

One, Two, Tree: Yoga in the Classroom  
By Bridgett Erickson , [Southwest Journal](#)

What do educators do when standardized test scores are down, kids are less fit and school budgets are tight? Minneapolis Public Schools will pilot a program at Jefferson Elementary School to see if yoga is part of the answer.

“We have best practices when it comes to teaching, but we’re looking for different ways to have kids excel,” said Jefferson Principal Ray Aponte, who said that the benefits kids will get from yoga are beyond pure academic success. “It’s about kids not only excelling at reading and math, but also in their own personal life.”

The pilot program, Yoga Calm, is the first of its kind in the state. Kathy Flaminio and Julie Hurtubise, both Minneapolis school district employees and Twin Cities-based yoga instructors, proposed the program to the district and will now spend a yearlong sabbatical living their dream: Giving yoga to kids.

Last spring, Hurtubise and Flaminio invited the Yoga Calm founders, Lynea and Jim Gillen, to Minnesota to train more than 20 counselors, speech therapists and teachers. Most of the participants were from Jefferson. Others were from Seward Montessori, Hurtubise’s home school. The results of the first training were immediate. With only two days left of school after the training weekend, teachers brought their new skills right into the classroom.

“They were so excited about teaching,” said Flaminio, a social worker at Jefferson. “They really felt the effects of this yoga.”

Amy O’Hara, a resource teacher at Jefferson, 1200 W. 26th St., applied her yoga knowledge just days after completing the training. O’Hara sees yoga as another tool to help students get the most out of education, including reducing test anxiety and preventing verbal and physical fights.

“I look at many different avenues to help students,” said O’Hara. “This is just one more resource to have that I can pull from to see what works for a student as an individual.”

Another group of employees will be trained this fall to use the Yoga Calm concepts of stillness, grounding, listening, strengthening and community.

### **How will it help?**

“Society is a tough place... [having] a way to deal with stress is important,” said Aponte, who believes yoga will not only provide needed physical activity in his school but is also a way to [help students] calm down. “It is the right thing to do, to teach kids how to function in this complex society.”

Yoga Calm helps kids clear their minds and keep stress levels low, which fosters a healthier learning environment.

“If you are stressed out, your brain isn’t available to problem solve or think about what worked last time,” Hurtubise, an occupational therapist, explained about the challenges for kids living in stress.

“The other thing is you have to be in the classroom to learn,” said Hurtubise, who explained that the previous protocol was often to send students out of the room if a behavior issue arose. Yoga Calm provides teachers and students with new tools to help the classroom community function with fewer disruptions.

Even though Hurtubise and Flaminio will lead yoga classes for both student and faculty, they believe teachers like O’Hara are the true key to the program’s success. The beauty of the program is that it can be used at anytime during the day. It isn’t scheduled like recess, lunch or gym class. And, Yoga Calm utilizes the relationship that teachers already have with their students.

Flaminio recently experienced firsthand the importance of the teacher’s involvement. She visited her son’s preschool class to share yoga and had a hard time finding the right cues to get the kids to respond to her.

“But the teacher already has that – that’s priceless. They have the classroom in control to learn this,” said Flaminio. “And we teach [the teachers] the yoga. We’re not teaching them anything complicated. It’s really simple; everyone can learn.”

Improved classroom management and student success are just the beginning. From the school staff perspective, Yoga Calm also introduces a continuing education opportunity. Many of the teachers who are participating have integrated Yoga Calm as a professional pay action research project. These projects will gauge the effectiveness of yoga in their class be it to teach math or to calm students before a test.

Hurtubise and Flaminio will help teachers with their research, and the Yoga Calm training prepares them to weave the yoga concepts into lesson plans. The possibilities range from learning to graph by taking pulses before and after physical activities to self-esteem-building group activities like tree challenge (Picture 15 kids in a circle, standing in a one-legged balancing posture known to Yogis as “tree,” with three kids in the center trying to distract their classmates.)

These activities add needed exercise to the school day as well as provide an opportunity for kids to identify with their minds and bodies in a noncompetitive environment. A safe environment is ideal for building self-esteem. And according to Aponte: Self-esteem can take you further in life than being a genius.

Both women credit this same positive thinking with the school accepting their sabbatical proposal. In fact, they just met and joined forces last spring.

“I knew it was going to happen. I’ve wanted this for a long time. And it’s all been tumbling together,” said Flaminio. “Doors keep opening up – we’re very focused and know where we’re going.”

The program has already proven successful in the Oregon school system, the Gillens’ home state. Yoga Calm will be fully integrated into Jefferson Elementary School

throughout the 2007-2008 school year. Aponte has designated a yoga room where Hurtubise and Flaminio will help both teachers and students get started with flow-style yoga classes. These classes, coupled with the everyday applications in the classroom, will keep kids moving daily and clear their minds for easier learning and test-taking.