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Teaching Students to De-Stress Over Testing

Third graders participate in a 15-minute mindfulness session in their classroom at Andrews Elementary.
—Tamir Kalifa for Education Week

Some districts are taking steps to help students better cope with test anxiety and other stresses of school

By Sarah D. Sparks

May 24, 2017

Assessments may change in many ways, but for most students, the stress of having to prove what they know and can do doesn't go away.

That's why an increasing number of districts nationwide are looking for ways to help change not so much the tests but the way students respond to them, and to do so in a way that helps improve students' achievement and well-being.

"People who are anxious in general often get test anxiety, yes, but a lot of people who are not particularly anxious can still develop stress around tests in different subjects" like mathematics, said Mark Greenberg, the chairman of prevention research at Pennsylvania State University and a developer of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, or PATHS, curriculum, a social and emotional development and anti-anxiety program for elementary students.

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What's actually going on when a student stresses out over a test? While it's a common occurrence, researchers are starting to get new perspective on exactly how fear interferes with performance.

Butler, the Austin school system's mindfulness director, chats with students on his way to Andrews Elementary School. Climate measures improved dramatically in district schools that piloted the mindfulness curriculum that Butler developed.
—Tamir Kalifa for Education Week

In the moment an anxious student begins a test, "the mind becomes flooded with concerns about the possibility of failure. And these worries essentially create a competition for attention between the worries and [the] need to solve the problems on the test," said Gerardo Ramirez, an assistant professor in developmental and cognitive psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. That divided attention leads to a stalemate—called "choking," in the parlance of Ramirez and his colleague Sian Beilock at the University of Chicago.

Young Students 'Shut Down'

This choking can be particularly visible in younger students. High schoolers may respond more like adults, with irritability or sleep problems, but "in elementary, kids just kind of shut down sometimes," said James Butler, who trains teachers in anti-stress techniques at the Austin, Texas, school district. "Last week, there was a 4th grader who just started crying and wouldn't write much on the test at all," he said. "They just get overwhelmed and don't know how to deal with it."

Interestingly, that fear response looks the same in both low- and high-performing students, Ramirez said. It doesn't matter how much the student actually knows, but rather how well he or she "feels they have the resources to meet the demands of the test" and how tightly performance is tied to the child's sense of identity.

For example, in a study out last month, Ramirez and colleagues found that students who saw themselves as "math people" but performed poorly on a math test actually repressed their memories of the content of the class, similar to the "motivated forgetting" seen around traumatic events like death. The effort to block out a source of anxiety can actually make it harder to remember events and content around the event.

"So maybe you feel, 'Hey, I'm supposed to be a math person, but I'm really stressed out, so maybe I'm not as big a math person as I thought I was.' That stress becomes a very big threat to you," Ramirez said.

"The point of forgetting is to cope with the experience, but if the experience is tied up with a lot of the content of the class, it's not what you want."

Take the American Psychological Association's 2013 report, "Stress in America." It students who wrote about their fears about an upcoming test the day before taking it performed better during the actual test, perhaps because it allowed them to focus on the fear and then put it aside. A 2011 University of Colorado at Boulder study similarly found that asking

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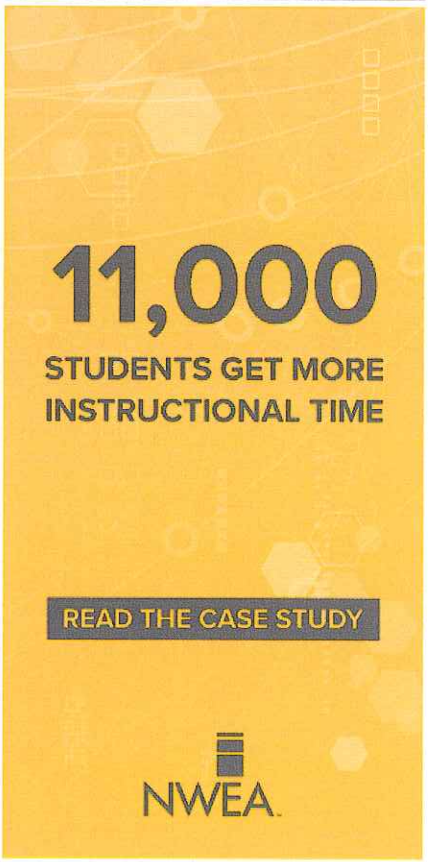


students to write about their values before a test improved performance; authors of that study noted that it could help students reinforce their sense of self outside the academic arena.

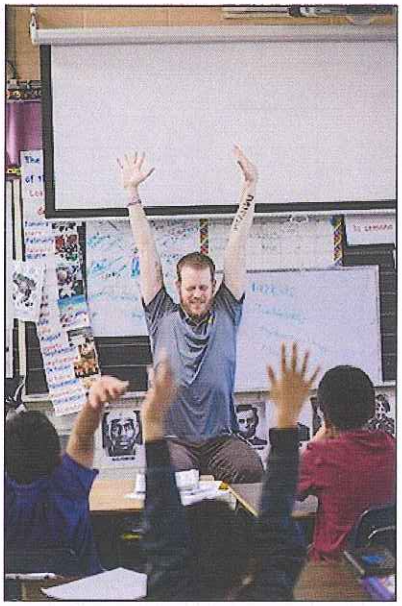
And a new study by researchers at Harvard University and the University of British Columbia found that **changing a student's mindset about the anxiety itself could also boost test performance**. Students in the treatment group were trained to reinterpret physical symptoms—a racing pulse or sweaty palms, say—as signs of excitement, not fear. Those students had better test performance and lower stress than students who interpreted their symptoms as fear.

"Experiencing a sense of threat and a sense of challenge actually aren't all that different from each other," Ramirez said. "Ultimately, by changing your interpretation, you are not going from high anxiety to low anxiety but from high anxiety to optimal anxiety."

'Mindful' of Testing

One of the most rapidly growing methods for shifting a student's focus is "mindfulness," a form of attention training in which students—and sometimes teachers—engage in breathing exercises and visualizations to improve focus and relieve stress. The method has shown evidence of promise in reducing anxiety and behavior problems in children and adolescents in both the United States and other countries. But most of the studies to date have involved relatively small groups of children who have not been randomly assigned to the interventions.

An **analysis of more than 60 evaluations of school-based mindfulness programs** released in March by the nonprofit Campbell Collaboration found small but statistically significant improvements in students' cognitive and emotional outcomes but no significant improvements for academics. The Norway-based authors cautioned that schools should evaluate the programs if they use them in class.



James Butler, the mindfulness director of the Austin Independent School District, leads 3rd graders in mindfulness exercises at the district's Andrews Elementary School.
—Tamir Kalifa for Education Week

"Mindfulness is in; it's expanding a lot, but ... sometimes, the excitement about these things gets way ahead of the evidence of its effectiveness," Penn State's Greenberg said. Yet, he said most anti-stress programs, including his own, involve at least some aspects of mindfulness, such as breathing exercises and students learning to identify their emotions.

"If [students] learn to just watch your own anxiety and see that it gets stronger and weaker—not to push the emotion away but just to notice it—you can surf the waves of anxiety," Greenberg said.

James Butler is one of those trying to help students ride those waves. A former teacher of the year in the Austin district, he has become the school system's first mindfulness director.

Butler and others in the district's social-emotional-learning department train both teachers and students to recognize their physical and emotional symptoms of stress and understand how they could affect their thoughts in the lead-up to a test.

"The way I approach mindfulness is from a very educational perspective; we're very explicit about the neuroscience of the brain," he said.

"I like to focus on very simple, easy techniques, like just taking three deep breaths" before a test, he said. With young children, he has them time their inhalations and exhalations by tracing the fingers of one hand with the other, both to help them count and to give tactile feedback. The exercises are designed so that teachers can lead their class through them in just a few minutes a day during class transitions.

"If a teacher is practicing mindfulness with their class consistently, it's more of a seamless transition ... something that they will naturally do during a test."

Two summers ago, Butler wrote "Mindful Classrooms," a 36-week curriculum covering research on how stress affects the brain and detailing the exercises he had done with his own kindergarten class for several years. Austin Superintendent Paul Cruz gave Butler the green light to pilot the curriculum in 2015-16 with 20 teachers, and it has since expanded to 400 teachers in 130 schools districtwide.

On an annual survey of classroom climate, average scores of district teachers in the pilot more than doubled after participating in the program. The results were only self-reported but positive enough that the district plans to conduct a quantitative evaluation of the program next year.

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shelves had to be completely covered-lest the student get an answer from a book title, and clocks had to be covered. Then move the students into a different classroom. Placing the students in a totally alien environment also increases stress.
3. Let teachers test their own students. After the students have been moved to strange room-go ahead and take away the one last familiar component of their school day. This will cause additional stress.
If district administrators are so concerned about the integrity of their teachers, place a second adult in the room to help monitor the tests.
I think that applying just a little common sense to the testing process would lower test-stress significantly.

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I have a U-tube video to help students cope with stress. See https://youtu.be/5HaleLbKZ3Q.

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