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Article published Oct 26, 2011

Movement calms the mind

Morning exercise helps Liberty students focus on schoolwork



Photo by: JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald

Liberty School students and teachers stop to breathe during an exercise class. Every action is focused on breathing and awareness. The goal is to focus and prime students' minds for the school day.

By [Emery Cowan](#) Herald Staff Writer

Exercising to calm down.

The concept may seem contradictory, but it has worked wonders for the teachers and students at The Liberty School.

Since the beginning of the year, Liberty's 19 students have spent the first 40 minutes of their day doing an activity routine that includes running, skipping, jumping and balancing.

The idea isn't to break a sweat. Instead, every action is focused on breathing and awareness. The goal is to focus and prime students' minds for the school day. Liberty is a private, nonprofit school serving dyslexic and gifted students.

Megan Lewis, a parent of two Liberty students and a local physician, runs the activity four days a week with help from Chris Grotfend, a fitness professional at Durango Sports Club.

The students breathe through their noses during the exercise, which helps maintain a restful

wave pattern in the brain that is ideal for learning, Lewis said.

Students start by walking and practicing conscious breathing, then transition to exercises that alternate increasing intensity with recovery. Last is a steady-state exercise: The students circle the gym at a speed they can maintain while breathing through their noses.

The activities also focus on increasing students' mindfulness about their energy.

"Your energy affects the energy of a room, so what you do with it is very powerful," Grotefend told the students as they held invisible balls of energy in their hands. After exercising, the students take time to explore the five senses.

The inspiration for the morning breathing comes from the book *Spark*, by John J. Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

In the book, Ratey explores the connection between body and mind as well as the positive effects exercise has on the brain. He profiles Illinois' Naperville School District, which started vigorous morning workouts with its students in the 1990s.

In 1999, the district's eighth-graders participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which is used to compare the achievement of U.S. students with their peers around the world. They tested first in science and sixth in math.

At Liberty, Lewis said the morning exercises have led to huge changes in her children.

"My son is much more able to focus and not as hyperactive," she said.

And students whose minds are usually jumbled with ideas tell her they are having only one thought at a time.

Students and teachers tell stories about using the nose breathing at home or during the school day, Grotefend said.

Liberty's students are chatterers and they are high energy, said Bill O'Flanagan, Liberty's head of school. But after the breathing exercise, he said, the kids are quiet and their energy muted.

"It just brings everything down a little bit, and it does help them focus," O'Flanagan said. "This kind of calm doesn't usually happen naturally."

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Photo by: JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald

Chris Grotefend, a fitness professional at Durango Sports Club, teaches Liberty School students to concentrate on their breathing during an exercise class in the gym below the Durango School District 9-R administration building.



Photo by: JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald

Liberty School students and teachers run during a class led by Chris Grotefend, a fitness professional at Durango Sports Club.
