

## ***Novato students practice guided relaxation***

By Joe Wolfcale / Marin Independent Journal

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The calming voice over the public address system asks Novato middle school students to close their eyes, take several breaths, exhale deeper and longer and visualize a positive outcome for their day. The voice belongs to dean of students Joanne Golden. It must be Monday at Sinaloa Middle School.

The breathing and relaxation techniques are those of Kaiser Permanente cardiologist Dr. John M. Kennedy and have become part of the routine at Sinaloa since school officials conducted their own survey of students and stress this year. The survey of more than 220 students at the 600-student school found that many students feel stressed out. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed identified stress as the reason they didn't get an assignment finished on time. In response, school administrators invited Kennedy to address the student body and staff about stress and ways to cope. In February, Kennedy met with every Sinaloa student who participated in the survey and reviewed techniques to handle stress. "Since medical school, I've been fascinated with the heart and brain connection," said Kennedy, 42, medical director of the cardiac catheterization lab at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in San Rafael. "What we've come to understand is that heart disease starts very early. Stress, over a period of time, unrecognized wreaks havoc on our cardiovascular systems. "We've seen it in kids as young as 12 years old." Sinaloa school officials became concerned about stress and academic performance after a contingent participated in two workshops by author and lecturer Denise Pope at Stanford University's School of Education. Two administrators, three teachers, a group of parents and two eighth-grade students visited in May and December 2007. Pope is author of "Doing School — How We are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students," published in 2003. Pope also founded the Stressed-Out Student project that studied the correlation between stress and academic performance in a range of student populations. Novato schools Superintendent Jan La Torre-Derby said the training and awareness will be beneficial to students. "I know this will help them cope with the challenges," she said. "The training is bringing awareness of how we can support student learning, growth and development and slow down a bit with unrealistic expectations." With the help of a Stanford graduate assistant, Sinaloa officials developed their own survey on stress and administered it to 224 students, including all eighth-graders and sixth- and seventh-grade students in the school's Gifted and Talented Education program. "The whole thing was an eye-opening process for me," said Gretchen Tara, one of the parents who attended the Stanford sessions and mother of an eighth-grader. "I truly wasn't aware of the far-reaching consequences of students, from grade school to college. In our survey, we asked most of the things we thought we should." The Sinaloa survey found that 64 percent of students identified stress as the reason they didn't get an assignment finished on time. Nearly 40 percent set short-term goals and submitted work on time, while 39 percent waited too long to begin the work. About 38 percent of students said they felt anxious or stressed about school or homework sometimes and 30 percent said the source of the stress was from extracurricular activities, family dynamics, the Internet or other reasons. Another 38 percent said the biggest pressure came from parents. "We have a pretty high-achieving clientele," Sinaloa Principal Kit Gabbard said. "We found that students have way too much stress and that it was something we wanted to look at." And then along came Kennedy, a cardiologist who has seen heart disease from the inside out. "I spoke to him at a peer summit at College of Marin last year and asked if he'd come talk to us," said Golden, the school's dean of students. "He was so enthusiastic about it, it was amazing. He wanted to work with kids and said he'd absolutely love to meet everybody. This was absolutely something we could use. The timing was perfect." Sinaloa school officials are hoping the stress program and survey can be bridged to the high school level in Novato. Gabbard said the school plans to follow up with this year's eighth-graders next year in high school. "We really wanted to have a solid baseline," Gabbard said.

*Dr. John Kennedy is an invasive cardiologist and board member of the American Heart Association. He has a particular interest in the negative impact of stress on our cardiovascular system and speaks regularly to businesses about managing stress in the workplace. Dr. Kennedy is co-author of the book "Breathe: Heal Your Heart in Just 15 Minutes a Day," which will be released by John Wiley & Sons in February 2009.*



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