

More schools try yoga despite religious controversy



Credit: Kent Johnson

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Kindergarten students at Bob Mathis Elementary School do yoga with instructor Sedef Dion earlier this month. Students at the school in DeKalb County get yoga as part of their unstructured time during the day. Administrators and teachers say their students exposed to yoga are more focused, and some students themselves have found it helps with their classwork. A small but growing number of metro Atlanta schools have embraced yoga, though it triggered litigation in Cobb County, where a lawsuit says Christian parents at one school complained that it endorses a non-Christian belief system. KENT D. JOHNSON / AJC

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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Despite a backlash by some parents against yoga in a Cobb County elementary school, the ancient Eastern practice has been quietly embraced as a teaching aid by other metro Atlanta school districts.

A federal lawsuit says Christian parents pressured Cobb leaders to rid Bullard Elementary School of yoga, triggering an administrative sanction against the employee who introduced it to the school.

Research about yoga's effect on students is inconclusive, yet a growing number of principals and teachers are drawn to its promise for calming the mind, and are experimenting with it as a way to reduce classroom disruption and help students concentrate.

"They need a way, a trained way, to eliminate all that stress," said Estella Cook, the principal of Sandtown Middle School in Fulton County. "I see this as a way to help them."

Sandtown's science teacher recently got certified as an instructor in the ancient art, which seeks presence of mind — “mindfulness” — through physical poses, focused breathing and, typically, chanting. She has become a physical education teacher and next fall will teach yoga full-time at the school.

She earned her yoga credential from Cheryl Crawford, a yoga instructor with a show about yoga on an Atlanta-based cable station, The AIB Network. Crawford, a founder of [Grounded Kids Yoga](#), said she has introduced yoga into a couple of dozen schools without blowback from parents, despite the hullabaloo in Cobb.

In Cobb, Bonnie Cole, a former assistant principal at Bullard Elementary, seeks monetary damages, maintaining she is a Christian, the yoga she brought to the school was not religious and her transfer to a lower-performing school farther from her house dimmed her career prospects. Her attorney, Edward Buckley, said in an interview that administrators put Cole “out of circulation in her own community” and “it is absolutely apparent that the religious attacks on Ms. Cole reached such a fever pitch that they felt they needed to do something.”

Christian parents held a prayer rally on campus "for Jesus to rid the school of Buddhism," and laid hands on her office window, [Cole's federal lawsuit](#) says.

Crawford, a former elementary school teacher in Fulton County, said such opposition is rare, but she also insists that participation should always be voluntary.

She left teaching while pregnant with triplets two decades ago, and got into yoga for back pain. She started teaching it to kids and eventually was invited into Fernbank Elementary School in DeKalb County. She's documented her sessions at Fernbank and other schools for her AIB show, [Yippee ki-yay Namaste](#) (some [episodes](#) on YouTube).

The Cobb County School District isn't commenting about the lawsuit. The district's [answer to the lawsuit](#) says no violation of Cole's federal rights could have occurred since, by her own admission, she was not engaged in the protected activity of religious expression.

Yoga has roots in Hinduism that go back thousands of years, but the practice in the United States is typically reduced to a physical and meditative activity. Jonathan R. Herman, who teaches about religion at Georgia State University, said it's often seen as a spiritual but not a religious practice. “It's a way of being religious in modern America while being ostensibly anti-religion.” He also said it's been characterized as religion “flying under the radar.”

That's the trouble, in the view of some who worry about it in schools on religious grounds.

“The problem is that yoga is inseparable from its religious roots, both Hindu and Buddhist,” said Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “so the introduction of yoga in any context is actually the introduction of Hindu and Buddhist concepts.” If yoga has the desired effect of calming the mind, then it is having a spiritual effect with a “theological consequence,” he said. “If it's spiritual, then it is religious.”

He said the concern is that Christian practitioners are supplanting their faith with the religion embedded in yoga. And, he said, public schools are violating the constitutional wall between church and state by embracing yoga.

Despite the theological debate and potential legal issues, some metro Atlanta school leaders have cautiously embraced yoga as a teaching tool and say they have met with little or no local objection.

Steve Green, the superintendent of the DeKalb County School District, said teachers tell him it helps their students regulate mood and temperament.

"If it helps our children in some way, I'm very much in favor of it," he said in an interview in early May. A couple weeks later, he appeared on Crawford's show, doing yoga with students at Druid Hills Middle School and giving an [on camera interview](#) in which he said he knew little about yoga and was there to learn. "I've heard about the benefits of it and I experienced it," he said, adding that it could help students focus.

Bob Mathis elementary school principal, Dawn Blackwell, introduced yoga into her Cobb County school to calm down disruptive student

Research into yoga's effects on students' bodies and behavior has produced mixed results.

One study found a reduction in concentrations of the stress hormone cortisol and a small uptick in academic performance, but other studies have found both positive and negative effects on behavior.

Catherine Cook-Cottone, a licensed psychologist who wrote the new book "[Mindfulness and Yoga in Schools: A Guide for Teachers and Practitioners](#)," teaches at the University at Buffalo Graduate School of Education and has reviewed the research. She attributes the unclear results to the difficulty of conducting a controlled experiment in a chaotic school environment. She said more research is needed to say anything conclusive about yoga's ability to affect learning.

Educators are evaluating yoga on their own.

"I have done yoga outside the school, so I know the techniques work," said Dawn Blackwell, the principal at Bob Mathis Elementary School in DeKalb. "It calms me down."

She brought Crawford to her school, first as a gift to teachers, who got their own session. Nearly all of them then asked Blackwell to bring it into their classrooms. Crawford found philanthropic dollars to pay for a year of yoga lessons for students.

Blackwell said out-of-school suspensions have dropped slightly from the prior year, from 16 to 13, and she assumes yoga is at least partially responsible. She said she's heard nothing but support from parents.

Nisaa Abdullah, who has several grandchildren and great grandchildren there, said her grandson, in third grade, has been "a little calmer" and "little more focused" on chores and school work since he started yoga last fall. Her granddaughter, in second grade, talks less in class and her math grades improved substantially, she said.

Crawford sent an instructor to Vivian Florence's kindergarten classroom on a recent morning. She started the kids with steady breathing and closed eyes before transitioning to more energetic work that involved hands, knees and, sometimes, wiggling.

Florence, the teacher, said her students also get yoga when the instructor is not there for the weekly visits. Each day, Florence leads them herself in brief sessions between subjects. "It's giving them a little bit more focus, I think."

Darren Calhoun, 6, a boy with eyeglasses, short hair and a Ninja Turtles hoodie, said yoga "has changed me for like being quiet and doing my homework. I can focus more."

Aniya Richardson, 5, in pigtails and a jean jacket with “Mickey Mouse” stitched into it, said her favorite move was what the instructor had called the “oompa loompa,” which involved an unzipping motion across the lips with abrupt laughter, then a zip back, and silence.

Aniya’s mom, Trisa Richardson, who teaches fifth grade there, said Aniya does yoga at home on her own sometimes. When she gets in trouble and is sent to her room, she assumes a pose, holding her thumbs to pinkies, elbows akimbo.

When Richardson looks in on her, she hears, “I’m breathing, mom.”

She said she doesn’t see yoga as religious, though she added, “I guess it could be a spiritual thing.”