

EASTON COURIER

Incorporating News From The Town of Monroe

VOL. XXXIII NO. 20 \$1 SINGLE COPY

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32 PAGES

THURSDAY, MAY 18, 2006

Easton and Monroe, Connecticut
Thursday May 18 2006
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Ancient ritual could hold key to classroom calm

By LARISSA LYTWYN

Kathy Connor wants to change the world one student at a time.

Connor, a Shelton resident, is the Fairfield County representative of the Consciousness-Based Education Association (CBEA), part of the Global Country of World Peace, an international nonprofit organization.

One of Global Country's major goals is to implement transcendental meditation (TM) into mainstream classrooms.

Connor defines TM as a natural, mental exercise that people practice for a few minutes each day to help them settle their minds and bodies. Its purpose is to rejuvenate the spirit and reduce stress.

TM is founded in the Hindu tradition. A person practicing TM closes their eyes for 10 minutes and focuses on a single sound, word or phrase, called a mantra.

The mantra is intended to stir feelings of peace and calm within the person.

Connor helped organize the New England Conference on Children's Health and Education at Fairfield University earlier this month.

The Connecticut Committee for Stress-Free Schools, a state-based subcommittee of CBEA, hosted the conference.

The event featured several educators and doctors, who are proponents of implementing TM into Connecticut schools.

Their evidence is based on the results of studies that explore the link between TM and brain coherence.

One of the most famous cases is a 2003 study of 22 fifth graders at the Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse in Detroit.

Dr. Rita Benn of the University of Michigan's Complementary & Alternative Medicine Research Center, said the 22 Nataki fifth graders who were practicing TM generally performed better academically, and were

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Meditation—

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socially happier and better adjusted, than their non-TM practicing peers.

Connor, a longtime TM adherent, said the studies offer proof that "this program works."

Connor is currently in the process of establishing "peace palaces" facilities where seekers can learn more about TM as well as peace-oriented education programs, in Fairfield County.

"We have been looking in Easton for land to build on," she said. "But it is still very much in the early stages."

Connor said that CBEA was also reaching out to administrators and educators throughout the state through programs like the recent New England conference.

School Supt. Dr. Allen Fossbender said he had heard about TM and its positive influence on student performance. "We are open to it," he said.

The TM movement gained national attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It was in 1971 that TM advocates founded a nationally accredited university in Fairfield, Iowa: the Maharishi School and the Maharishi University of Management.

The Maharishi School's academic renown has gained international attention in recent years.

The school's director, Dr. Ashley Deans, was the keynote speaker at the New England conference.

"Students today are very, very stressed," Deans said. "The thinking of today's top schools is that there must be challenging curriculum in place. But there must be something else in place, too."

While scholastic rigor was essential, Deans said, it was

also imperative for students to achieve a balance between their educational responsibilities and their peace of mind.

"We want our students to do well. When they are overly stressed, they will not perform as well as they should," Deans said, "or as well as they *could*."

The Maharishi school has an open admissions policy. Its only requirement is that children 10 or older who choose to enter the school have parents that practice TM.

A mental practice, not a cult

Critics have argued that studies touting the benefits of TM have been, at best, inconclusive.

A large-scale literature review published in 2003 in *The Middle European Journal of Medicine* found that of 700 studies on TM spanning 40 years, only 10 were conducted in the clinical tradition of using control groups, randomization and placebos.

Of those 10, four of the studies recruited subjects who had already shown an interest in TM.

Other critics have expressed concern over TM's religious overtones, citing the conflicting separation of church and state TM could face in a mainstream classroom.

But Connor said that TM was inherently a mental practice that transcended religious or political identification.

"I was raised a Roman Catholic, and I have remained one," she said.

Connor said it was important that educators keep an open mind and look at scientific evidence before casting judgment.

For more information, visit the CBEA website at www.cbeaprograms.net, call 256-9705, or email Kathy Connor at kconnor@globalcountry.net.