

In This High School, There's No Time Like the Present

BY CHUCK WILBANKS

This was not your typical ribbon cutting ceremony. A New York City High School Principal, a high-ranking DOE official and several officials from an array of non-profit organizations walked into a softly lighted room. Each switched off their cellphones and found seats on a circle of cushions, where they focused on their breath and allowed their minds to quiet. The session lasted for several tranquil minutes, under the gentle direction of a teacher trained in mindfulness meditation. As the lights went back up, the mood in the room was palpably calmer, with many smiling faces.

The group class was an unexpectedly welcome part of the official opening for the new John Adams High School meditation room, located in what was once a basement drama center in the Queens Community School. For several years, John Adams cycled through more than one dire list of troubled schools, only to emerge with a clean bill of health in June. While that's not totally the result of meditation classes, an emphasis on quiet reflection certainly hasn't hurt.

The program and room is the brainchild of Assistant Principal Dr. Scott Silverman, a longtime practitioner of meditation himself. "I see a lot of stress, whether it's from family issues, problems with friends, or problems at school," he said. "This is to help people reflect. The average teenage brain is very reactive, and meditation can help spread out the time between an event and a reaction so they can more accurately size up situations. It's OK to feel angry but it's how we act on those feelings that is important."

Dr. Silverman said the room will have several purposes, including as an alternative, calming place for restorative justice meetings and group counseling sessions. He thanked District Superintendent Michael Alcoff and Principal Dan Scanlon for helping make the project a reality.

Principal Scanlon noted that when Dr. Silverman approached him with the idea of a dedicated space for meditation, he jumped on board immediately. But in his own mindful way, Scanlon said, he realized that inside he was skeptical. "Even though I was saying 'Go for it,' I wasn't



PHOTOS BY CHUCK WILBANKS

■ **Left:** Dr. Scott Silverman discusses mindfulness after a short class for visitors in John Adams High School's new meditation room. **Right:** Principal Daniel Scanlon, Global Kids Site Director Justine Ouano, David Lynch Foundation's Adam Friedman, Community Schools Director Chris Caruso, Dr. Silverman, and Global Kids Executive Director Evie Hantzopoulos.

sure how effective it was going to be," he said. "That was my mindset." Now, Mr. Scanlon said, he has seen the proof of how effective meditation has been in helping students stay calm and centered.

In addition to Dr. Silverman, two teachers – Brendan Walsh and Meg Clare – also provide mindfulness instruction. Both teach PE and health classes and currently conduct six mindfulness courses. Mr. Walsh, who led the meditation, described how it helped him in his own life. "This is a special gift that we can share with students," he said. "Mindfulness doesn't solve our problems, but it helps control our relationships to our problems. Feelings are not facts."

Global Kids, the Community-Based organization and non-profit partner in the project, has six full-time and two part-time staff members in two offices at the school providing, among other programs, mental health services, academic enrichment, parent and attendance outreach and

afterschool programs.

Evie Hantzopoulos, the group's executive director, said Global Kids picked up the \$19,000 tab to renovate the room, which now sports bamboo floors, forest-colored wall paint, gentle lighting, soft music and several egg chairs that together provide a near cocoon of serene quiet. Other partners include the David Lynch Foundation, which supports the teaching of transcendental meditation, the local Home Depot, which donated lamps, and Col. Michael Licata, who heads the school's ROTC program. He lent a portable air conditioner.

"Community schools are about partnerships and that's what we are seeing today," said Chris Caruso, executive director of the DOE's Office of Community Schools. "Kids, to thrive, need academic help, but they also need emotional help. We know how important it is to pay attention to ourselves and to how we affect others. That's what this room is for."