a private school but for eight years has operated as a charter school. It's a social studies immersion school, with a focus on civics, economics, geography, world cultures, history and human behavior. The school also offers sewing, dance and swimming classes.

The school's fifth-through-eighth graders have been practicing transcendental meditation (TM), a popular form of meditation, for six years, thanks largely to donations from DaimlerChrysler and General Motors. A Bloomfield Hills couple — Nancy and Arthur (Bud) Liebler — funded the research.

The money has helped the school hire TM instructors Pitt and Carol Lubetkin to teach students and staff the method.



ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press

Tim Kingsley, 12, meditates with other students twice a day at Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit