Yoga Leadership and Instruction: Lessons Learned from School Communities

April 7, 2015
This study was conducted by the Center for Education Policy and Law (CEPAL), an Institute for Entrepreneurship in Education (IEE) research entity operating under the auspices of the School of Leadership and Education Sciences and the School of Law at the University of San Diego.

Established by a grant from the William D. Lynch Foundation in 2007, CEPAL’s mission is to foster better linkage between educational research, policymaking, and practice. To this end, CEPAL undertakes empirical and legal research on educational policy issues, enhances communication between education leaders and state-level policymakers, and facilitates understanding among USD law students and education graduate students about the policymaking process through courses, internships, and research opportunities. Additional information about CEPAL is available at www.sandiego.edu/cepal.

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Executive Summary

Across the United States, select schools and districts are electing to incorporate alternative approaches to meet the health and wellness needs of children. Schools are moving beyond traditional physical education and health classes and incorporating yoga to further support students’ physical and mental well-being.

In partnership with the Sonima Foundation, two schools located in the southern region of the United States have maintained a consistent yoga component within their health and wellness programs. Both programs provide researchers and practitioners an opportunity to understand how each school has shaped its own yoga program, observe the long-term impact of yoga instruction within two distinct school communities, and learn how program successes and challenges were addressed before health and wellness instruction was in the public spotlight.

Each school’s respective program took shape as a result of the administration’s advocacy for health and wellness instruction, the health and wellness instructor’s personal philosophy, the staff’s investment to incorporate the program’s fundamentals throughout the school day, and the community’s reaction to the health and wellness program’s presence in the school’s environment.

This report details the development of each school’s yoga program from the perspective of school personnel providing evidence that suggested various school-level contextual factors are responsible for the yoga programs’ distinct implementation paths. Through the use of observations, interviews, and focus groups, the differences in each of the yoga program’s background, administrator’s involvement, schedule, classroom environment, and instruction were identified. One school provided students with yoga experiences that resemble a traditional yoga class while the other school’s program integrated academic components into the yoga classroom. Despite differences within each school’s yoga program, teachers and administrators at both schools reported similar student outcomes perceived to be connected to yoga. Such student outcomes include improved emotional regulation, behavior, and academic focus.

As the Sonima Foundation continues to shape their K-12 health and wellness model, these cases suggest differing paths to implement yoga may support similar outcomes.
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Introduction

In recent years, select schools and districts have worked to enhance academic excellence by supporting students’ physical and mental well-being with instructional day-embedded health and wellness programs and initiatives. Two schools located in the southern region of the United States have maintained a consistent yoga component within their health and wellness program that has been shaped by both the school’s leader and the yoga instructor. Through the influence of these individuals at both schools, each site has uniquely shaped their school’s yoga component within their health and wellness program.

These consistent school models of yoga instruction provide researchers and practitioners an opportunity to understand how each school has shaped its own yoga program, to observe the long term impact of yoga instruction within two distinct school communities, and to learn how programmatic successes and challenges were faced before health and wellness instruction was in the public spotlight. Researchers from the Center for Education Policy and Law at the University of San Diego were commissioned by the Sonima Foundation in the spring of 2014 to study the design and perceived impact of these two models.

Sonima Foundation’s School Yoga Programs and Partnerships

The Sonima Foundation is a non-profit organization founded to support parents, educators, and community leaders to provide children with health and wellness strategies designed to increase fitness, provide self-discovery, improve focus, and reduce stress and anxiety. The Sonima Foundation has recently developed a systematic kindergarten through 12th grade health and wellness curriculum to guide teachers or instructors through health and wellness instruction with students, and has set scheduling requirements for partner schools to ensure participating students receive regular health and wellness support from the program. Additionally, the Foundation has instituted mandatory training sessions instructors are required to complete before entering any public school the Sonima Foundation supports. Such changes have resulted in greater uniformity in each new program’s design and a systematic expansion of health and wellness reform in many regions throughout the United States.

Visit www.sonimafoundation.org for more information about the Sonima Foundation.
Oak Crest School of the Arts and Spring Valley Science School have consistently provided yoga instruction in partnership with the Sonima Foundation. These schools were not initially given the systemic support Sonima currently provides to schools and districts. Instead, each school’s respective program took shape as a result of the school leadership’s advocacy for health and wellness instruction, the influence of the health and wellness instructor’s personal philosophy, the staff’s investment to incorporate the program’s fundamentals throughout the school day, and the community’s reaction to the health and wellness program’s presence in the school’s environment.

**School Overview and Background**

**Oak Crest School of the Arts**

Oak Crest School of the Arts (Oak Crest) is a K-8 grade school that primarily attracts students who have an interest in visual and performing arts. The school’s founding leaders believed the surrounding community lacked sufficient opportunities for children to be involved in the arts, and opened the school in response to this need in the fall of 2011. Oak Crest has space for approximately 400 students, which does not meet the community’s demand for enrollment. An annual lottery is used to determine which of the interested students from six neighboring communities may attend. The enrolled population is predominately white, with approximately 46 percent of students qualifying to receive free or reduced price lunch.

The principal and administrative teams have held their leadership roles since Oak Crest opened in 2011. Students are supported by 34 administrators, teachers, and staff members throughout their 8:00-3:30 school day. Class sizes are small per requirements set by the state. In addition to traditional academic instruction, students at Oak Crest are exposed to elective opportunities in dance, drama, music, visual arts, physical education, and yoga. Extracurricular clubs, performances, and musicals are available to all students over the course of the school year.

The academic success of Oak Crest students in grades 3-8 is measured through an annual statewide standardized assessment encompassing reading, writing, mathematics, and science content knowledge. Each school year, results from these assessments generate an ‘A’ through ‘F’ score for the entire school each school year. Table 1 depicts Oak Crest’s standardized assessment scores since opening in 2011.

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2 Pseudonyms are used throughout this report in order to protect the confidentiality of participating schools and their personnel.

3 Qualification for free or reduced lunch commonly serves as a proxy for the socioeconomic status of students at a school site.

4 According to the State Department of Education, a maximum of 18 students are enrolled in each kindergarten through third grade class, and 22 students are enrolled in each fourth through eighth grade classroom.

5 Data were retrieved from the State Department of Education website.
Table 1: Oak Crest State Standardized Assessment Scores Over Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011-2012 Assessment Score</th>
<th>2012-2013 Assessment Score</th>
<th>2013-2014 Assessment Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oak Crest School of</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>the Arts</td>
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</table>

Oak Crest was the first of the two schools to introduce yoga to their school community, and the yoga program was introduced the same year the school was opened. Prior to the start of the school year, representatives from the Sonima Foundation approached the school’s administration to include yoga in Oak Crest’s health and wellness program. The Sonima Foundation provided Oak Crest with funds for supplies and the salary for a yoga instructor to carry out the program.

A total of two different yoga instructors have taught at Oak Crest since it opened. Hired part-time during the 2011-2012 school year, Oak Crest’s first instructor offered yoga three days each week. According to reports from school administrators, not offering yoga every day of the week left insufficient time for all classes to receive yoga. Part-time staffing of the yoga instructor position ultimately left some students with an inconsistent yoga practice and other students with no exposure to yoga.

Hired full-time for the 2012-2013 school year, Oak Crest’s second yoga instructor replaced the first instructor. Full-time staffing of the yoga instructor’s position allowed Oak Crest’s program to expand from three to five school days each week increasing students’ exposure to yoga. Elementary-level students participated in two yoga classes each week, and middle school students desiring to participate in yoga as an elective did so on a daily basis.

Oak Crests’ yoga instructors in each of the first two years were experienced yoga practitioners and instructors, and teaching at Oak Crest was both instructors’ first experience teaching children within a public school setting. Oak Crest’s second yoga instructor was in her second year of teaching at the time of this study.

**Spring Valley Science School**
Spring Valley Science School (Spring Valley) is a K-8 school that primarily attracts students with an interest in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). According to the school’s leadership team, Spring Valley’s founding leaders believed the surrounding community needed a successful neighborhood school and opened this school dedicated to STEM learning in the fall of 2011. Approximately 380 students attend Spring Valley, which is the maximum enrollment capacity at present. Some Spring Valley students commute as far as 25 miles each way to attend this school as opposed to a neighborhood public school. The
enrolled population is predominately white, with approximately 64 percent of students qualifying to receive free or reduced price lunch.\(^6\)

The principal and administrative team have held their leadership positions since the school opened in 2011. Students are supported by 32 administrators, teachers, and staff members throughout the 8:00-3:30 school day. Class sizes are small\(^7\) per requirements set by the state. In addition to traditional academic instruction, students are exposed to enrichment opportunities in art, music, technology, physical education, and yoga.

The academic success of Spring Valley students in grades 3-8 is measured through a statewide annual standardized assessment encompassing reading, writing, mathematics, and science content knowledge. Results from these assessments generate an ‘A’ through ‘F’ score for the entire school each school year. Table 2 depicts Spring Valley’s standardized assessment scores since opening in 2011.\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Spring Valley State Standardized Assessment Scores Over Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring Valley Science School</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring Valley Science School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spring Valley was the second of the two schools to introduce yoga to their school community, and the yoga program began the year after the school was first opened. Hearing yoga had been introduced at Oak Crest, Spring Valley’s sister school, the school’s administrator reached out to the Sonima Foundation and proposed yoga also be offered at Spring Valley. The Sonima Foundation granted the administrators’ request and the administrator began preparing the yoga instructor for her teaching role at Spring Valley in the fall of 2012.

As at Oak Crest, a total of two different yoga instructors have taught at Spring Valley since the yoga program began. Hired for the 2012-2013 school year, Spring Valley’s first instructor offered yoga five days each week. All students received 45 minutes of weekly yoga instruction once each week.

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\(^6\) Qualification for free or reduced lunch commonly serves as a proxy for the socioeconomic status of the students at a school site.

\(^7\) According to the State Department of Education, a maximum of 18 students are enrolled in each kindergarten through third grade class, and 22 students are enrolled in each fourth through eighth grade classroom.

\(^8\) Data were retrieved from the State Department of Education website.
Hired for the 2013-2014 school year, Spring Valley’s second yoga instructor replaced the first instructor and continued to offer yoga to all students consistently each week. Schedule changes occurred during the second year of the yoga program altering the duration of time students attended yoga based on their grade level. Younger students attended yoga for shorter periods of time more frequently while older students attended fewer, longer sessions.

Both of Spring Valley’s yoga instructors were traditional experienced yoga practitioners and instructors, and teaching at Spring Valley was both instructors’ first experience teaching children. Spring Valley’s second instructor was in her first year of teaching at the time of this study.

Similarities exist in the formation of the yoga programs at both schools. Both schools adjusted their yoga schedules after the first year, both replaced their original yoga instructors with the instructor who participated in this research study, and both hired instructors with backgrounds in yoga instruction. Uniquely, the Sonima Foundation approached Oak Crest with an interest to pilot the yoga program, and Spring Valley approached the Foundation to implement yoga.

**Report Focus**

The purpose of this report is twofold. Detailing the divergent development of each school’s yoga program, the report first provides evidence that suggested taking distinctive paths to implement yoga is expected given differences in various school-level contextual factors. Findings resulting from these different paths to yoga are reported through the perspective of school personnel. Second, themes stakeholders from both schools shared about the lessons learned from their respective yoga programs are reported. As the Sonima Foundation continues to shape their K-12 health and wellness model, these case studies suggest differing paths to health and wellness instruction may be both possible and effective.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study was designed to identify the contextual factors at two uniquely constructed schools that provide yoga instruction to students. To understand each school’s yoga program, observations, interviews, and focus groups were conducted with school personnel over the course of two days at these schools during the spring of 2014. One full school day was spent at each of the two schools. Identical observation, interview, and focus group protocols were utilized at both schools in order to ensure similar data were being collected at each site. This process enabled the exploration of commonalities and differences between each yoga program and the opportunity to learn of the potential impact on students.
and the school culture at large. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How have contextual factors including school leadership, program implementation, and instructional pedagogy shaped yoga instruction at participating schools?
2. What outcomes do teachers and administrators perceive to have emerged from the yoga program at both schools?
3. What perspectives do school stakeholders offer to schools seeking to implement yoga instruction?

Data Collection
The following data were collected at each of the two sites.

Group Interviews with School Administrators
In order to gather information on administrators’ perspectives of their school’s yoga program, a group interview with the school principal and supporting members of the administrative team was conducted at each of the two schools. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each and focused on background related to the program’s implementation process, community reaction to the health and wellness program, access to yoga in the surrounding region, school day scheduling of yoga and other health and wellness activities, and the administrators’ perceptions of the program’s impact on the student body.

Focus Groups and Interviews with Classroom Teachers
In order to gather information on teachers’ perspectives of their school’s yoga program, one focus group with third and fifth grade classroom teachers was conducted at each of the two schools. At the recommendation of the school principal, an additional interview was conducted with a sixth grade teacher at Oak Crest, and an additional focus group was conducted with kindergarten and first grade teachers at Spring Valley. The focus groups and interview lasted approximately 45 minutes each and focused on longitudinal change in the yoga program’s development, teachers’ observations of their students in yoga and in their own classrooms, teachers’ perceptions of the program’s impact on their students, and teachers’ personal experiences with yoga both in and outside of the school environment.

Interviews with Yoga Instructors
In order to gather information on yoga instructors’ perspectives of their school’s yoga program, one interview with the yoga teacher was conducted at each of the two schools. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each, and focused on each instructor’s teaching experience, background with yoga, the support and training they received, and their expectations for their school’s yoga program.
Observations of Yoga Instruction
In order to gather information about activities in each school's yoga class, two class-length observations of yoga instruction were conducted at both schools, for a total of four observations.

Observations were conducted with second and sixth grade students at Oak Crest, and third and fifth grade students at Spring Valley. Observations lasted approximately 40 minutes, and focused on instructional and pedagogical characteristics related to the melding of health, wellness, yoga, and character education; classroom structure, management, and environment; student-instructor behavior and interaction; rules, procedures, and instructor expectations; and the overall progression of the yoga-related sequences that took place.

For a summary of data collected, see Table 3 below.

Table 3: Data Collected and Analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Leadership</th>
<th>Classroom Teacher</th>
<th>Yoga Instructor</th>
<th>Yoga Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time (Min.)</td>
<td>Grade (Min.)</td>
<td>Time (Min.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personnel Involved</td>
<td>Grade # Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak Crest</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal Leadership team</td>
<td>3rd (1) 5th (1) 6th (1)</td>
<td>Yoga Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Valley</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal Leadership team</td>
<td>K (2) 1st (3) 3rd (3) 5th (2)</td>
<td>Yoga Instructor PE Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With participants’ knowledge and permission, interview and focus group sessions with consented participants were audio-recorded and later transcribed for use in the analysis.

Data Analysis
All interview, focus group, and observation data collected were incorporated in the analysis process. These data were coded using a qualitative software program, HyperResearch.

Findings
As noted in the methodology section, both schools constructed a health and wellness program based on the needs of their school community and integrated yoga into that program as they
saw fit. An overview of each school’s yoga program is first presented below, followed by a description of the ways in which stakeholders at each of the two sites reported that students are affected by yoga. Finally, recommendations from school personnel are offered to other schools interested in adopting a health and wellness program.

How have contextual factors including school leadership, program implementation, and instructional pedagogy shaped yoga instruction at participating schools?

School Leadership

**Oak Crest.** Based on interviews with school administrators and the yoga instructor, though Oak Crest’s administration was vested in the success of the yoga program, they took a passive approach toward the program leaving the yoga instructor responsible for the day-to-day activities including curriculum development, pedagogy, and classroom management. This passive leadership style related to the yoga program at the administrative level provided Oak Crest’s yoga instructor with the independence to design instruction to align with her background in yoga. She reported:

> I have a great deal of autonomy when I’m working, which is wonderful. I think they trust me so much because they trust me to be an expert. [The school’s leadership team] knows we are provided support from the [Sonima] Foundation, the website they’ve given us, the curriculum, and the constant communication... So I think [the principal] knows what we’re trying to do. She knows what our purpose is. She sees all the information we’re pulling from and she really trusts me to do it.

Administrator interviews confirmed the yoga instructor’s sentiment and her autonomy over yoga instruction at the school.

**Spring Valley.** Unlike at Oak Crest, Spring Valley’s administrator directly oversaw the program activities in yoga. She reported:

> Although I have not observed [the yoga instructor] as much as I would like, I observe a lot more of the older kids and I’m so impressed with what they can do and with how respectful they are. I would like to get in more often and find it relaxing just to listen and be there.

Based on interviews with administrators and the yoga instructor, a high level of communication existed between the yoga instructor and Spring Valley’s administrator, who
reported having a vested interest in the program’s success. “...I believe in the breathing, I believe in the meditating,” the administrator reports. “I believe in the focusing and so I even use that with kids... So this is just an awesome fit for what I do too.” Both Spring Valley’s yoga instructor and the administrator reported engaging in conversations regarding instructional support for classroom management, rules, and procedures. The yoga instructor reported the administrator conducts yoga classroom observations to collaboratively contribute to the development of Spring Valley’s yoga program. Spring Valley’s administrator additionally reported encouraging collaboration between Spring Valley and Oak Crest’s instructors and guiding both instructors to professional development opportunities.\(^9\)

Administrator involvement in yoga differed at Oak Crest and Spring Valley. Though both administrators reported valuing the yoga program’s presence at their schools, Oak Crest’s administrator was passively involved in the daily activities in yoga whereas Spring Valley’s administrator was actively involved in the development of the school’s yoga program.

**Program Implementation**

**Oak Crest.** The yoga classroom at Oak Crest was physically disconnected from the academic school environment. Housed in an elevated dance room above the gymnasium, students were escorted by the yoga instructor out of the school and into the gymnasium to attend yoga. The yoga classroom space was structured as a traditional yoga room. No furniture, desks, chalk/white boards, or other traditional classroom materials such as a list of rules and consequences or time out corners were present in the room. Instead, yoga mats were spaced between windowed and mirrored walls, leaving ample space for students to spread out and practice yoga.

Observations at Oak Crest suggest students encounter an unfamiliar context in the yoga room within their school’s environment. No visual cues from a traditional academic classroom were present. Instead, a simple environment with ample space, natural light, colored mats, and a mirrored wall were present. With these differences, students were less likely to have prior knowledge as to appropriate behavior or expectations within this space. Observations suggest that, at Oak Crest, students participated in a rigorous yoga practice that was not hindered by misbehavior or poor classroom management.

During the 2013-2014 school year, middle school students at Oak Crest had the opportunity to choose yoga as their elective course and practice in the yoga room daily for a full 55 minute class period.\(^{10}\) Elementary school students saw their yoga instructor in two capacities; as an in-

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\(^9\) In addition to her school leadership role, Spring Valley’s administrator serves as a professional development consultant for the Sonima Foundation.

\(^{10}\) Middle school students had the option to select yoga from a list of elective courses. Those students selecting an alternate elective did not participate in yoga while at school.
class Physical Education (PE) instructor and as a traditional yoga instructor. Elementary students interacted with their yoga instructor 30 minutes twice weekly; once in the academic classroom for the in-class physical education class and again in the yoga room for instruction grounded in the fundamentals of yoga.

Classroom teachers at Oak Crest are not required to attend either in-class PE or the traditional yoga class, leaving the yoga instructor responsible for the students’ learning, engagement, and classroom behavior. Administrators reported teachers often remained in their classroom during in-class PE. “I have the same teachers that leave [during in-class PE] every time, and I have the same teachers that stay,” stated the yoga instructor, “so really maybe half and half. I’d say more stay than leave." During observations for this study, no classroom teachers escorted their students to their traditional yoga class, and no teachers joined to observe the yoga class or practiced yoga with their students.

Though a staff yoga class was offered at Oak Crest during the 2011-2012 school year, it no longer occurs regularly. Administrators reported offering staff yoga during in-service or professional days when scheduling permitted.

**Spring Valley.** The yoga classroom at Spring Valley was located in a portable classroom within the school grounds. Classroom teachers reported escorting their students to yoga and observations indicated the yoga instructor greeted students at the door so shoes were removed prior to entering the room. Though the classroom had components commonly found in a traditional yoga classroom (mats, muted lighting, an audio station for music) the space resembled a traditional academic classroom with white boards, a teacher’s desk, assigned mat seating, and a space for students who were on time out and removed from the group.

Observations at Spring Valley also suggest that yoga instruction was not hindered by misbehavior or poor classroom management. This yoga environment incorporated instructional components that resembled a traditional academic environment. At Spring Valley, students sat on assigned mats, flowed through yoga sequences timed by the use of a stopwatch, and used hand or body signals such as raising hands to answer questions or taking child’s pose to solicit the instructor’s attention. Behavioral expectations and consequences for poor behavior were apparent including an “inspiration station,” where students relocated due to misbehavior. Similarities between Spring Valley’s yoga environment and a traditional classroom offered students the opportunity to understand, engage, and participate in yoga as they would in a traditional academic class.

All Spring Valley students received instruction from the yoga instructor as well as the physical education teacher every week. During the 2013-2014 school year, elementary age students at Spring Valley interacted with their yoga instructor 30-40 minutes twice weekly. As grade levels
increased, the time a student spent in yoga extended. Beginning in middle school, visits were consolidated into one class per week. Kindergarten students, for example, attended two 30-minute yoga classes each week, whereas middle school students attended one weekly yoga class for 50 minutes.

Classroom teachers were not required to attend their students’ yoga class, leaving the yoga instructor responsible for the students’ learning, engagement, and classroom behavior. In focus groups and interviews, two teachers reported observing their students’ yoga class at the beginning of the year, and one of those teachers reported sporadically practicing yoga with her students. No other teachers reported regularly observing yoga.

A staff and community yoga class occurred weekly at Spring Valley giving parents and teachers an opportunity to practice with Spring Valley’s yoga instructor. Teachers were currently the only regular participants, although the administrator reported making plans to ensure the neighboring community was more aware of this resource.

At both Oak Crest and Spring Valley, students were permitted to opt out of yoga per the parent’s request. Those who opted out of yoga still participated in the traditional physical education component of the health and wellness program with the PE teacher.

**Instructional Pedagogy**

**Oak Crest.** The yoga component of Oak Crest’s health and wellness program was maintained by the yoga instructor’s personal knowledge of yoga instruction, routine in-class procedures, and high student expectations. Oak Crest’s instructor reported having few colleagues in the local community also teaching yoga in schools and therefore seeking out professional development opportunities from other regions where the Sonima Foundation had implemented yoga. She reported accessing lesson plans and ideas from the Sonima Foundation’s website and additionally traveling for in-person enrichment.

Oak Crest’s yoga instructor reported that her classes are led with “consistency, routine practice, and high expectations.” Instruction was closely aligned to a traditional yoga class with the instructor serving as a facilitator to guide students through breath and movement emphasizing self-regulation throughout the practice. Observations of both elementary and middle school grades indicate students met the instructors’ expectations and maintained engagement throughout class. For example, upon entering the classroom, both elementary and secondary students efficiently removed their shoes, chose a mat, and found their beginning pose settling into their breath without prompting from the yoga instructor. After all students entered and were settled, the yoga instructor led students through a rigorous yoga practice without disruption.
Though no observations were conducted of the in-class PE component led by the yoga instructor, teachers and the yoga instructor reported yoga skills are reinforced during this component. “When I go into their classrooms” the yoga instructor explained, “I keep it more the general physical, vigorous kind of exercise, stretching, and movement. It’s not so yoga-based so everyone can participate.” Classroom teachers reported the instructor led students through games and activities that reinforced yoga poses in addition to breathing techniques. “It’s been really neat to see how comfortable the kids are in class using the breathing techniques they’ve learned and the different stretching positions they can use in their chairs,” reported a 5th grade teacher. “My kids like to move, so it’s really great that they have this foundation.”

**Spring Valley.** The yoga component of Spring Valley’s health and wellness program was developed in collaboration with the yoga instructor, school administrator, and the classroom teachers. The yoga program was supported by the administrator’s expectations and guidance to ensure classroom management did not impede instruction. With the administrator’s support, the yoga instructor maintained rules and procedures aligned to the administrator’s expectations while leading students through a yoga practice acceptable to the school community.

Spring Valley’s yoga instructor reported connecting academic content into her daily yoga lessons and reaching out to classroom teachers to understand what students are learning in class to tie those concepts to yoga.

> I communicate with all the teachers and ask them what they’re teaching. I’m in their faces a lot about what’s going on in their classroom... Like they think we’re stuck in our activities and they’re stuck in their academics. I want the yoga program to be a liaison between the two, because it can. I don’t have a million standards to meet. I don’t have tests and curriculum and grades.... So I can help the teachers teach by learning what they’re teaching.

As an example, researchers observed the yoga instructor revisit the concept of Newton’s Law, reportedly from a recent science lesson, with fifth grade students as they made their way to a standing yoga pose.

Having expertise in yoga, the yoga instructor was also responsible for planning the yoga curriculum and developing students’ connection with breath and movement. This was done using methods found in adult yoga classes. “I’m using a traditional Ashtanga method, how I was taught,” reported the yoga instructor, “How I was taught to teach yoga to adults is how I teach to kids except I use more fun words and a less aggressive way of teaching.” The yoga instructor also worked closely with the PE teacher to support the students’ mastery of state
physical fitness standards and assist with annual physical fitness assessments throughout the year. Together, the yoga instructor and PE teacher promoted Spring Valley’s health and wellness program to the school community through events, newsletters, and informal conversations with teachers and parents.

Yoga classes at Spring Valley were reported by the yoga instructor to be conducted through “...a lot of repetition. Repetition of the same thing because the behavior is the first thing that has to be there.” Observations of both third and fifth grade classes suggested students meet the instructor’s expectations and grasped the concepts she promoted. Upon entering the classroom, students found their assigned mat and independently sat to begin settling into their breath. The instructor then took her place in front of the white board to introduce an affirmation of positive intentions before engaging the students in movement. Classroom observations indicate students have familiarity with introductory routines and could independently engage in the opening sequences of movement.

School Comparison
Based on classroom observations and reports from school personnel, Oak Crest and Spring Valley have developed unique yoga programs that enhanced their school’s health and wellness initiatives. During the study, Oak Crest provided students with yoga experiences that resembled a traditional yoga class, while Spring Valley’s program integrated academic concepts into the yoga classroom. Differences in each school’s background, yoga schedule, classroom environment, and yoga instruction are summarized in Table 4.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oak Crest School</th>
<th>Spring Valley School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Foundation approached administrator to implement program</td>
<td>Administrator approached foundation to implement program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership</td>
<td>Passive supporter of yoga program</td>
<td>Active supporter of yoga program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Implementation:</td>
<td>Varies: In-class PE occurred systematically but yoga happened less frequently &amp;</td>
<td>Systematic: All students regularly attended yoga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga Schedule</td>
<td>with select students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Implementation:</td>
<td>Physically distant from the academic</td>
<td>Located within the school environment; resembled traditional school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Environment</td>
<td>school environment; resembled traditional yoga room</td>
<td>classroom</td>
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</table>
What outcomes do teachers and administrators perceive to have emerged from the yoga program at both schools?

Oak Crest and Spring Valley Schools have both had yoga as consistent components of their health and wellness programs since the program’s implementation at each site. Observations, interviews, and focus groups with school personnel confirm differences in each yoga program’s background, the administrator’s involvement with the program, the yoga schedule, the yoga classroom environment, and the yoga instruction to meet the needs of each school community. Despite differences within each program’s construct, administrators and classroom teachers at both schools reported identical student outcomes to have emerged at their respective schools.

Perceived Student Outcomes
Both school communities reported favorable outcomes believed to be connected to the yoga component of the health and wellness program regardless of the method of yoga instruction or the leaderships’ involvement in the program. Teachers and administrators at both Oak Crest and Spring Valley reported perceiving similar student outcomes believed to be connected to yoga. Such student outcomes involve improved emotional regulation, changes in behavior, and academic focus.

Improved Emotional Regulation. Teachers and administrators at both Oak Crest and Spring Valley reported that yoga has had an impact on students’ ability to calm themselves down during demanding experiences. They stated that the incorporation of yoga in their school has provided students with strategies to manage stress and anxiety. As a result, the behavior of individual students, classrooms, and the school community has improved. Teachers and administrators across both sites reported that students used strategies learned in yoga to calm themselves under stressful circumstances. For example:

I would say [the yoga program] carries over some of the principles from yoga into their everyday life – being able to calm themselves if they need to, being able to walk away from a conflict, being able to talk more openly about their feelings. So I think that’s probably one of the biggest things that I see growthwise. (Oak Crest administrator)
I have witnessed students put [strategies learned in yoga] in place and actually control their emotions and regain composure using these yoga strategies. (Oak Crest teacher)

Alongside the perceived changes in students’ emotional regulation, teachers and administrators reported the yoga program to have calmed their school climate at large:

It’s just a little bit more calm, more focused for sure...I love having [yoga] first thing in the morning. (Oak Crest teacher)

Oh my gosh, yes! I have to say the anxiety level at this school as a whole has gone down. So there is a big difference and I think the expectations, teaching respect and character, everything is just kind of working together. And so I’m very pleased at the direction we’re going and it’s only going to get better. (Spring Valley administrator)

**Behavior Change.** Administrators from both Oak Crest and Spring Valley perceived the skills learned in yoga have provided students with tools to manage their emotions with peers, which has positively redirected student behavior. Administrators shared the following:

I’ve observed students carrying over some of the principals of yoga into their everyday life. Being able to calm themselves if they need to, being able to walk away from a conflict, being able to talk more openly... (Oak Crest administrator)

I have those squishy anger balls with a smiley face.... It was a very tough year that first year so I gave out 38 anger balls... The second year I passed out 15 anger balls... And this year I have not passed out one anger ball... It’s a lot of things, it’s not just yoga, they got to learn my expectations and what is expected of them and we don’t accept bullying... So this is just awesome fit for what we do. (Spring Valley administrator)

**Academic Focus.** The skills perceived to have been learned in yoga helped ready students to engage in academic instruction. Teachers reported capitalizing on the instructional time following yoga to teach core academic content and additionally utilize tools learned in yoga to prepare students for testing. Examples of teachers capitalizing on instructional time following yoga are reported below:

I do notice this year that when they come back from yoga I do writing, that’s when I typically teach writing and it really helps. I’ve seen lots of improvement in
their writing because I like to do it right after yoga period. (Spring Valley teacher)

Being in yoga, I think, really coincides with what we’re trying to do here. Clearing their mind, opening their mind to get into the right process of thinking. Yoga just helps the body and mind get into the right track. (Oak Crest teacher)

Additionally, teachers from both schools shared how breathing and mindfulness strategies were used to focus in preparation for test taking:

We took 20 minutes or so before the test to do breathing exercise and that whole body relaxation. It really does make a difference just that short amount of time clearing your head and meditating on what you’re trying to do. I was really impressed by it. (Spring Valley teacher)

The biggest impression that I had was actually our second year because it was really awesome for me to see that during stressful times before a test I would watch them do their [yoga] practice in their seat. They would take the time to breathe. You could see them close their eyes and I know that they’re getting a positive picture in their head and they’re going to their happy place. In other places with that same student—I’m thinking of one kid in particular—if he didn’t have that strategy he could very easily have just melted down and totally lost it before he took that test. (Oak Crest teacher)

Administrators also affirmed that strategies learned in yoga were used in class to improve students’ academic focus:

It’s not necessarily that they’re standing up doing the whole sequence physically, but just sitting at their desk before they’re about to take a test or about to do a big assignment, you can see them taking their deep breaths and kind of closing their eyes for a moment and visualizing and setting their intention for their test and taking some of the things that they learn about in yoga and applying it to just sitting at a desk. (Oak Crest administrator)

Figure 1 depicts how these similar outcomes were perceived by school personnel despite differences in administrator involvement and yoga instruction.
Figure 1: Paths to Yoga Instruction

**PATHS TO YOGA INSTRUCTION**

**PATH ONE**

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**
- Passively involved in yoga instruction.
- Yoga Instructor seen as expert.
- Invested in maintaining yoga experience for kids.

**YOGA INSTRUCTION**
- Classroom environment resembles a traditional yoga class.
- Yoga instructor is self-driven to improve instructional quality for students.
- Yoga instructor is intrinsically able to manage the classroom environment.

**PATH TWO**

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**
- Actively involved in yoga instruction.
- Yoga Instructor is seen as expert, but also in need of professional support.
- Invested in enhancing the overall health and wellness of students.

**YOGA INSTRUCTION**
- Classroom environment resembles a traditional academic classroom.
- Yoga Instructor is supported by administration and staff to improve instructional quality for students.
- Yoga Instruction manages classroom environment using traditional academic techniques.

**SCHOOL SITE CONSENSUS**

**POSITIVE STUDENT OUTCOMES**

Stakeholders report improvements in student emotional regulation, behavior, and academic focus.
What perspectives do school stakeholders offer to schools seeking to implement yoga instruction?

As a component of the interview process, yoga instructors, classroom teachers, and administrators were asked to provide insight to other schools and districts interested in providing yoga to their students. This section highlights prominent themes and suggestions that emerged from those discussions.

**Implement Collectively Rather than Independently**

In this study, one administrator and both yoga instructors reported challenges implementing a yoga program and accessing ongoing support given their geographic distance from other schools with similar programs. As one yoga instructor described:

> Support is not consistent and not offered often, but in areas [with more yoga schools] they have lots of meetings and things like that. I'm down here tucked away and we don't have our own team down here. It's just us.

The individuals in this study reported needing to seek professional development either virtually or by traveling to other regions. Participants recommend that, when possible, yoga programs be implemented among a collection of schools as opposed to independently. As an administrator suggested:

> More schools so that there is more collaboration. I think this is just so good for kids, and [additional schools] would give more collaboration and more force to what we're doing to build and expand. Yoga instructors then could have more connectedness to get together once a month or once a week or talk about their teaching.

**Collaborate between Physical Education and Yoga**

One administrator, one PE teacher, and yoga instructors from both schools reported value in frequent collaboration between PE teachers and yoga instructors. They reported this partnership provided additional movement and physical activity for students and further promoted a school-wide awareness for health and wellness. As one PE teacher described:

> I think any yoga program that is brought into a school the yoga and the PE teachers have got to communicate. Have got to be one and one, and have to feed and help each other... Students are surrounded by [health and wellness] here. They can't run away from health, fitness, wellness, and making good
choices. I mean they’re going to see us. And now versus the beginning of the year they want to impress us. (Spring Valley PE teacher)

Support Yoga Instructors with Classroom Management Strategies

A prominent theme throughout interviews to guide other schools introducing yoga involved the issue of classroom management support. Administrators at both schools, eight of 13 classroom teachers, and one of the two current yoga instructors all reported a need to support yoga instructors new to the school environment with classroom management strategies. All four yoga instructors who taught at the two schools were new to teaching children and had not received formal training through a teacher-credentialing program where such strategies are systematically taught. Observations at Oak Crest and Spring Valley suggest participating yoga instructors received sufficient support from the Sonima Foundation and their school communities to effectively manage classroom behavior, but stakeholders reported that classroom management support was necessary to achieve this level of participation without disruption.

Methodological Limitations

All research generates limitations that hinder the generalizability of findings. For this study, limitations surfaced as a result of stakeholders retrospectively reporting data, the method of participant selection, the omission of parents and students from this study, and a short window of time for data collection.

Data collection occurred at both Oak Crest and Spring Valley in spring of 2014, at which time stakeholders were asked to reflect on events from as far back as September of 2011. Capturing perspectives from participating teachers, yoga instructors, and leaders at the beginning of the yoga program may have increased the reliability of data highlighting the program’s introduction to the school community.

This research study’s timeline required school leaders to take an active role in supporting the data collection process. School leaders from both Oak Crest and Spring Valley were tasked with devising a day-long data collection schedule allowing researchers to interview teachers, yoga instructors, and administrators while also conducting a minimum of two classroom observations with older and younger students. This resulted in administrators recruiting participants whose schedules fit within the time constraints of the day. Allowing more time for preparation and data collection may have enabled researchers, rather than school administrators, to identify and recruit participants, which may have increased the involvement of any school personnel who may have been less-supportive of the yoga program, potentially resulting in more confidence that the findings identified represented the views of all members of the school’s population.
Due to time constraints and challenges with the consent process, data from school personnel were prioritized over data from parents and students. Though this study provides an overview of the yoga program’s implementation from the standpoint of leaders, teachers, and yoga instructors, the study does not provide information that incorporates the perspective of parents or students. In addition, the findings presented here are based on stakeholders’ perspectives of the program’s impact on students, rather than empirical measures of those impacts.

Finally, the findings contained within this report are extrapolated from a single daylong window of time at each of the participating schools. Though the findings represent the perspectives of various school stakeholders, they are derived from a single retrospective interview or focus group and two observations of yoga instruction. More interviews and observational opportunities would have provided additional data from which researchers could generate and corroborate findings.

**Conclusion**

Yoga instruction at Oak Crest and Spring Valley Schools differed in how it was implemented, how it was scheduled, the environment in which it was located, and the manner in which students received instruction. These contextual differences have resulted in Oak Crest providing students with a yoga experience that resembles a traditional yoga class, while Spring Valley provides students with a yoga program that integrates academic concepts in a more traditional academic environment. Elaboration on the effectiveness of either model is beyond the scope of this report. These findings do, however, provide insight as to how two different schools have implemented a yoga program to meet the needs of their communities, the ways in which the schools perceive their program has had an impact on their students, and what guidance the schools would provide to others considering implementing yoga at their sites.

Though observations, interviews, and focus groups with school personnel identified differences in contextual factors of each yoga program, administrators and classroom teachers at both schools reported identical student outcomes to have emerged. Stakeholders shared similar testimonials of perceived changes in student emotional regulation, behavior, and academic focus. Despite the different paths and approaches to yoga instruction at Oak Crest and Spring Valley, students are perceived to be positively responding in similar ways.

The findings contained in this report related to student effects are the perceptions of school leaders and classroom teachers. Additional research with students is necessary to affirm these perceived changes in student emotional regulation, behavior, and academic focus. Additional research surrounding the student experience and physical or mental effects may be valuable given the longstanding duration of yoga at both schools.
Contributors

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Andria Shook is a Research Associate at both the Mobile Technology Learning Center and the Center for Education Policy and Law. A graduate of the University of San Diego’s School of Leadership and Education Sciences PhD program, Dr. Shook’s dissertation work focused on the influence of health and wellness education at schools serving low-income students. Her recent publications include Yoga in Public Schools: Evidence from the Encinitas Union School District’s Yoga Program 2012-2013, using iPads for Instruction, Mobile Technology in K-6 Schools, San Diego Unified School District: Schools in City Council Districts 1-8 and the California Mayoral Empowerment Study. Additional upcoming work will be released through the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) where she interned in 2012 at Stanford University. Andria’s central area of study is education policy reform predominantly focused on the role of health and wellness instruction in public education. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies she was an elementary teacher in central Los Angeles as a Teach for America corps member.

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Hannah Johnson is originally from Massachusetts. After moving to sunny San Diego to complete her undergraduate degree in Business Administration, Hannah began her work in a number of entrepreneurial roles in the world of health, wellness, and fitness. Her work experiences revealed a strong interest in combating preventable childhood disease and promoting health and wellness in our young ones. This prompted Hannah to pursue a Masters in Leadership Studies. She also works as a research assistant in the Center for Educational Policy and Law assisting in health and wellness programs for K-12 school district studies.