

Mindfulness-Based Intervention in Chicago Public Schools

“Mindfulness is an effective tool for supporting whole-child development — mental well-being as well as the skills necessary for engaging in learning. This is helpful for all children in the early years of schooling, but meets a dire need for students who experience toxic stress or trauma in their lives. It creates a sense of community and validation that their teacher is allowing time for the ‘curriculum of me.’ ”

— Amanda Moreno, Ph.D., principal investigator of the project

Erikson Institute is the first in the nation to examine whether mindfulness exercises can improve academic performance for children in the early grades. Funded primarily by a prestigious \$2.5 million U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, the study will, over the course of four years, reach 2,000 students in Chicago Public Schools classrooms that serve primarily low-income children of color. Erikson is also partnering with the Luster Learning Institute, designers of the Calm Classroom™ program, and Chapin Hall from the University of Chicago, which will conduct the independent evaluation to determine the program’s impact on children, classrooms, and schools.

Responding to a Need

Mastery of self-regulation skills — the ability to manage emotions and impulses — during the early years of schooling has been shown to be as important, if not more, to long-term academic competence than intelligence. Additionally, younger children are increasingly experiencing high levels of trauma, unpredictability, and toxic stress, thus arriving at school with tendencies to either act out or disengage, rather than being ready to participate productively in the classroom community and learn. Recent research in the area of toxic stress in young children has shown that common, moderately stressful circumstances associated with socioeconomic disadvantage have deep, biological consequences for children, such as smaller brain size.

Quick Facts

- The **prestigious \$2.5 million federal i3 grant** is funding a four-year project to help 2,000 Chicago Public Schools students in kindergarten through 2nd grade manage stress, build self-regulation skills, and focus on learning.
- Erikson’s grant proposal was the **highest-ranked** in the country involving social-emotional learning.
- Teachers are trained to lead **daily mindfulness exercises** and use a **social-emotional learning vocabulary**.
- The project is studying whether mindfulness **reduces stress** in students and teachers, **improves academic performance**, and **improves the interpersonal climate** of the classroom.

Erikson's Unique Approach

Mindfulness is not only unique relative to traditional social-emotional learning programs, but Erikson has added elements designed to tailor our program to the unique needs of children during the seismic developmental shift that coincides with the early years of formal schooling. Although the project is multi-faceted, it is easily integrated into daily curriculum and does not require teachers to master specific subject matter.

Components of the project include:

- Class-wide daily mindfulness exercises, such as guided breathing with eyes closed, stretching, yoga-inspired poses, “body scan” visualizations, focus on external objects, and “social mindfulness” exercises with classmates.
- A “Calm Spot” app used as a “brain break” up to four times a day that guides children through relaxing, nature-based imagery.
- Erikson-led “Calm Community” sessions aimed at helping children apply mindfulness at home and in their communities.
- Regular “Parent Nights” during which parents learn how to incorporate mindfulness at home and can share challenges they are facing with their children.

What is the Impact?

The project is expected to improve a child's self-regulation, attention, engagement in school, and academic performance. In addition, the program is expected to improve interpersonal relationships, reduce behavioral issues in classrooms, and also reduce stress and improve job satisfaction for teachers. Although the project is in its early stages and data results are not yet available, it was developed according to U.S. Department of Education criteria for “strong theory” and “evidence of promise.” The project is being evaluated using a cluster-randomized controlled trial, which is known to provide the highest standard of rigor in educational research.

Dr. Moreno says that educators cannot expect to close the achievement gap by addressing only *what* children learn. Nurturing the social-emotional well-being of students inside school walls every single day is not simply a nice notion, but a practice that pays back in dividends ten-fold, allowing children to be more attentive, engaged, and productive in the classroom community.

Looking Ahead

Currently, Dr. Moreno and her team are evaluating initial findings and lessons learned from the first school year of the project and will make appropriate adjustments to the project for subsequent years.