



## P.E. with a twist: More schools offer yoga

Written by [Rebecca Jones](#) on Oct 27th, 2010.

Tom Barela, the physical education teacher at Denver's [Colfax Elementary School](#), grew up playing football and basketball in his gym student days.

But on Monday, he was down on the floor alongside a class of kindergarteners roaring like a baby dragon, then hissing like a cobra, then steadying himself like a frog on a lily pad.

Leading the class was yoga instructor Allyson Levine, who started coming to the west Denver school four years ago to offer three classes a week to supplement the school's P.E. offerings.

This year, she's leading 12 classes a week at the school, thanks to a partnership between DPS and [The Wellness Initiative](#), a four-year-old Boulder-based nonprofit that provides yoga instruction to more than 2,000 students in 20 predominantly low-income schools.

For 45 minutes, Levine put the students through a series of breathing exercises, stretching and flexibility routines, creative visualization, and movements to improve balance and focus.

Preliminary findings of research on the effects of TWI's yoga instruction in public schools indicate that at least half of the students who participate report improved physical prowess as well as more self-confidence and optimism, and that 60 to 70 percent used the breathing and visualization exercises they learned in yoga to help them outside of gym class.

Barela couldn't be more pleased, even though the yoga takes up a third of his students' gym class time each week.



A Kipp Sunshine Peak Academy fifth-grader demonstrates his flexibility in a yoga class last year. Photos by Tara MacKeigan.



Second-graders at High Point Academy in Aurora participate in a partnered yoga stretch.

“At first, I wasn’t quite sure about it. But now I think it’s great,” he said. “Even though it isn’t vigorous exercise, it is moderate activity, and it improves the students flexibility. It also helps them learn to rest and to focus better.”

He’s had some physically disabled students who excel at the activity.

“Not every child is an amazing athlete,” Barela said, “but I have some who are amazing at yoga.”

## **Still some fear, reluctance out there**

Yoga isn’t new, of course. But many schools have been slow to adopt it into the physical education curriculum.

“Years ago, there were protests about bringing yoga into the schools because people were afraid it was religious,” said Mara Rose, executive director of TWI. “But what we’ve done is to train teachers in a curriculum that takes all the Sanskrit words out, so it won’t freak anybody out. That’s a promise we make to schools. We make it comfortable for teachers and students alike.”

The strictly secular “[Yoga Ed](#)” curriculum is now taught in more than 150 schools around the country. Rose said principals now typically report one to two students in each school who opt out of the yoga classes, but so far no parental protests have arisen.

Rose says yoga’s benefits extend to three areas of student life: physical health, emotional well-being, and academic performance.

“The kids get stronger and more flexible, and the athletes say that after yoga they feel faster and more capable,” she said. “Emotionally, they feel they can better manage stress and control anger. Their academic performance is mostly related to their ability to focus, to calm themselves in the classroom.

“We’ve worked with teachers and students prior to CSAPs to help them develop techniques they can use to focus during the tests, and the proctors say they’ve never seen the kids so calm and focused before.”

## **Yoga and storytelling, yoga and bullies**

The Wellness Initiative is not the only organization pushing yoga in Colorado public schools.

Another Boulder group, [Calming Kids: Creating a Non-violent World](#), promotes yoga in school as an anti-bullying tool. [Storytime Yoga](#), which integrates children’s yoga and storytelling, poetry and healthy eating, is also based in Boulder County. And at a two-day gathering of physical education teachers from across the state last week in Loveland, at least three workshops dealt with in-school yoga.

TWI does serve the most children, however, Rose said.

In addition to its yoga classes for students, TWI offers a two-hour [Tools for Teachers](#) workshop to provide classroom teachers with simple yoga-based techniques they can introduce into academic classrooms; and [on-site yoga classes for teachers and school staff](#) members before or after regular school hours.

Yoga classes for students run the gamut, from year-long regular exposure to yoga as part of the PE curriculum to less-intensive elective classes, sometimes offered during the school day and sometimes offered before or after school. Cost to provide the yoga instruction averages about \$70 per class, but the cost to the school varies depending on students' ability to pay.

“In schools where there’s a high percentage of low-income students, we subsidize a large percentage of the cost,” Rose said. “In schools that serve more affluent students, we rely on the school or the parents to support the program.”



A sixth-grade yoga student at High Point Academy in Aurora.

## Research shows positive impact on youngsters

The Wellness Initiative is working with the [Center for Policy Research](#) to conduct research on the effects of yoga instruction in the schools. Rose expects a significant amount of data to be available within the year, but she has some preliminary findings based on a survey of 47 high school students from four schools who participated in 6 to 42 yoga sessions. Their average age was 15, and 70 percent had no previous exposure to yoga.

Among the findings:

- More than three-fourths of the students agreed strongly or somewhat with the statement “I feel stressed out a lot of the time.”
- About two-thirds agreed strongly or somewhat with the statement “I put a lot of pressure on myself.”
- Following participation in yoga classes, at least half the students noted improvements in physical flexibility; feeling positive and optimistic; feeling physically strong; standing up for oneself; self-confidence; being nice to other students and family.
- When asked their reaction to yoga, 63 percent said they “love it” or “like it a lot,” while 24 percent said they “like it somewhat,” and 13 percent said they did not like it at all.
- More than a third of the students reported improvement in how they felt about their body; their ability to concentrate; feeling good about themselves; feeling less stress; feeling frustration; eating less junk food; and putting too much pressure on themselves.
- When asked how often they used various yoga practices outside the class, more than half reported using the breathing exercises; more than 70 percent reported using visualization; about 45 percent practiced positive statements about themselves; and 44 percent practiced yoga poses.

## Schools participating in The Wellness Initiative yoga classes:

Adams County: Welby New Technology High School, High Point Academy.

Arapahoe County: East Elementary School, Pathways Program.

Boulder County: Columbine Elementary, Crest View Elementary, Fairview High School, Louisville Middle School, Mesa Elementary, Southern Hills Middle School, Whittier Elementary.

Denver: Colfax Elementary, Denver CAMP, Florence Crittenton School, KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy, Knapp Elementary, Munroe Elementary, North High School.