

# Mindfulness-Based Programs and the American Public School System: Recommendations for Best Practices to Ensure Secularity

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Over the past decade, the interest in mindfulness among educators and the number of mindfulness-based programs for students and teachers have grown dramatically. Empirical research to examine the effectiveness of such programs has increased exponentially, but it has not kept up with the burgeoning growth of school-based programming. While the research is indeed promising, there is still much to learn about how best to introduce mindful awareness practices (MAPs) to children and adolescents in school settings. A primary concern is whether or not MAPs constitute religious activities that cross the boundary between church and state, especially as delineated by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution (e.g., Sedlock v. Baird 2015). The purposes of this commentary are to address this question and to offer recommendations for best practices in public educational settings.

Religion ([Dictionary.com Unabridged n.d.](#)) has been defined as “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.” The term “secular,” by definition, means not pertaining to or connected with religion. While law dictates that public schools in the USA not teach religious content, Western educational systems originated in religious contexts, and there are practices in use in our educational settings derived from religious practices. For example, choral reading of prayer is a common

practice in religious settings. Choral reading is also used in educational settings; however, the content is secular (e.g., poetry, dramatic reading). Therefore, it is the content that determines the religious or secular nature of any given practice, not necessarily the practice itself. While MAPs can be found within both Eastern and Western religious traditions, the practice of mindfulness itself is not inherently religious.

Secular MAPs do not involve and/or require any belief. Rather, the rationale for such practices in educational settings is based on evidence from cognitive and affective neuroscience and the social and behavioral sciences (Mind and Life Education Research Network MLERN et al. 2012). Research directed towards the reduction in suffering and the promotion of human flourishing has demonstrated the value of MAPs in numerous contexts (Keng et al. 2011). This evidence is critical to the successful application of mindfulness to a variety of secular settings. Individuals adapting MAPs for public educational settings should be familiar with and draw upon this research to design MAPs that are based on this evidence, align with educational aims and objectives, and meet the needs of the school context.

Content such as language, artifacts, or beliefs that are associated with practices in religious contexts should not be introduced in public educational settings. When it comes to language and artifacts, the distinctions between the religious and secular may be subtle; however, it is best to error on the side of secularity to avoid misunderstandings. For example, the practice of focusing attention on the sound of a bell or chime is a MAP commonly introduced to younger children. Using a bell from a religious tradition (such as a Tibetan bowl or cymbals used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals) may give the impression that the practice has religious significance, when the intention is purely secular. Therefore, it is recommended that educators use bells and/or chimes that are devoid of these associations.

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Similarly, introducing names, words, or sounds that come from a religious or spiritual tradition (that are associated with spiritual and/or religious belief) as a focus of attention during practice is inappropriate in the secular public school context. Furthermore, when introducing postures from yoga, the use of *Sanskrit* names and identifying areas of the body associated with spiritual and religious significance (e.g., *chakras*) are inappropriate. This does not preclude educators from focusing on areas of the body such as the center of the chest or the center of gravity of the body. Indeed, focusing attention on the chest may be helpful when engaging in practices intended to generate care and/or compassion, and focusing attention on the center of gravity of the body located in the lower part of the abdomen may help children and adolescents learn balance and stability. While each of these areas of the body may have spiritual and/or religious significance in yogic and/or other spiritual and religious traditions, teaching these associations in public schools is inappropriate and unnecessary for engaging in the practices and deriving benefit from them.

Finally, it is recommended that instructors take care not to give the impression that MAPs involve the transmission of any sort of spiritual or metaphysical energy. For example, a common practice that has been adapted for use in school settings is “lovingkindness practice,” intended to promote feelings of care and compassion for oneself and others (Kang et al. 2015; Flook et al. 2015). This practice typically involves focusing attention sequentially on oneself and a series of others who are felt as more or less intimate and generating and extending feelings of goodwill in the form of mentally repeated phrases such as “may you be well, peaceful and happy.” It is important to clarify that the intention of this practice is not to actually transmit anything to another, but to simply generate positive and caring feelings within oneself for oneself and others.

To be clear, the suggestion is not that one should conceal the fact that such associations between practices and religious and spiritual traditions exist. Rather, it is that educators be especially careful to ensure that the nature of the practices they are introducing is indeed completely secular and science based, and to explain clearly that the rationale for such practices is based on science, rather than belief. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that MAPs be presented as devoid of an ethical base. I agree with Greenberg and Mitra’s (2015) exposition of the value of “right mindfulness,” or mindfulness informed by secular ethics. Educators can link practices to the secular ethical framework found in educational settings (e.g., the golden rule). For example, students learn MAPs that help them manage their anger, which improves their behavior and their relationships with their teacher and peers.

A final consideration is how MAPs are integrated into the school day. In many cases, these activities have been added on to the regular school schedule and introduced by individuals from outside the school community who may not understand

the importance of secularity and/or how to present secular MAPs. Educators faced with growing demands to cover academic content may perceive mindfulness-based programming as intrusive and burdensome, and parents may wonder why valuable school time is being used for such programming. Depending upon outside providers who may have a limited understanding of education and child development to deliver such programming may be inadvisable and unsustainable. However, educators presenting MAPs to students without adequate preparation may also be problematic. An educator’s misapprehension of the secular ethical basis for MAPs may lead to a misappropriation of these practices aimed towards student compliance and raising test scores, rather than promoting individual and community flourishing.

Two promising trends are the proliferation of mindfulness-based professional development programs for teachers (Roeser et al. 2012) and the movement to integrate MAPs into curricular areas such as social and emotional learning and health and physical education (Broderick 2013; Compassionate Schools Project 2015; Felver et al. 2013; Gueldner and Feuerborn 2015; Jennings et al. 2012). MAPs specifically developed for teachers may not only reduce teacher stress (Harris et al. 2015; Jennings et al. 2011; Jennings et al. 2013; Roeser et al. 2013; Schussler et al. 2015; Taylor et al. 2015) and improve performance (Jennings et al. 2015) but also prepare them with the skills required to present MAPs to students effectively (Jennings 2015; Schonert-Reichl et al. 2015). MAPs may help build the underlying capacities required to develop the social and emotional competencies as outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.). Furthermore, MAPs align well with the recently released CDC/ASCD Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child approach to health and physical education (Lewallen et al. 2015) and integrating MAPs may bring new interest and energy to this curricular area as well.

It is critical to the success of the mindfulness in education movement that MAPs delivered in public educational settings conscientiously avoid any elements that are associated with religious and/or spiritual language, trappings, and belief. As the field grows and develops, educators are finding ways to ensure that MAPs are completely secular, based on the most current evidence and introduced in ways that fit the needs and the context of educational settings.

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