

SCHOOLS USE YOGA TO HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP

Yoga

BUILDING BODY



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The room is 81 degrees.

Thirty Webster Thomas boys varsity lacrosse players lay on mats during the 45minute yoga session with instructor Erica Denman, whose fancy title this year for the Webster School District is “instructional specialist exploring mindfulness.”

But right now, in this moment, Denman has heard enough.

She has heard too many audible groans after asking the boys to get into the type of poses that happen in most yoga classes, ones that stretch their muscles and ones they’ve all done before this spring. In a firm but quiet tone, Denman calmly stops class.

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Webster Thomas lacrosse players Spencer Nuccitelli, left, and Matt Hill take part in a team yoga class. Erica Denman, who has been certified in yoga for 12 years, works with teams in the Webster School District.

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SPRING. DENMAN CALMLY STOPS CLASS.
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“How you show up here is how you show up there,” she says, meaning the playing field. “It’s how you show up in class. It’s how you show up in your relationships.” Class resumes at Balance Yoga & Fitness in Webster. Barely a peep is heard the rest of the session. Webster is among several suburban districts in the Rochester area using yoga and mindfulness to help students, athletes and faculty cope with stress, manage their emotions and be better to themselves and others. They’re learning to take what they hear and feel and think in those quiet moments and incorporate it with the rest of their lives. “They always say the game is 90 percent mental but no one ever really teaches you how to handle things like dealing with your emotions during a game or when you’re losing by a lot, how do you gather up the strength to push through a game?” Webster Schroeder lacrosse player Emma Dear says before her team’s session with Denman, 43, who taught English for 17 years and opened Balance about four years ago. “You don’t realize how important it is and how much it really helps you,” Dear says. Vickie Curry, a teacher at Webster’s Spry Middle

School, had been doing some mindfulness and meditation work in the district in recent years. But when the idea came in front of the school board last year to make it a fulltime position there was plenty of support. Denman has been certified in yoga for 12 years. “Stress levels for people were ballooning and we needed to address that,” says Webster superintendent Carmen Gumina, who has practiced yoga for years. “The impact this has had has gone above and beyond any expectation I had. I attribute that to Erica, her ability to connect with so many coaches and kids.” Gumina says parents have told him their son or daughter has come home and talked with the entire family at the dinner table about what they learned during a yoga session when it’s not just Denman talking. The kids and coaches also interact. Her work isn’t just confined to the kids who compete on the field and court, either. She might be in an AP Physics class in the morning on the same day she spends an afternoon with Schroeder coach Kali Watkins’ football team, one of the first squads she worked with even before she was hired. “I think the overarching concept is getting comfortable being uncomfortable, you know?” Denman says, before adding, “sometimes life is really not comfortable and here’s how we deal with that.”

There are different and even greater challenges for many kids in the Rochester City School District, but the impact a secondyear program at Wilson Magnet has had on about two dozen students has been profound. Assistant principals Denise Quamina and Dave Passero started it during the 201516 school year in an effort to modify disturbing behavioral trends they were seeing. “When I started doing yoga all the anger, it releases,” says Wilson sophomore Amarria Howard, who had trouble with getting into fights but is now a shining example of being mindful of herself and others. “That’s why I come here, to release my anger and my stress and stuff like that.”

Howard hasn’t gotten into any fights this year. “None. Zero,” Quamina says with a smile. “She knows how to come and find people to help her out. She will go to people now and cool down.”

If she’s feeling agitated, Howard has learned to walk away, find the school social worker and then, as she says, “just breathe.” Then, when she’s ready, she’ll go to Quamina’s office and “talk if she wants to and if she doesn’t want to talk,” says Quamina, a native of Trinidad, “that’s fine too.”

Howard has even sought out Joan Nichols, the yoga instructor who Wilson brings in to teach the students who chose to take the class, for more tools to help her beyond their 45-minute sessions every other day.

“We are teaching kids a way of conduct, which is a way of self-checking,” Nichols says. “Who and how am I being in this moment? Is this where I want to stay? And then there’s a choice, yes or no?”

Nichols has taught yoga for 17 years, including 14 in local schools. She also now teaches a mindfulness class as an adjunct professor at St. John Fisher College. She owns Inspire Yoga in Penfield.

What about all those yoga poses, also called asanas? They were designed, Nichols says, as a way to foster being still and staying in the moment.

Slowing yourself down, Howard says, is helpful.

“If you’re getting bullied or if you’ve been having fights this could help ... you go to yoga and it’s like your mind is in a whole other place,” she says. “It’s like you’re just thinking about calming yourself down.”

Self — it’s an important part of yoga. In the quiet of the room, even if you’re surrounded by others, it should feel very self-reflective because those practicing yoga or variations of it are asked to be present with their own thoughts.

“Yoga has definitely taught me one thing that I’m very, very grateful for and that’s putting myself first,” says Wilson junior Luul Jeylani.

That doesn’t mean be less cognizant of others, she says. But now she feels empowered.

Now she makes sure to ask herself, “how I’m feeling and ... not having to depend on someone else asking,” the 16-yearold says.

“I stop thinking about the stress of the day,” says Wilson sophomore Mohamud Sheikh, and may include the geometry class that follows a Qigong session.

Qigong is the Chinese martial art Paul Schramm teaches the boys at Wilson (the girls do yoga). Qigong is basically meditation and health-related exercises or calisthenics pulled out of martial arts, says Schramm, a Wilson graduate.

There are 18 variations of push-ups, stretching your hips and core while loosening and lengthening your spine, hamstring and calf muscles. It’s helped Sheikh be a more explosive jumper as a soccer goalkeeper, he says. While it’s also helped Giovonny Kennedy-Clark in football, basketball and lacrosse, the Wilson freshman says it’s helped him become mentally stronger, too. “People think (practicing martial arts) is fighting and it’s not,” Kennedy-Clark says. “It’s about mastering your inner self and trying to be OK with your surroundings ... but you have to control yourself first.”

Qigong has helped him learn different relaxation techniques and helped him confront problems calmly. Schramm says Kennedy-Clark, like many, was curious at first but also cautious. “He didn’t see the value of what we were doing,” says Schramm, who has taught martial arts for 20 years.

Like yoga, a strong mind is key to Qigong (pronounced KEY-gong). The word “can’t” is forbidden from Schramm’s class. “You’ll never learn anything if you’re constantly telling yourself you can’t,” he says. One thing Webster Thomas boys lacrosse coach Rob Ruller has focused on personally — and with his team — is understanding not to focus on things you can’t control in a game, be it the officials or the weather. “What we’re learning do to,” he says during a brief pause in their most recent yoga session with Denman, “is cope with them, understand it and stay focused on your task. Embrace the challenge of staying focused on your task.” Denman has worked with Webster teams in hockey, football, softball, basketball, lacrosse, soccer, track and cross country. How many sessions is up to the coach. Some may be once a week, others a couple times a month. Thomas boys lacrosse has done four sessions this spring. Junior midfielder Matt Hill says it did sound odd earlier this spring to say his team was going to do yoga first and then practice. But he knows it is becoming more popular.

“It’s not as ‘out there’ anymore,” Hill says. Ruller has practiced yoga for several years. He also knew that if a bigtime college football coach such as Urban Meyer of Ohio State could incorporate yoga during runs to national championships, as Meyer did at Florida, “why can’t we?” he says.

The veteran coach admits that he was worried whether his players would buy in. They have, though.

“This has really helped me,” says senior defenseman Joe Carey.

He’s an emotional player so now instead of “freaking out,” if a teammate makes a mistake he says he tries to look at the big picture. “What are we trying to accomplish and is this (reaction) going to help?” Carey says. “You want to be the person that helps, not hurts.” First-year Schroeder girls lacrosse coach Bryan Hanley, who earned All-Greater Rochester coach of the year honors in the fall for girls golf, also has seen a change in his squad. “From the beginning of the season we’re much stronger now than we were in March.” he says, “and that’s really what you’re hoping for as a coach.”

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Yoga instructor Erica Denman, center, works with the Webster Thomas boys lacrosse team at Balance Yoga & Fitness in Webster.

JAMIE GERMANO/ @JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Joan Nichols, right, who has taught yoga for 17 years, works with a small group of students at Wilson Magnet.

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Amarria Howard



Luul Jeylani



Giovary Kennedy-Clark

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