Mindfulness in Schools: A Brief for Educators

What it is, what the evidence says, eight short practices with scripts and an implementation checklist

For: Teachers, counselors and school leaders

What classroom mindfulness is

Classroom mindfulness means short, structured practices that train students to notice what is happening right now, inside and around them, without reacting immediately. It is attention training. Within the CASEL framework it mainly supports self-awareness (noticing thoughts, feelings and body sensations) and self-management (regulating them).

It **is**: brief (one to five minutes), secular, optional and repeated at the same transition.

It **is not**: a behavior-management tool, a form of therapy, or a guaranteed route to calmer classrooms or higher test scores.

What the evidence says

Study	What it found
Meta-analysis, 33 randomized trials, 3,666 children and adolescents (Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2019)	Small effects (d = .16 to .30) on mindfulness, executive functioning, attention, depression, anxiety and stress, and negative behavior. Against active comparison programs, only mindfulness, depression and anxiety and stress effects remained.
Updated meta-analysis, 66 randomized trials, 20,138 participants (Evidence-Based Mental Health, 2022)	Effects of d = 0.12 to 0.35 against passive controls; against active controls only anxiety and stress (d = 0.11) and mindfulness (d = 0.24). No significant effects at follow-up. Authors called the evidence low quality and inconclusive.
MYRIAD cluster randomized trial, 85 schools, 8,376 students in the final analysis (Evidence-Based Mental Health, 2022)	After one year, no difference from teaching as usual on risk for depression, social-emotional-behavioral functioning or wellbeing. No intervention-related adverse events.

Takeaway: Mindfulness produces small, short-term gains in attention and stress tolerance, especially compared with doing nothing. It is not a universal mental health program. Use it as a classroom tool, keep it short and voluntary, and measure locally.

Eight short practices with scripts

Read slowly. Where you see "pause," count silently to three. Always offer "close your eyes or look softly at your desk."

1. Belly breathing buddy (K-2, 90 seconds) "Put your buddy on your belly. Breathe in slowly and watch it rise. Pause. Breathe out and watch it fall. Pause. Four more times. If your mind wanders, come back to your buddy."

2. Listening to the chime (K-2, 1 minute) "When you hear the sound, listen until it is completely gone. When you cannot hear it anymore, put your hand on your heart." Ring once. Wait. "Let's try once more and hear it even longer."

3. Spot five things (K-5, 2 minutes, eyes open) "Look around slowly. Find five things that are blue. Pause. Four things that are soft. Pause. Three things that make a sound. Pause. Thumbs up when you feel ready to learn."

4. Box breathing (3-5, 2 minutes) "Trace a square. Breathe in for four up the side. Hold for four across the top. Out for four down the side. Hold for four across the bottom. Four squares together, then two on your own."

5. Weather report check-in (3-8, 2 minutes) "If your feelings right now were weather, what would they be? Sunny, cloudy, stormy, foggy? You don't have to change it. Just notice. Weather changes on its own. Write one word on your card or keep it in your mind."

6. STOP practice (6-12, 1 minute) "Stop. Take one slow breath. Observe: what are you thinking, feeling, what is your body doing? Name it silently. Proceed: choose your next action on purpose."

7. Pre-test grounding (6-12, 60 seconds) "Feet flat on the floor. Feel your weight in the chair. Breathe in through the nose, longer out through the mouth. Again. Let your jaw and shoulders drop. One more breath. Begin when you're ready."

8. Open awareness of sound (6-12, 3 minutes, eyes open or closed) "Let your attention rest on sounds. The furthest sound. Pause. The closest. Pause. Sounds inside the room, outside. Don't name them; hear them arrive and fade. When you drift into thinking, come back to the next sound."

Scheduling guide

Grade band	Length	Best moments
K-2	1-2 minutes	After arrival, after recess, before story time
3-5	2-4 minutes	Start of day, after lunch, before assessments
6-8	2-4 minutes	Start of period, before group work, before tests
9-12	1-5 minutes	Before assessments, after heavy content, end of week

Attach the practice to a fixed transition. Keep it shorter than feels necessary. Run it when the room is already reasonably calm.

Opt-out and neutrality rules

- Use plain language: breathing, noticing, attention, focus. No chanting, mantras, hand positions or spiritual vocabulary.
- Tell families in writing before you start: what, how long, voluntary, and the alternative.
- The alternative happens silently in the same room: reading, drawing or sitting quietly. No forms, no explanation.
- Never require closed eyes.
- Offer eyes-open, externally anchored practices (sounds, five things, stretching) for students who find inward attention distressing. Watch for students who become more agitated and offer them a different tool.
- Never use a practice as a consequence for misbehavior.

Measuring locally

- Time how long the class takes to be ready to work after a transition, before and after you start.
- Collect an anonymous one-to-five stress rating before tests.
- For program evaluation by a counselor or psychologist, the Child and Adolescent Mindfulness Measure (CAMM) is a validated 10-item self-report questionnaire for school-aged children and adolescents.
- Ask students monthly: Did you use any of this outside class? Which practice helped most? What would you change?

Implementation checklist

- [ ] Practiced each script myself for two weeks
- [ ] Informed families and administrator in writing, including the opt-out
- [ ] Taught the quiet alternative before the first practice
- [ ] Chose one practice and one fixed transition
- [ ] Chose one indicator to track for a month before and after
- [ ] Ran the practice daily for two weeks before judging it
- [ ] Reviewed results after a month: keep, adjust or drop
- [ ] Added a second practice only once the first was routine

Common mistakes

- Running practices only when the class is out of control.
- Scripts that are too long or too fast. Silence is the content.
- Promising reduced anxiety or better scores.
- Requiring closed eyes or stillness.
- Adopting a packaged whole-school curriculum on the strength of its marketing rather than its trial results.

Sources

- Dunning et al., Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2019: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30345511/
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- Kuyken et al., MYRIAD trial, Evidence-Based Mental Health, 2022: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35820992/
- Greco, Baer and Smith, CAMM, Psychological Assessment, 2011: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21480722/
- Full toolkit: transformingeducation.org/resources/mindfulness-toolkit/

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