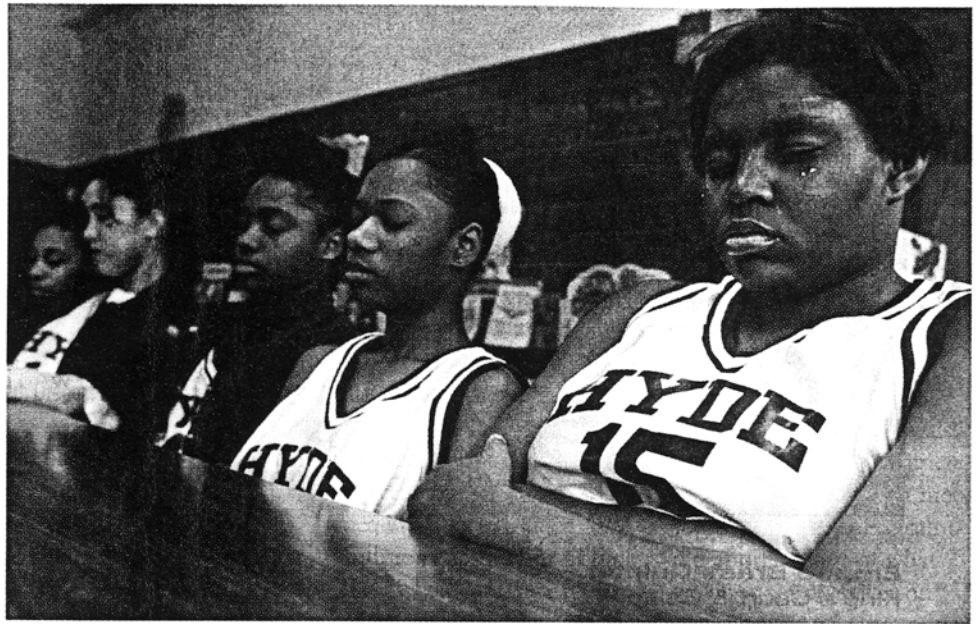


## Reading, Writing, and Relaxation

OK CLASS, HOW ABOUT A great big yawn. Just stretch your arms way up in the air and let your jaw drop. Feeling sleepy? That's OK; you learn better that way. Not long ago yawning was frowned on in class, but the Education Initiative—brainchild of Herbert Benson, M.D., and his staff at the Mind/Body Medical Institute—is changing all that.

Piloted three years ago in South Central Los Angeles, the Initiative has extended its quiet influence to high schools in Boston and Newark as well. The premise: Teach stressed-out teens to chill, using the relaxation response and other coping measures, and they'll not only do better in school, they'll be better equipped to stave off the pressures of the streets.

Here at Boston's Hyde Park High, the temperature outside is ten degrees, but students are basking in the sun, letting sand massage their toes. They stroll on the beach, alone but safe, watching waves toss pebbles and sailboats wash the sky. As part of this imagery journey, nurse-psychotherapist Eileen O'Connell has kids relax each muscle group, then focus on breath, inhal-



**Team spirit:** Students at Boston's Hyde Park High meditate before a basketball game.

ing peace, exhaling anxiety. Next, they imagine warmth and heaviness in their hands, and finally ask thoughts to float away like clouds. One student seems fast asleep, but later writes in her journal "I felt so good I just wanted to stay here."

"In this frame of mind," O'Connell tells her groggy class, "things you learn will stick like little pieces of Velcro." She assures them that this will help with the spelling bee, but talks of deeper effects too: walking away from fights, staying in school, coping with family. "This definitely helps me," confirms Jean Eugene, an ESL student. "If I stand up in church it helps me to speak. And it makes me feel comfortable before I take a

test." Other students talk of "pacing themselves," using mini-exercises to draw slow belly breaths or stretch into a yoga pose.

Weekly relaxation sessions take place in 15 classrooms at Hyde Park High, and soon a tranquil hush will descend on the ROTC and teen-parenting programs as well. Early findings from L.A., based on attendance sheets, indicate that students who study relaxation stay in school more often and have fewer incidents of suspension. As for teachers, three-day workshops are scheduled at the Mind/Body Institute this spring and fall to offer training in classroom exercises, self-guided relaxation, and solutions for classroom management.

Relaxation in urban schools does pose problems. How can you learn peace in a hostile or alienating envi-

ronment? How can you ask educators to volunteer when they already work at an emergency-room pace?

"Teachers have to make it a part of their own lives first," says secretary Marcia Chapin, who introduced biweekly meditation to teachers, administrators, even custodians at Hyde Park. A liaison for the Initiative, Chapin earmarked grant money for a staff retreat room, complete with aromatherapy, soft carpeting, and music.

One meditation regular, teacher Jane McGuckian, now plays taped exercises while taking attendance in her freshman English class. "I can't prove this," she laughs. "But I think it makes them feel cared for."

—Sarah Goodman

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