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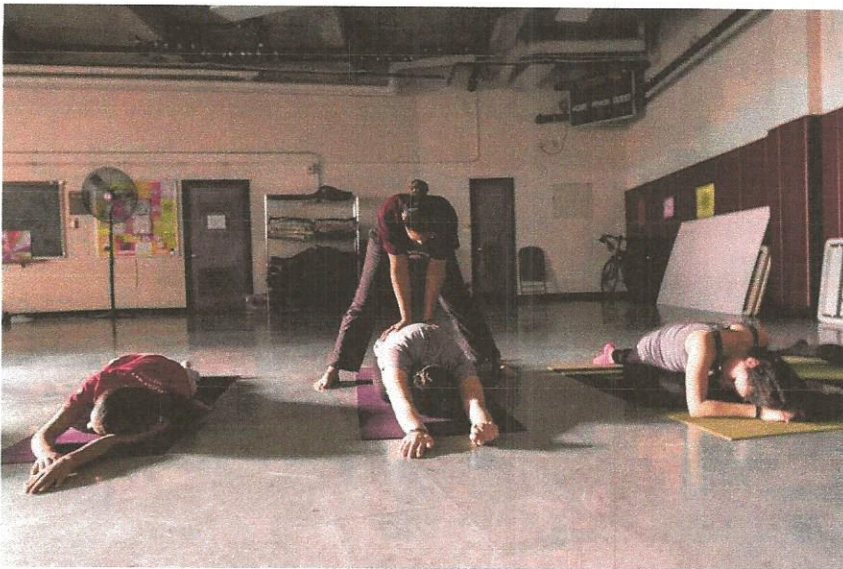
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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-rethink-health-class-incorporate-mindfulness-training-1431306596>

U.S. | NEW YORK | NY SCHOOLS

## Schools Rethink Health Class, Incorporate Mindfulness Training

Lectures on drugs and STDs are being replaced with sessions on life skills



Instructor Manisha Doran works with students at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **SOPHIA HOLLANDER**

May 10, 2015 9:09 p.m. ET

On a recent afternoon, Riverdale Country School students stretched in the dark, streaks of sunlight illuminating yoga mats and bowed heads. In gym class at the elite Bronx private school, monitors strapped to students' chests beamed their heart rates to display screens suspended from the ceiling. In a course on study habits, the class closed their eyes for a moment of guided meditation.

More independent schools are pushing to redefine what it means to teach health,

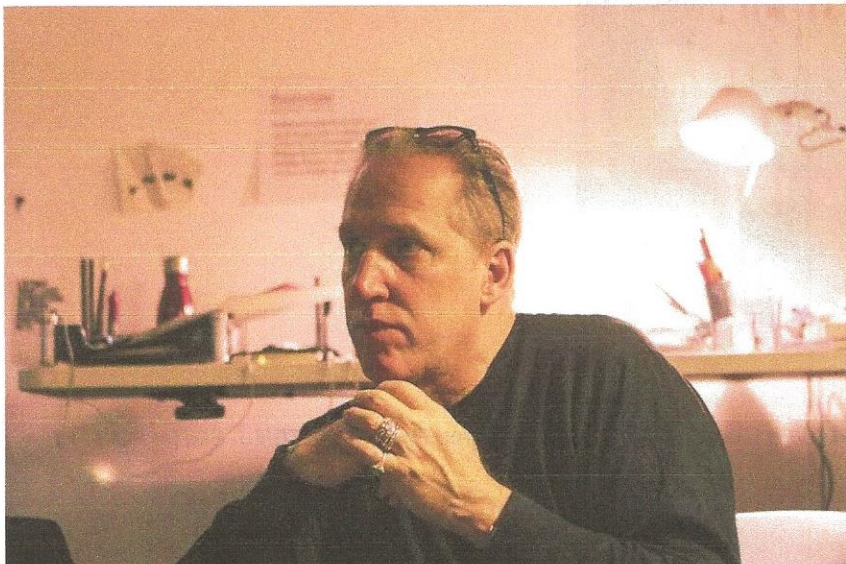


shattering the stereotype of awkward classes and squirming students.

Many New York schools are incorporating mindfulness training to help students handle stress and replacing lectures on drugs and sexually transmitted diseases with interactive sessions on life skills, such as communication and decision-making.

For a long time “the definition of success for our members was mainly focused on the academic part,” said Amada Torres, vice president for studies, insights and research at the National Association of Independent Schools. “But now the research is stressing the importance of developing these noncognitive skills.”

The National Association of Independent Schools conducted its first-ever survey this spring on health education among its members. While 85% of the schools surveyed called health and well-being an essential or high priority, only 41% described it as part of their school’s mission.



Dominic A.A. Randolph, head of school at Riverdale, says he has tried to reframe the teaching of health. *PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Unlike public schools in New York, there are no national or state standards specifically for private-school health instruction. The Independent School Health Association is now pushing the independent-schools group to adopt guidelines for approaching health, the way it has endorsed principles for other areas.

That includes a broader definition of health that moves beyond “sick or not sick” to include emotional, intellectual and social well-being, said Miguel Marshall, the



association's interim executive director.

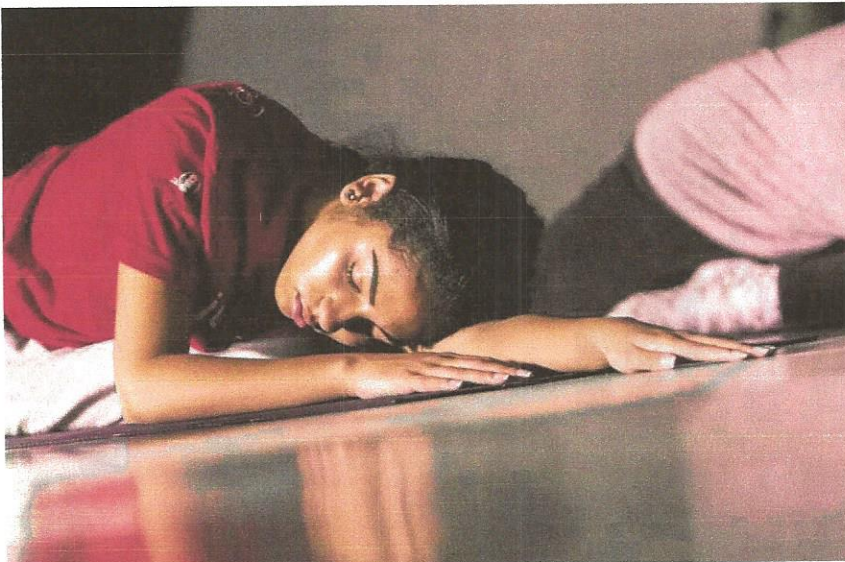
Traditionally, health education for independent schools has been “very much of a wild west,” said Ben Thompson, vice president of the health association. “A lot of times it was seen, in my view, as kind of a necessary evil.”

In the New York area, the push means private schools are rewriting curricula and providing healthier food at lunch, and some are investing heavily in new technology and facilities for health education.

At Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, starting in fifth grade, students have twice-weekly classes that incorporate mindfulness training, social justice, food politics and gender identity, in addition to more traditional health topics.

Teachers at Friends Seminary in Manhattan are expanding the health curriculum to include extended instruction on social action and social justice, as well as mandatory yoga and mindfulness classes for middle school.

At Grace Church downtown, middle schoolers will start taking three multiweek sessions on life skills, health and wellness, and community service.



Senior Amanda Chiles during yoga class at Riverdale. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Hackley, a private school in Westchester County, received an approximately \$49 million donation in 2012 that it is using to expand its wellness curriculum, build a new wellness center, hire a full-time wellness director and rework its health curriculum.



In the eight years since Dominic A.A. Randolph became head of school at Riverdale, he said he has tried to reframe what it means to teach health, encouraging teachers to weave wellness instruction through academic classes.

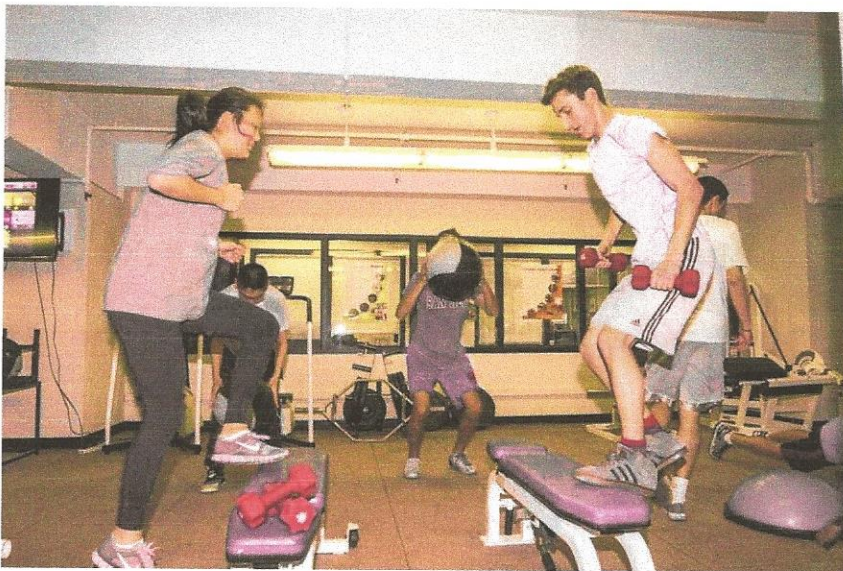
That means English classes sometimes begin with a moment of silence as part of a schoolwide push for mindfulness.

Riverdale also added daily recess for fourth- and fifth-graders. Officials eliminated trays at lunch after research showed that it leads to less food being wasted. And to widespread dismay, they dropped dessert three days a week.

“People are not happy about that,” Mr. Randolph said.

The changes haven’t come unchallenged. Some teachers worry longer recess will cut into their instruction time. Some students and teachers object to the increased meditations, which “they view as religion or spirituality,” said KC Cohen, middle and upper school counselor and co-director of the health program.

“I think what’s missing is people don’t really understand how much five minutes can center you,” she said.



Riverdale students use mindfulness techniques as they exercise. PHOTO: PETER J. SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ms. Cohen overhauled the health curriculum in the past few years. In seventh grade, students learn about communication—just as parties for bar and bas mitzvahs begin to ramp up social pressure. Eighth-grade health class covers traditional topics, like

addiction and anatomy, but also decision-making and how to build healthy relationships.

So far, changes like adding moments of silence before class have been voluntary, with faculty seminars and mindfulness sessions scheduled to introduce the ideas.

“People used to think the idea of going to a gym or running outside was absolutely ridiculous 100 years ago,” Ms. Cohen said. “Same thing with mindfulness.”

Health classes can still be uncomfortable, some Riverdale students said.

Caleb Jeanniton, a ninth-grader, said he didn’t take his eighth-grade health class seriously and resented that there was homework.

This year, he signed up for a class on mindfulness—despite some skepticism. “I had a very 1970s image of tie-dye and yoga mats and mullets and beards and stuff,” he said.

He said he was pleasantly surprised.

“What really intrigued me was the aspect of being able to have more control over your life,” Caleb said. “There’s a world full of things you can’t control.”

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