

# Yoga Leadership and Instruction: Lessons Learned from Charter School Communities

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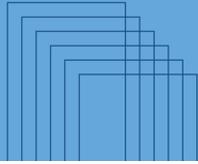
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## Executive Summary

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.

Two K-8 charter schools located in the southeastern region of the United States have maintained a longstanding yoga component within their health and wellness programs, providing 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.

These schools have provided yoga instruction since 2011 and 2012, respectively, serving as the Sonima Foundation's first health and wellness partner schools. 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 charter school's yoga program from the perspective of school personnel providing evidence to suggest that 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 provides students with yoga experiences that resemble a traditional yoga class while the other school's program integrates academic components into the yoga classroom. Despite differences within each school's yoga program, teachers and administrators at both schools report 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.

# Yoga Leadership and Instruction: Lessons Learned from Charter School Communities

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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 K-8 charter schools located in the southeastern region of the United States have maintained a longstanding 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 longstanding charter 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 Charter 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.<sup>1</sup> The Sonima Foundation has recently developed a systematic kindergarten through twelfth 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Visit [www.sonimafoundation.org](http://www.sonimafoundation.org) for more information about the Sonima Foundation.

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.

Oak Crest Charter School of the Arts and Spring Valley Science Charter School<sup>2</sup> have provided yoga instruction since 2011 and 2012, respectively, serving as the first Sonima health and wellness schools in the United States. 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 Charter School of the Arts

Oak Crest Charter School of the Arts (Oak Crest) is a K-8 grade charter 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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

The academic success of Oak Crest students in grades three through eight 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 on the following page depicts Oak Crest's standardized assessment scores since opening in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1: Oak Crest State Standardized Assessment Scores Over Time**

	2011-2012 Assessment Score	2012-2013 Assessment Score	2013-2014 Assessment Score
Oak Crest Charter School of the Arts	B	A	A

Oak Crest was the first of the two charter 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.

<sup>5</sup> Data were retrieved from the State Department of Education website.

### Spring Valley Science Charter School

Spring Valley Science Charter School (Spring Valley) is a K-8 charter 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.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 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 three through eight 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.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 2: Spring Valley State Standardized Assessment Scores Over Time**

	2011-2012 Assessment Score	2012-2013 Assessment Score	2013-2014 Assessment Score
Spring Valley Science Charter School	F	D	B

Spring Valley was the second of the two charter 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

<sup>6</sup> Qualification for free or reduced lunch commonly serves as a proxy for the socioeconomic status of the students at a school site.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> Data were retrieved from the State Department of Education website

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.

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 altered 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 charter school's yoga program, the report first provides evidence to suggest 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 charter 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 the 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 stakeholders from the founding 'Sonima Schools' 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 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at Oak Crest, and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 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**

	School Leadership		Classroom Teacher		Yoga Instructor		Yoga Observations	
	Time (Min.)	Personnel Involved	Time (Min.)	Grade (# Teachers)	Time (Min.)	Personnel Involved	# Classes	Grade Levels
<b>Oak Crest</b>	<b>60</b>	Principal Leadership team	<b>45</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> (1) 5 <sup>th</sup> (1) 6 <sup>th</sup> (1)	<b>45</b>	Yoga Instructor	<b>2</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> 6 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Spring Valley</b>	<b>60</b>	Principal Leadership team	<b>45</b>	K (2) 1 <sup>st</sup> (3) 3 <sup>rd</sup> (3) 5 <sup>th</sup> (2)	<b>45</b>	Yoga Instructor PE Teacher	<b>2</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> 5 <sup>th</sup>

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 charter 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 charter 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 administration level has provided Oak Crest's yoga instructor with the independence to design instruction to align with her background in yoga. She reports:

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 oversees the program activities in yoga. She reports, "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 exists between the yoga instructor and Spring Valley's administrator, who reports 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 report engaging in conversations regarding instructional support for classroom management, rules, and procedures. The yoga instructor reports the administrator conducts yoga classroom observations to collaboratively contribute to the development of Spring Valley's yoga program. Spring Valley's administrator additionally reports encouraging collaboration between Spring Valley and Oak Crest's instructors and guiding both instructors to professional development opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

Administrator involvement in yoga differs at Oak Crest and Spring Valley. Though both administrators report valuing the yoga program's presence at their school, Oak Crest's administrator is passively involved in the daily activities in yoga where Spring Valley's administrator is actively involved in the development of her school's yoga program.

## Program Implementation

**Oak Crest.** The yoga classroom at Oak Crest is physically disconnected from the academic school environment. Housed in an elevated dance room above the gymnasium, students are escorted by the yoga instructor out of the school and into the gymnasium to attend yoga. The yoga classroom space is 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 are present in the room. Instead, yoga mats are 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 are present. Instead, a simple environment with ample space, natural light, colored mats,

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to her school leadership role, Spring Valley's administrator serves as a professional development consultant for the Sonima Foundation.

and a mirrored wall are present. With these differences, students are less likely to have prior knowledge as to appropriate behavior or expectations within this space. Observations suggest that, at Oak Crest, students participate in a rigorous yoga practice that is 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 fifty-five minute class period.<sup>10</sup> Elementary school students saw their yoga instructor in two capacities; as an in-class Physical Education (PE) instructor and as a traditional yoga instructor. Elementary students interacted with their yoga instructor thirty 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 report teachers often remain 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 report offering staff yoga during in-service or professional days when scheduling permits.

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

Observations at Spring Valley also suggest that yoga instruction is not hindered by misbehavior or poor classroom management. This yoga environment incorporates instructional components that resemble a traditional academic environment. At Spring Valley, students sit on assigned mats, flow through yoga sequences timed by the use of a

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

stopwatch, and use 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 are apparent including an "inspiration station" where students relocate due to misbehavior. Similarities between Spring Valley's yoga environment and a traditional classroom offer students the opportunity to understand, engage, and participate in yoga as they would in a traditional academic class.

All Spring Valley students receive 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 increase, the time a student spends in yoga extends. Beginning in middle school, visits are consolidated into one class per week. Kindergarten students, for example, attend two 30-minute yoga classes each week, whereas middle school students attend one weekly yoga class for 50 minutes.

Classroom teachers are 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 occurs weekly at Spring Valley giving parents and teachers an opportunity to practice with Spring Valley's yoga instructor. Teachers are currently the only regular participants, although the administrator reported making plans to ensure the neighboring community is more aware of this resource.

At both Oak Crest and Spring Valley, students are permitted to opt out of yoga per the parent's request. Those who opt out of yoga still participate 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 is 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 has implemented yoga. She reported accessing lesson plans and ideas from the Sonima Foundation's website and additionally traveling to New York and California for in-person enrichment.

Oak Crest's yoga instructor reported that her classes are led with "consistency, routine practice, and high expectations." Instruction is 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 meet the instructors' expectations and maintain 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 report 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 report the instructor leads students through games and activities that reinforce 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," reports a 5<sup>th</sup> 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 is supported by the administrator's expectations and guidance to ensure classroom management does not impede instruction. With the administrator's support, the yoga instructor maintains 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 reports 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 is also responsible for planning the yoga curriculum and developing students' connection with breath and movement. This is done using methods found in adult yoga classes. "I'm using a traditional Ashtanga method, how I was taught," reports 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 works closely with the PE teacher to support the students' mastery of state physical fitness standards and assists with annual physical fitness assessments throughout the year. Together, the yoga instructor and PE teacher promote 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 are 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 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes suggest students meet the instructor's expectations and are grasping the concepts she promotes. Upon entering the classroom, students find their assigned mat and independently sit to begin settling into their breath. The instructor then takes 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 can 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 enhance their school's health and wellness initiatives. Oak Crest provides students with yoga experiences that resemble a traditional yoga class, while Spring Valley's program integrates academic concepts into the yoga classroom. Differences in each school's background, yoga schedule, classroom environment, and yoga instruction are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: School Level Differences in Yoga**

	<b>Oak Crest Charter School</b>	<b>Spring Valley Charter School</b>
<b>Background</b>	Foundation approached administrator to implement program	Administrator approached foundation to implement program
<b>School Leadership</b>	Passive supporter of yoga program	Active supporter of yoga program
<b>Program Implementation: Yoga Schedule</b>	Varies: In-class PE occurs systematically but yoga happens less frequently & with select students	Systematic: All students regularly attend yoga
<b>Program Implementation: Classroom Environment</b>	Physically distant from the academic school environment; resembles traditional yoga room	Located within the school environment; resembles traditional school classroom
<b>Instructional Pedagogy</b>	Systematic instruction promoting self-regulation, grounded in traditional yoga practice	Incorporates feedback from administrator & teachers merging the essence of yoga with academic instruction when applicable

### What outcomes do teachers and administrators perceive to have emerged from the yoga program at both schools?

Oak Crest and Spring Valley Charter Schools have both had yoga as consistent components of their health and wellness programs respectively for four and three years at the time of this study. Observations, interviews, and focus groups with school personnel confirm differences in the yoga program’s background, administrator’s involvement with the program, the yoga schedule, the yoga classroom environment, and yoga instruction exist to meet the needs of each school community. Despite differences within each program’s construct, administrators and classroom teachers at both schools report identical student outcomes to have emerged at their respective schools.

#### **Perceived Student Outcomes**

Both school communities report 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 report 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 growth-wise. (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 redirect student behavior. Administrators share 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 report capitalizing on the instructional time following yoga to teach core academic content and additionally utilizing 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 share how breathing and mindfulness strategies are 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)

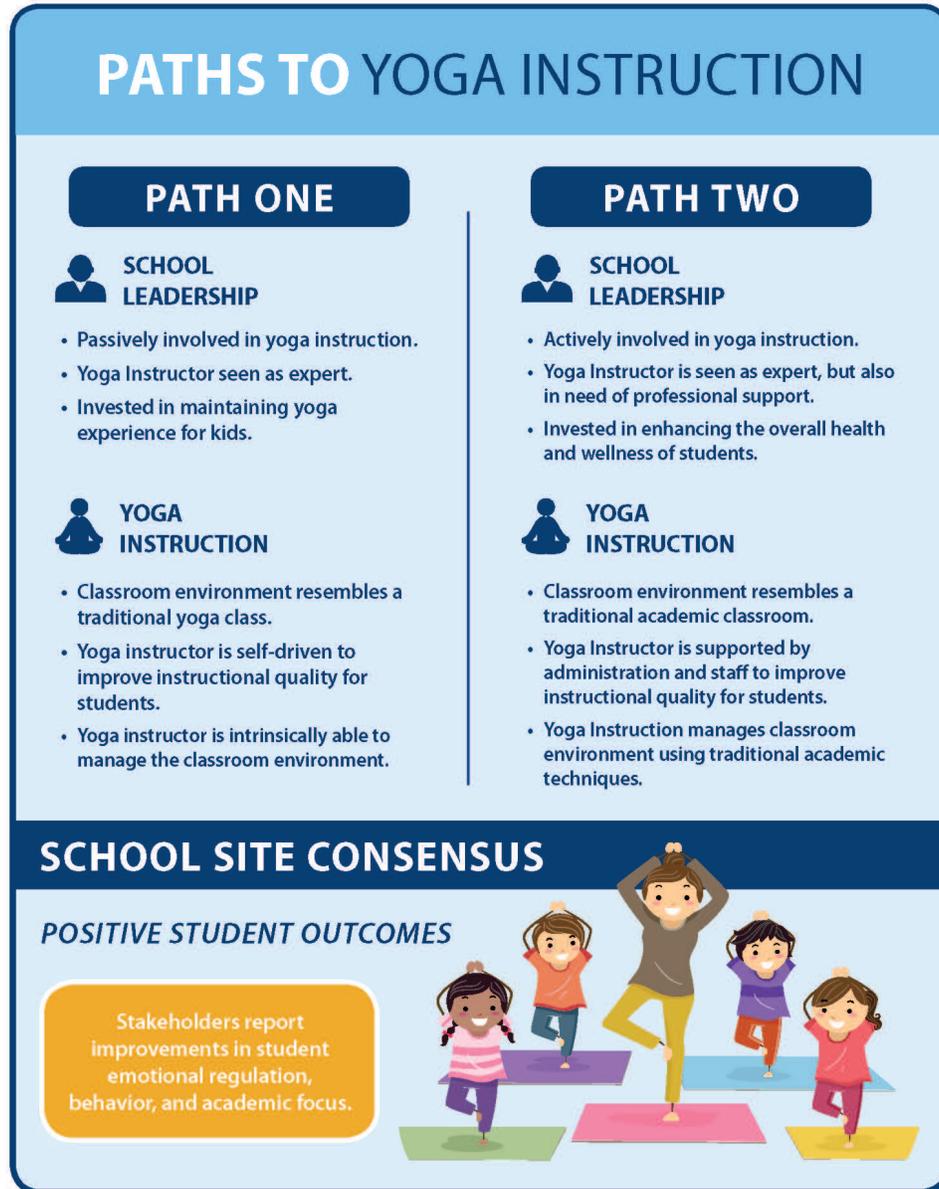
The biggest impression that I had was actually our second year because it was really awesome for me to see that during stressful times before a test I would watch them do their [yoga] practice in their seat. They would take the time to breathe. You could see them close their eyes and I know that they're 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



## What perspectives do stakeholders from the founding 'Sonima Schools' 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 provides additional movement and physical activity for students and further promotes 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 Charter Schools differed in the 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



### **Andria Shook, *Research Associate, University of San Diego***

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*. Currently, Dr. Shook is located in Houston, TX where she is leading health and wellness research throughout the Houston Independent School District. 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.



### **Hannah Johnson, *Research Assistant, University of San Diego***

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 Education of Policy and Law assisting in health and wellness programs for K-12 school district studies.