

Inspiring the use of **Daily Mindfulness in Special Education Classrooms** at La Joya Independent School District

BACKGROUND

In schools and centers across the country, mental health concerns are on the rise. At the same time, students and educators are facing an immense amount of pressure to perform well academically and close the learning gap that we are facing due to the pandemic.

At La Joya Independent School District, staff members are using Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) through Inner Explorer as a preventative solution. Cynthia Salgado, a behavior specialist at La Joya, says that students are looking for help; oftentimes, this plays out through noticeable stress and anxiety, anger and frustration, or breaking down emotionally.

Inner Explorer Co-Founder Dr. Laura Bakosh coined the term Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) after establishing that daily mindfulness practice offers foundational support for the five core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL):

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

The traditional SEL curriculum is designed to activate the prefrontal cortex (PFC) – the part of the brain associated with learning. However, when the brain is stressed, it cannot access what it

cognitively knows. Furthermore, it cannot absorb new information. MBSEL addresses this disconnect by utilizing daily mindfulness to target stress

Judith Lopez Guerra, a special education teacher at La Joya, practices daily mindfulness in English and Spanish in her classroom with Inner Explorer. She recognizes that mental health challenges are amplified for special education students, who already find it difficult to express how they are feeling and advocate for what they need.

Through Inner Explorer, Judith, her co-teachers, and colleagues have noticed a remarkable difference in student behavior, made evident by a drastic decrease in the number of reported behavioral issues.

85%

Reduction in behavior issues in special education classrooms through practicing daily mindfulness with Inner Explorer.

Judith notes that daily mindfulness practice helps her students find their inner voice. "Students who were once extremely shy learn to ask for what they need," she says. **"It's not that their voice wasn't there before, it's that they didn't know how to find it. Mindfulness helps the students get in touch with who they are."**



Judith's students practice mindfulness with Inner Explorer.

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If students are not mentally and emotionally there, they are not going to learn
-Angelika Loraine Garza, School Counselor

“We have math and we have science, but we also have Inner Explorer. Through MBSEL, students can get in touch with how they are feeling; as a teacher, I want them to know that what they are feeling matters because it impacts everything else that they do.”

-Judith Lopez Guerra

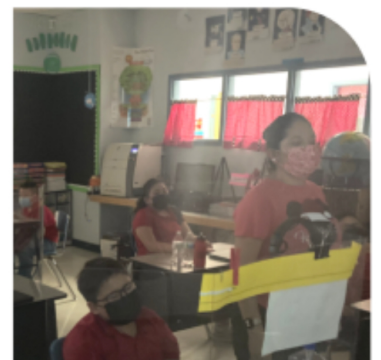
BEST PRACTICES FOR USING INNER EXPLORER IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

In working with special education students, it is important to recognize their unique skills and abilities, while also finding ways to empower them to express themselves, learn, and grow. Try out these best practices for integrating Inner Explorer in a special education classroom.

Set the Stage for Success

Inner Explorer's audio-guided format makes it easy to just press play and practice mindfulness together as a class. Here are a few tips to help students prepare for a daily practice:

- Establish a set time every day to practice. The structure helps students know what to expect. Judith's classroom practices twice a day – in the morning to prepare for academics and at the end of the school day before going home.
- Dim the lights to reduce distractions and signify it is time for mindfulness.
- Set an example by participating in the practice alongside students. This removes any stigma and helps students feel safe practicing. Plus, teachers who practice mindfulness report improved well-being and 43% less stress!



Judith practices Inner Explorer with her

Bonus: The Inner Explorer Educator Well-Being Series is a set of mindfulness practices specifically designed to provide educators with additional support tools that supplement daily Inner Explorer practice in the classroom.

80%

Reduction in behavior issues in special education classrooms through practicing daily mindfulness with Inner Explorer.

Save Time and Resources With Mindfulness

While Judith is adamant about instilling a daily mindfulness routine at a set time each day, she also honors requests from her students to do additional sessions when academic work becomes too much. “If we are in the middle of a math lesson and they become overwhelmed and can’t focus, I will offer to do a session right then and there – or the students will ask me to play an Inner Explorer practice,” she says.

This saves time and resources in the long run; mindfulness helps students calm down and focus, reducing the amount of time spent settling in or managing behavior issues. In Judith’s classroom, daily mindfulness significantly reduced the need for additional help.

Invite Students to Reflect and Share

Each Inner Explorer practice includes additional time for independent reflection to help students further explore and express their thoughts and feelings.

To encourage the use of reflection time, Judith created a corner display in her classroom for students to hang up their reflection drawings or journal entries if they choose to. This encourages self-expression and gives her insight as to what is happening in their lives beyond the classroom.



The reflection board in Judith's classroom.

Bonus: Get families involved by inviting them to download the Inner Explorer @HOME app. They can use the TuneIn feature to listen to the daily practice in real-time or when their schedule allows. Then, students and families can discuss what came up for them during the practice at home.

Judith views MBSEL initiatives as critical lifelong skills for her students:

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Eventually, my students will move on to a new classroom, a new school, and a career. The tools they learn through MBSEL are tools they can take with them for their entire lives.



Learn more about integrating MBSEL with Inner Explorer by visiting InnerExplorer.org.