

Open Doors

Season 1 Episode 4: Mindfulness in Motion

Shannon Fagan 0:05

Welcome to open doors a podcast from the Allegheny intermediate unit that explores the people, programs and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, together, we're opening doors to learning, support and connection so every student can thrive.

Shannon Fagan 0:27

What if wellness spaces truly welcomed everyone for nearly a decade, our guest Marissa Vogel, has been making that possible in Pittsburgh open up teaches mindfulness through movement and art, helping both students and educators to manage stress, regulate emotions and access internal calming tools. Marissa and her team are helping to build capacity that students and staff can feel safe, celebrated and supported in this episode of open doors, Marissa shares why these skills are so important for everyone. Welcome Marissa and thank you for being here.

Marissa Vogel 1:00

Hi, Shannon, thank you for having me today. So

Shannon Fagan 1:02

excited to talk to you today about open up and what all you do. So I want to jump right in and ask you about the program. Can you tell us how it started, how it came about, and what are the unique aspects of it? Yeah.

Marissa Vogel 1:16

So as former teachers, we saw that many, many people, especially people with disabilities, were missing opportunities to participate fully in social, emotional learning and wellness activities that really were considerate and truly considerate of their needs. So we know also

that a lot of teachers have a lot on their plate. So open schools was created 10 years ago to bring movement mindfulness and creative expression to all students while centering inclusion from the start, we really hope to provide an experience that helps to teach the class students and teachers strategies for emotional regulation while they're in community together.

Shannon Fagan 1:54

Wow, that's a lot. And I think you guys have from learning about your program and getting to know what you all do? I think it would really be helpful for those listening to understand how you do it. How do you bring that to the school?

Marissa Vogel 2:07

Sure, so most typically, we provide weekly classes where students get to really practice yoga postures, mindful breathing and creative movement activities and also practice intentional thought like affirmations and gratitude as tools to help them feel more the way they want to feel in a situation. We can teach sample classes, or we also do assemblies about mindfulness, and we have professional developments for teachers that give a general overview of how the nervous system works in response to stress, and also ways to embed brief, accessible mindfulness moments throughout the day to benefit both teachers themselves and students and the greater school community.

Shannon Fagan 2:46

That's awesome. And how does that work? So I guess my question is, what schools are you currently in? And then how does that flow over to the community?

Marissa Vogel 2:55

Yeah, so we serve mostly pre K through 12 students in public, private and charter schools, and we have a special focus on supporting students with disabilities and educators who work with them. So while we provide classes for students in the inclusive school settings, we also serve students without disabilities in those spaces, and then we teach these practices that students can take into their families, into their other community spaces. So we have a space in Lawrenceville that we offer families and students to come to for

practice, and we also see students sometimes stepping into leadership roles. You know, even those first graders, they might be learning some of these practices and then really taking them to heart and teaching them to their classmates, or reminding their teachers about how to use them just in really natural ways. So we definitely see that the practice in school helps things to translate more easily into the community and into the rest of the life.

Shannon Fagan 3:55

And I'm sure after covid and with all the stress that we're facing now, you're probably more in need than ever before.

Marissa Vogel 4:02

Yeah, we've definitely seen a need for not only mindfulness and stress reduction. We see a lot of students and staff struggling and families also struggling with anxiety and just trying to navigate coming back from a period of social isolation, really trying to find ways to meaningfully reconnect with one another, and also find ways to reconnect with themselves, to identify how they feel in a moment, what they need, and how to communicate that in a way that feels safe for them.

Shannon Fagan 4:33

Feeling safe is so important today. Can you tell us a little bit about what kind of training or background your staff and facilitators have?

Marissa Vogel 4:41

Yeah, so our facilitators are trained in inclusive movement and mindfulness. They're also trained in trauma informed practices and disability awareness. Many of us also have backgrounds in education, exercise science or the arts,

Shannon Fagan 4:56

very cool, very cool. And you said that some of the students. Actually take on a leadership role. And so I do know that you do have a student that does also teach yoga that was really

that was something that was really intriguing to me, like how she was able to take that and then now she's teaching it, yeah.

Marissa Vogel 5:12

So that's a really great example of how we kind of bridge the school to community space, especially while centering students and people living with disabilities, because, as some may know, if you qualify for an IEP, you're also eligible for services beyond what is traditionally considered 12th grade, so usually that is employment services or life skills services. So we were able to partner with a school district, with Hampton School District actually to and also the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to provide a student with a 200 hour RYT yoga teacher training, which is actually internationally accredited by the yoga Alliance. So we worked with Emily. She's she's happy to share her name, she's proud of the work and her training. And we were able to train Emily through a 200 hour training, which we adapted based on international standards, but made accessible for Emily. And not only was Emily involved in that training, but she was involved in a cohort of 10 other people that were training alongside of her. So while we were working with and training Emily, we were also working with and training nine other people with diverse abilities, and they were working with and training one another on how to be more accessible and inclusive. And then, yes, you're right. We also did use that as a recruitment opportunity, and recruited Emily to teach for us at open up. And now she leads the class every Monday. And so you know, Emily is also someone who's living with Down syndrome, and as a young adult with Down syndrome, navigating the changes from the school setting to the community setting, it was really important for her to have some sort of autonomy and leadership opportunity as she went out and explored her future career opportunities and independent living. So we're happy to have a space for her to do that, and happy to bring her into the community and also have her bring community to us for for collaborative learning.

Shannon Fagan 7:05

That's awesome. We often talk with the programs that we do at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit about social emotional learning and social emotional wellness. So one of my questions is, what makes your program different from normal or everyday SEL programs that might be something that a school district

Marissa Vogel 7:21

purchases, sure, so we start with inclusion. It's not an add on, but it's foundation. So many SEL programs aren't necessarily designed with accessibility and disability inclusion in mind, so they might end up excluding the very students who could benefit the most. And we also like to think that, you know, when we have these different ways of centering disability, centering inclusion, centering accessibility, it not only makes practices more accessible for those who who might benefit from those different modes of learning, but also it helps people to to kind of bring them into their own life in all these various ways. It's, I always think about it as a way where you're like, you know, a kid tries to taste broccoli for the first time, and, you know, they're like, Oh, the first I guess it's like 15 times or something when you try broccoli. But you know, the more that we talk about these breath practices, we have visual schedules for them. We have opportunities to practice them in 30 seconds or in two minutes, like these different ways, using sensory cues like lights and sounds, these different modalities for accessing something don't just benefit one person. They benefit everyone. They give everyone different modalities and different touch points on how to access these sometimes abstract practices, or, you know, things that you think about doing you want to do. But then when you're in the moment when you really heat it up, when you really in that moment, it's hard to recall them. So we really try to center inclusion in

Shannon Fagan 8:46

that very cool. Okay, are there any special tools or practices or even philosophies you use to make your approach stand out?

Marissa Vogel 8:55

Yeah. So as I just touched on a bit, our approach really does draw from Universal Design for Learning, so we have sensory, friendly strategies and also culturally responsive teaching. So we intentionally make space for joy, because joy is a vital part of learning and resilience, a key part of our philosophy is embracing an improvisation mindset, so kind of like yes anding the student and helping them connect with their reality in the moment. As educators, we really must see what is actually happening, adapt and then scaffold accordingly, so our staff models flexibility, so that students learn that their ideas and their experience are valued, and that there are many ways to participate and succeed. It's not a one size fits all kind of mold. Everyone's bringing something to the table, and that's what we mean by culturally responsive, and that joyful piece you know, intentionally embedding that in really does make a difference, yeah,

Shannon Fagan 9:48

bringing that joy. What are the challenges you faced with implementing or scaling the program? Right?

Marissa Vogel 9:54

So one challenge is definitely ensuring that schools have the resources. To bring programming in, especially in underfunded districts. So just trying to help schools and families and communities navigate how they can bring these resources into their schools. And then also, you know, we do navigate situations where people have said, well, we've tried this before. We've had this calming corner. We've bought this curriculum, and it's just something that's collecting dust or it's not being used in the way that we spent all of these hours training on it. And so we really try and push back a little bit on that stigma and just say, like, Okay, well, you know, here's this little 32nd thing you can do at the beginning of, like a reading circle, or here's something that you can put into your parent communications. Or just, you know, these little embeddable practices that are really intentional, but also don't require a whole shift from your day to day.

Shannon Fagan 10:45

That's so important. That's what we hear all the time, that everyone is so busy, it's hard to take a new thing and add it. So providing tools and tips and tricks for the teachers is really important. Yeah, for sure. Yeah. So what's what's something about your program that you've learned that surprised you?

Marissa Vogel 11:03

Hmm, I think that I've learned that people are kind of willing to try new things. I mean, I knew that at my heart, but sometimes people see things as, you know, a little woo, woo or not, not important. And I've really just seen kind of a shift and shift in that kind of thinking. I've seen, especially when we're out tabling at like a community event like PTO fair, or we do a lot of block parties at different schools in the area and different neighborhoods, just to raise awareness of programming and whatnot. But you know, we'll see kiddos coming up and recognizing what a breath ball is. We have these different practices using sensory tools, and they know how to use them, and so it's really surprising to me, just the shift that I've seen in my career in education and just my lifetime of people really valuing and

interacting with these different tools, whether they be tangible, like physical tools that you can hold, or whether they just be practices that you kind of hold in your your own brain library to access. So yeah, I think it's just a little bit surprising to see how things change over time, but it also is. It's heartening and it's hopeful. So I guess it's a little bit of surprise in that way. Wow.

Shannon Fagan 12:17

Well, I think it's just so cool what you guys do. I think watching kids go through using those techniques and learning how to do these from themselves can carry over in their entire life. So I also know just from working with a few of the teachers that it's so much stress for them every day, so to just give them that moment of rest, or like, how do I reframe in the moment to make this day a better day, and I've seen that coming from you guys and being able to do that within a classroom. So I really appreciate the work that you guys do.

Marissa Vogel 12:48

Thank you very much. And I just, you know, I really do think it's so important just to I'll go back to it. Just one more thing that surprises me is how important it is just to name what's happening and how people are feeling. And in, like, with schools with administrators, like we've, you know, we've worked with superintendents before, it just naming that people do have emotions, that people are people, and people have interests, and, you know, they have things that happen in their day to day, students, teachers, parents, everyone who's involved in these school communities. So I think just by, like, naming that we have these social needs, we have these emotional needs, and they're what make us human. I really think that that's that makes a huge difference. So by just talking about it, it's already starting to have a shift.

Shannon Fagan 13:31

Just having that conversation exactly bringing awareness. So if educators, parents or community community members want to get involved or support your work. How would they do that? Sure.

Marissa Vogel 13:43

So I'd say in this moment, we're working on expanding our professional development offerings so that more teachers can feel confident about leading inclusive wellness moments and activities themselves. We're also developing digital resources so more people across the country can access open UPS approach, even if we can't be there in person. So some ways that we do, that we share out through our YouTube channel, we do a lot of partnership and learning opportunities, just like this podcast. Here we ourselves have a podcast called Sunday safe spaces, where we have our team reflecting on the intersection of race and disability. We just had our 50th episode. So really just you can find us on social media, our handles open up, PGH, on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and we have a YouTube channel with resources. People can also reach out directly to me. My name is Marissa Vogel, and I'm the Director of Operations and fundraising at open up. And if you email info at open up.org I will definitely see that and respond from my personal email, which just is a little more clunky to say on the air.

Shannon Fagan 14:49

Well, that's wonderful. I'm glad you have so many opportunities for people. Yeah, one last question I have for you. If you could leave our audience with one message about the importance of social emotional wellness. What would it be?

Marissa Vogel 15:03

Oh, one message about the importance of social emotional wellness. I would say that my message would be, just ask. Be curious and be curious about how you're feeling. Be curious about what's happening around you. Be curious about the kiddos in your life, your co workers, yeah, just be curious and and think about the different dynamic ways that there are to interact with practices. You know, it's anything we learn. You know, we go to school, we take classes, we we learn different structures for but then we have to tailor them and apply them to our own lives. So I think just you know, seeing that there is that opportunity for access and inclusion already in what we're doing, it doesn't have to be this whole separate thing, just thinking about curiosity around how we can take these practices and embed them in our own lives.

Shannon Fagan 15:53

Awesome. Thank you. Thank you so much for coming in and talking us today and sharing your story and your program story with us. We're very excited to be to have you as a

community member of our project, and excited to put this podcast out so other people can learn about it too. Thanks so

Marissa Vogel 16:09

much. Shannon, I love that you're doing this too. Thank you. You

Shannon Fagan 16:23

announcer, open doors is produced by Emily Wiley at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Thank you to the Center for Creativity at the University of Pittsburgh for use of their podcast studio. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan. Join us next time when we explore another inspiring program that's helping youth build resilience, empathy and emotional intelligence. Until then, keep the doors open. The content shared in this podcast is for informational purposes only. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit does not endorse or promote any specific program or service mentioned in this episode.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>