

BLUE ZONES

“If you're happy, if you're feeling good, then nothing else matters.” – Robin Wright

Wellness classes at New Beginnings bring in new element of well-being

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Blue Zones Project-Southwest Florida

Panther, oyster, starfish, volcano, eagle, cobra, downward dog, and lizard lunge. These are names students and staff at New Beginnings are hearing more often these days and it's not to learn about nature and animals.

Instead, these are the names of breathing techniques and stretching poses that instructor, Julie Frizzi uses to help them become more in tune with their body, down shift and learn more about themselves and life.

Part of Collier County Public Schools (CCPS), New Beginnings is in Immokalee and Naples, and is an alternative school program designed to accelerate the academic progress and develop positive social skills in students grades 1-8 who have committed zero tolerance offenses and/or been significantly disruptive to the education of others and themselves.

“It provides a highly structured learning environment similar to a JROTC program, where students have opportunities to be promoted in rank, and to become good citizens,” said Dr. Cynthia M. Janssen, Principal of Alternative Schools.

“The program helps students become both willing and able to meet the behavioral and social expectations of society and the traditional schools.”

Recently, New Beginnings has adopted bi-weekly breathing and stretching classes taught by Julie Frizzi, children's book author, Blue Zones Project wellness champion, yoga instructor, and district school counselor with CCPS. Powerful stretches, breathing exercises, and positive self-talk are all part of the



New Beginning students hold a Warrior One pose with Instructor Julie Frizzi. PHOTO COURTESY OF COLLIER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

class that are helping students in many ways.

“There are many stress factors that are relieved when students engage in Mrs. Frizzi's classes,” says Dr. Janssen. “The students are learning breathing techniques that increase their ability to

deal with any stress-related incident and when the stretching movements are practiced with sincerity, it helps the blood flow and allows the mind and body to focus.”

A 2010 randomized controlled trial published in Journal of Abnormal Child

Psychology studied the effects of a 12-week mindful yoga program on fourth- and fifth-graders in underserved, urban communities who are at risk for a range of negative outcomes related to stress,

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Classes

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including social-emotional difficulties, behavior problems, and poor academic performance. It found that the mindful movements led to “significant reductions in students’ problematic responses to stress, such as experiencing repetitive negative thoughts and strong, intrusive emotions.”

Dr. Janssen points out that the classes not only benefit students but also staff. “We believe this may be a big source of stress relief for them.”

In fact, a 2015 study published in *Mindfulness Journal* assigned 64 educators to either participate in a 20-minute yoga and mindfulness program four days per week, or go about their work as usual. The results revealed that the 16-week program had “significant benefits for educators’ mindfulness, positive affect, classroom management, distress tolerance, physical symptoms, blood pressure, and cortisol awakening response.”

Through breathing and stretching, youth learn to become aware of how their internal state is affecting their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

“Stress and anxiety in youth is at its highest,” says Frizzi. “The miraculous human body is a machine equipped with internal tools to heal and regulate through trauma and difficult times and these students are learning to access these free tools and find their internal power.”

The positive feedback received from the students continues to keep Julie and New Beginnings staff motivated and coming back for more.

“I receive many letters from students

after my presentations,” says Frizzi. “They inform me they use the breathing tools during benchmark tests, family disagreements, and athletic games. I get especially excited when I see other teachers and counselors begin using these tools and strategies in their own classroom. Some even go on to become yoga teachers themselves!”

One third-grade student shared that before the class, she felt shy and after the class, she felt “happy.”

A fifth-grade student expressed their gratitude for the classes.

“Because of it, we are now calm after all of the breathing and stretching and the oyster pose really helped with posture. All of the things we did were calming and helped all of us wake up. I think everyone’s favorite pose is starfish because we got to lay down and clear our thoughts and stretch.”

It is no secret that today’s environment can be challenging for students and youth, especially for those facing adverse circumstances in their lives and do not have the resources to deal with them.

Thanks to New Beginnings and CCPS, these students are regaining a new sense of control while cultivating social, emotional, and physical health.

“These children are extra special,” says Frizzi. “I feel honored and blessed to practice with these students who are learning to navigate through life’s ups and downs.”

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information, visit southwestflorida.blue-zonesproject.com.

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