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Calming techniques ease tensions, cut suspensions

Mind, body focus pays off at Gompers

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BY ROSALIND ROSSI AND ART GOLAB Staff Reporters

With his principal's lilting voice leading the way over the public address system, 10-year-old Jahriel Dennis presses his palms together, Buddha-style, and closes his eyes.

Daily, yoga-like "Calm Classroom" exercises have begun at Gompers School.

Inhaling deeply, Jahriel is oblivious to the classmates around him. Exhaling slowly, serenity washes over his face.

Though only a fifth-grader, Jahriel can sense the benefits of this schoolwide ritual of deep breathing and stretching, all while kids are seated at their desks.

"It brings our blood pressure down and everything," Jahriel says of the "Calm Classroom" exercises. "It calms you down."

"Calming" exercises are just one innovation folks at Gompers say took root last school year -- when Jahriel was in fourth grade -- and helped Gompers reduce fourth-grade suspensions, which had been the Chicago public school's most troublesome.

Principal Melody Seaton can't help but believe the behavioral changes such exercises helped instill is one reason Gompers' elementary-level test scores soared last school year.

The West Pullman school of 99 percent African American and 99 percent low-income students vaulted over 438 other schools with elementary grades, coming in 1,595 statewide in the Sun-Times elementary rankings. Its jump in rank was the sixth biggest among the city's neighborhood schools.

And even at No. 1,595, Gompers outranked much more affluent schools in Bolingbrook, Wheeling and Oak Forest, based on its average fourth- and fifth-grade reading and math score.

Gompers' knockout elementary improvement on April's Illinois Standards Achievement Tests followed special attention last year to the school's entry-level fourth grade.

Concerned about rising fourth-grade misbehavior the year before, Seaton pooled together every penny she could find to buy an extra fourth-grade teacher last school year. That let class sizes shrink almost in half, from just around 30 to around 15 -- a financial impossibility this year.

Even today, fifth-grader Sydney Waite remembers the difference: "With less kids, the teacher could get to you right away."

Perhaps as important, Seaton said, she moved seasoned teachers to fourth, and gave both fourth- and fifth-grade teachers special training on the way kids of different ages -- rather than different grades -- learn. An Erikson Institute consultant provided help using a book about the hallmarks of different ages, called *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14*.

"We got a little smarter," said Seaton, a serene, mellow-voiced presence who also serves as associate pastor at a South Holland church. "We realized students were coming to us from a different setting, coming into what is a middle school, and it's a transition, and we had not really considered that there's a need for dealing with that."

In fourth grade, "some kids are 8 when they come to us, some are 9, and some are even 10," Seaton said. "We just said, 'OK, it's fourth grade, we have [fourth-grade learning] standards, so go teach.' But Erikson taught us how to do that by covering what kids liked at that age."

Yardsticks shed light on everything from why one fourth-grader told a teacher, "I cut my finger, I can't work today" (Yardsticks' translation: 9-year-olds complain of, and sometimes exaggerate, physical hurts) to the fact that 8-year-olds work best in groups, while 9-year-olds like to work with partners.

Academically, teachers also credit a new cross-curricular push of weekly reading strategies. When "summarization" was the reading focus of the week, everyone from art to gym teachers were asked to emphasize it.

Plus, several attempts to address the "whole child" also may have paid off.

Kids now look forward to a new After School Matters program, begun two years ago, that gives them a half-hour of homework help, followed by 1½ hours of sports. And right around the same time, physical education

teacher Dean Refakes began organizing sports for kids during the half-hour before school starts. That's why last week, student backpacks laid in a lump in the middle of Gompers asphalt playlot as Refakes played quarterback during a morning multi-age touch football game.

Fourth-grader Germaine Long says morning football represents one of his few chances to play sports. His mom won't let him stay after school most days because "it gets dark outside . . . with criminals outside and everything."

Germaine also enjoys Gompers' "Calm Classroom" exercises. His teacher uses them to focus kids after gym class because "after gym, your heart is beating. This calms you down."

If a class gets too loud, some kids actually ask teachers to start the exercises.

"If children need to settle down because an argument broke out and everyone is excited, instead of screaming at them to calm down, why not teach them to calm down?" Seaton said.

It's "50-50" as to who has benefitted most--kids or teachers, Seaton said. One teacher credits the exercises with her blood pressure improvement.

"Some of us were wound up. We didn't realize how much," Seaton said.

By the second year of the "Calm Classroom" program from the Luster Institute, suspensions plummeted in every grade -- fourth through eighth -- but especially in once-problematic fourth grade.

"Last year we really began to see the effect," said Seaton. "That's when people said, 'This isn't going anywhere. It's here to stay.' "

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