

# Mindfulness in Education: A Conversation with Dr. Uchenna Orji and Stefanie Lachenauer

## Speakers:

- **Dr. Uchenna Orji:** Eagleton Science Fellow at the New Jersey Department of Education
- **Stefanie Lachenauer:** 2025 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, educator for over 18 years in the Montgomery Township School District

## Introduction

---

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** Back in 2021, during the height of the pandemic, I was in medical school. I was looking for ways to sort of relieve stress. Some of my friends started planting, other friends started baking sourdough, and for me, my outlet was running. I ran track in high school, ran cross country, so I would actually go along the railroad path along the river.

And I would run. The first time I ran was a bit of a shock to me. I was out of shape super exhausted. So I remember looking up a YouTube video, how you breathe on long runs. I learned that there was a way that marathoners breathe to, I guess, maximize their efficiency and maximize their endurance. I started to implement that, but one thing I noticed was breathing, like they explained, which is basically [breath sounds]...I couldn't do that with the music playing with me running, and so I actually turned off my music. I turned off my music and I started to listen to my breath. I started to listen to my feet. I heard birds, I heard bees. I felt dragonflies, whizzing past my ear, saw and heard, and kind of was freaked out by some geese that were hissing at me. I guess because her kiddies were there with her, and I just heard and smelled the vegetation, the wind rustling through the leaves.

And I came back home to my roommates and I was like, that was the best run I've ever been on. And they were like, oh, explain how, how so? And I was like, I wasn't listening to music and they thought that was kind of weird, but I just told them like, that was the first time I really felt present. I really listened to my body, listened to my surroundings, and I think that was my first introduction to mindfulness without even knowing what mindfulness was at that point.

So my name is Dr. Uchenna Orji. I am working here at the New Jersey Department of Education as an Eagleton Science Fellow. And today, I'm joined by Stefanie Lachenauer, the 2025 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year. She has been an educator for over 18 years in the Montgomery Township School District where she's led groundbreaking initiatives in student wellbeing, leadership and civic engagements. She's a civics and mindfulness teacher, certified in yoga and mindfulness, and a driving force behind programs that integrate mindfulness into the classroom. Stefanie has also taken her work to the global stage where she presented at the Global Leadership Summit in Berlin on sports and wellness, helping shape international discussions on student wellbeing. Her commitment to mindfulness education not only impacted her students, but also inspired educators across the state. Stefanie, it is a great honor to have you here today.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Thank you so much. It's such a joy to be here with you and hearing your story, a

great story about mindfulness.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** So in recent years, mental health and behavioral health conditions in our youth have been worsening. Unfortunately, over time in 2022, the White House released a strategy whereby the federal government collected data on children to help address the national mental health crisis. In 2023, 5.3 million adolescents aged 12 to 17, which is about 20% of this age group were diagnosed with at least one mental or behavioral health condition, such as anxiety, depression, behavior, and conduct problems.

So we also know that social media is becoming a larger and larger issue for our students. In fact, Governor Phil Murphy recently came out in his state of address to the state of New Jersey that he would like to ban cell phones in schools across the state given all these different factors.

There is a lot going on in our schools. A lot of things that teachers deal with, a lot of things that our students deal with as it relates to mental health. Stefanie, can you speak to some of the things that you've seen in your experiences as a teacher as it relates to this mental health issue that we're facing?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Yeah, absolutely. I think this has become a growing issue. It's something that we've seen, we've seen kids struggle with stress, with being worried about tests, about friendships. Especially at the middle school level. But now I think we're seeing this grow, so it's not a small population. I think we're seeing a larger and larger population of students who are struggling with this.

One of the main things, I think phones definitely play a part in it. We do see that show up in our schools as well. Sometimes students joke about their phone being like an emotional support thing, but the truth is it kind of is an emotional support thing. When they don't have it near them, there's this anxiety about what they're missing about what else is going on.

But it also forms these other feelings of overwhelm in what's happening on that social media. So there's a lot going on right now in research and even the district I'm from. We're doing book clubs right now where we are talking about social media, we are talking about screen time and its impact on mental health.

We're also seeing, you know, different trends and how that's showing up in student behavior. TikTok has different trends. One of them had to do with student bathrooms. So we're seeing some of that show up. And these behaviors also are showing us how these kids are when they're acting out in this way that doesn't feel good.

Right? When we act poorly or we disrupt or dismantle something, something else is going on and underlying that, that issue. So we are seeing things in that way as well, seeing the way that students are interacting with each other, the way that they are wanting to learn how to cope with stress. So they're starting to realize. I'm having more and more students who are developing more language. I think that's one of the benefits of social media, is that they now have the words and language to describe how they're feeling. And knowing like this is overwhelming, this is too much. I need help.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** So we know that, right? We can't solve all of these challenges overnight, but one tool that we do have in helping students and educators is mindfulness. And we've been talking a lot about mindfulness, but I would like for us to define mindfulness. Stefanie, can you walk us through what

mindfulness means?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Sure. So Jon Kabat-Zinn is responsible for making mindfulness very popular in United States. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn actually is a doctor and he did a lot of his research on patients with pain. So he had patients who were experiencing all this pain, pain medication wasn't really helping, it was chronic pain.

And he wondered about what happens if they practice mindfulness, how would that help? And what he found is that it actually did help to reduce the levels of pain. So that's just the quick story of how it came here. So that's such a great way for us to think about it. It doesn't make something necessarily go away, but it helps us to tolerate or deal with it.

So the definition of mindfulness, according to Jon Kabat-Zinn, is mindfulness means paying attention on purpose in the present moment, nonjudgmentally. So when I talk about that with students, I say that mindfulness is paying attention in the present moment, right, with kindness and curiosity. So that means that we're paying attention, we're curious about what's happening.

We're not judging the experiences. It's happening, but we're fully present with it. And the truth is we're always paying attention to something. But it's about paying attention to what's happening right here and right now. Not paying attention to the thoughts of the past or the future right here and now and on purpose, right? Because sometimes we're paying attention to the present, but maybe it's not what we're choosing to pay attention to. So it's focused on purposeful attention.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** It makes a lot of sense. And I feel like I was doing those things on my runs without even realizing it.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** A hundred percent.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** And another thing with mindfulness too, is there's a lot of science behind mindfulness. There has been research done on the brain, research done on our nervous system, to really get to the center of how it helps us sort of regulate ourselves, calm us down, make us feel better, make us be more attentive. The big thing is the interplay between our parasympathetic nervous system and our sympathetic nervous system.

So you might have heard that the sympathetic nervous system represents our fight or flight response. A lot of times when we're stressed, that SNS for short is always firing. It's always active, and that is very exhausting to our body. The parasympathetic nervous system represents our rest and digest system.

So when we're in times of calm, when we're in times of rest, this system is more activated. At the heart of mindfulness is we want to get at ways to heighten our parasympathetic nervous system and dampen our sympathetic nervous system. Many different techniques, we can talk about them shortly, will help us activate our parasympathetic nervous system.

Another aspect of mindfulness is the concept of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons were first studied in the 1990s. Basically we have these neurons in our brain that are active whenever we perform a task or whenever we witness somebody else performing that same task. So what's interesting is you can derive

the same benefits if you are interacting in something or if you see somebody else doing the same thing. One good example is if I'm smiling, I can feel good. If I see a baby smiling, if I see somebody else smiling, I can also feel good even if I'm not smiling myself. So that's really interesting and it plays a crucial role in mindfulness and the effectiveness of these practices. Another big thing is co-regulation, and I'll pass it over to Stefanie to explain more about co-regulation and how it plays a part in mindfulness.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Thank you for explaining the science behind that. So I, sometimes I, when I think about those mirror neurons, I think about those days when I'm coming into the classroom and maybe it was a day where I'm late, I spilled my coffee, I'm feeling super dysregulated and I go to start speaking to my class and I can feel that they're becoming more and more dysregulated, right?

So they're mirroring what I'm feeling. The opposite is true too. You know, when I come in and I'm a calm presence, even when they are like losing their minds, hanging from the ceilings all over the place, when I'm that calm presence, they start to feed into that and feel it as well. And so that leads us right into co-regulation.

So we know that babies can't regulate themselves. They'll cry. And so what happens is, you know, a caregiver will pick them up. We'll rock them, we'll shush them. And so what the caregiver is actually doing is co-regulating with that baby to help them get to that calm state. And so that same thing is true for kids as they grow up, right.

Little by little caregivers, other adults that are around them help them to co-regulate when they're dysregulated and so that eventually they begin to start learning those practices themselves. If nothing else in our own classrooms, when the educator, the teacher, whoever is leading that class that day, when they're regulated in that calm place that is also signaling to students. To bring that regulation to them, it's giving them that presence, that strong self, that strong regulation.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** I've definitely seen this at play working with kids in the behavioral clinic. So during my child psych adolescent rotation in med school, I worked with kids who had various behavioral problems. There was one child in particular who was dealing with oppositional defiant disorder, which is one of our diagnoses, marked by heightened aggression, disobedience towards authority. She was very argumentative and also very manipulative towards her parents and other kids in the clinic. One of the things that we would do is we would challenge her to see if she could regulate on her own in the face of these challenges. We kind of knew her trigger points. We would give her all these tools, whether it was in group therapy, one-on-one therapy, these mindfulness tools, box breathing, journaling, grounding herself. We would walk her through these techniques, teach them to her, such that whenever we challenged her, we wanted to see if she would reach into that toolbox and start to self-regulate.

Towards the end of her stay, it was remarkable seeing her work with other kids inside the clinic. And she would kind of sneak off into her room and I would follow her and see her practicing these techniques. She was box breathing on her bed. She was journaling, right? She was grounding herself. And I remember at the end, when she was getting discharged, she told me and the rest of the team that she's very thankful for some of the tools that we gave her.

These are kids who don't want to allow themselves to get to that heightened state all the time. It doesn't feel good, but they don't have the tools, they don't have the knowledge so that when they start to feel themselves getting agitated, starting to get heightened, what can we do? What can I do? And that's what mindfulness does, is it gives these kids tools to use whenever they need them.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** And I love that you practiced these with her first, right? So they were practiced in a calm state first. It's almost like a fire drill, right? How many times we practice that fire drill over and over and we're like, well, it's simple.

You just do this. But if you had a real fire without doing that, you know, we wouldn't maybe leave in that calm order. Exactly. So, we keep practicing this so that when we have that crisis situation or we're in that high stress situation, you know to go back to it. So that's such a beautiful story. Thank you for sharing that.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji :** No problem. It's definitely impacted me. I now use mindfulness myself because I see it can help people and I think it was such a stark contrast between how she first presented to when we discharged her. And it was just super cool to see that.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** So, Uche, you told us a lot about some of your experiences and the science behind some of that, but can you tell us a little bit more about the evidence and what the research tells us about mindfulness and mindfulness in schools?

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** Absolutely. There is robust research on the impacts and benefits of mindfulness in schools. The biggest thing being what we see in the students, right? It improves social functioning. There's a lot of research that indicates mindfulness interventions in the classroom and in the school can enhance social relationships by fostering empathy, reducing aggression, and minimizing disruptive behaviors.

And these things when taken together, it's just more conducive to learning. There are less disruptions in the class. Students can be more focused. And what does that mean? We're seeing better academic performance in these kids. There are studies that consistently demonstrate that mindfulness programs lead to improvements in academic outcomes, such as increased GPA scores, test scores, and math performance by enhancing focus and concentration and reducing test anxiety. What we're seeing is kids are more confident going into tests, they're more confident doing their homework right? They're more excited to engage in these activities, and it's not just on the student end either.

We're seeing a lot of impact and benefits for educators. So mindfulness based practices for teachers can improve self-regulation, increase job satisfaction. And foster essential skills such as non-judgment, observation, and emotional resilience. And what does that mean? There are studies that say that teachers experience far less burnout once they have these mindfulness practices integrated into the curriculum. I think a big thing for that too is I felt the same thing while I was in med school. A lot of med students deal with burnout. There's a whole bunch of hours, a whole bunch of studying, going into the hospital, dealing with patients, coming back, having to read and study.

There are a lot of kids who suffer from burnout, especially during the Covid pandemic when we were all dealing with outside stressors as well. I felt that doing mindfulness during that time helped me a little bit with that sense that we all get, whether we're teachers, whether we're students, we all feel these stressors, and I think that mindfulness definitely helped.

So, Stefanie, can you talk to me a little bit about how you've integrated mindfulness into your classroom?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Absolutely. So it started kind of slowly, like I was practicing yoga and mindfulness for myself and I was like, wow, this is like really helping. And at the same time I was noticing a lot of stressors in my students.

There was a lot of crying, there were a lot of tears, there were a lot of students who were like, worked up sometimes in social situations. And I spent a great deal of my time in the hallway with kids, you know, one-on-one helping them to regulate, which I didn't know what that was at the time, but that's what I was doing.

Helping them to get back into their learning part of their brain so they could keep going for the rest of their day. And as I practiced all these things for myself, I was like, maybe I'll just start trying one thing at a time. And so that's kind of how it started. It was, you know, the kids were nervous before a test, all right, before we even touch the test, before we even touch the test guys, we are going to get into the learning part of our brain.

We're going to help ourselves de-stress a little bit because we're not going to do really well on this test if we're in this heightened state. So I kind of laid it out like that. And then we would do, you know, box breathing or we would do heart and belly breath. And I would, each time I would just try something new that I was learning.

And as I was learning these new things, I realized in order to be a really good educator, to get really deep into this with my students, I needed to really practice this myself. So I couldn't be like I'm just going to try one thing here and there. I knew I wanted to implement this more. So, that's how I ended up going into getting certified and taking more classes.

So I did my own practice. And I noticed even with that, that who I showed up as in the classroom was different. I was regulated, I was calmer, I had a greater window of tolerance, meaning I could handle a lot more of the big emotions that came into the room with a lot more grace and a lot more skill. And I was noticing that it was having an impact on my students.

So just my own practice was helping. So then I was like, imagine what's going to happen if I taught these kids these skills? Like I'm learning this now. What if I had those skills as a middle schooler? Because as a middle schooler, I was that kid who would melt on the floor. Whenever I had a big paper, I had a project, I literally was in tears and I thought this was normal.

Like, yeah, I'm cool and calm and collected in school, but like at home, like everyone does this, like everyone just cries every time that they have to write a paper. Apparently that's not true. I had students

who I was like, I'm sure they were also having those experiences, so let me teach them, let me learn more about this so I can bring that to them.

So that was kind of how it began. And there were definitely flops in the process, but the more that I practiced with them, the more that I saw our classroom culture begin to change and shift. It's very clear that you've built an ecosystem around mindfulness in your classrooms, right? It's a huge integral part to how you teach, how you interact with your students.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** And you've obviously received the training for it. You're a mindfulness instructor, yoga instructor, so many can say that Stefanie is about that life, right? How can educators who may be new to mindfulness start to dip their toes into this field, and what are some ways they could implement things into their classroom to start their journey on mindfulness?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think step one is always, it starts with you. It starts with us, the educator. It starts with you, teachers. You are the most valuable resource in that classroom, the most valuable resource, how we show up makes all the difference for our students. So when we are calm and regulated, those mirror neurons, man science, right?

It makes such an impact for our kids. So I think step one would be to practice something yourself. So pick a mindfulness practice and start utilizing it and see how that makes you feel. Some other things that you can do are when you start practicing some things yourself, noticing which ones you like, but slowly start that with your students like I did, you know, maybe before a test or when there's something that students are struggling with and know they're stressed out about. State testing is always a great time to start this also or to continue it. Another thing is if you have a Zen Den or calm corner, a regulation station, whatever you wanna call it, but a space in your classroom where students can go to help themselves get regulated and you can have in that different resources, different tools, that could be like a whole other lesson.

You can Google that to come up with ideas, but I can talk about that forever. But having that space for students to go, so after you teach them some things, now they have a separate room that they can go to. Practice some of it. And then I think another great thing you can do is looking for professional development around it. There's lots of organizations that have professional development, so learning more about how you can implement that.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** Stefanie, how have students responded to these mindfulness things in your classroom?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** So, that's a great question. Initially, I'm not going to lie, it was a tough start, but I started this also 10 years ago.

No one was really—actually, it was more than 10 years ago—but no one was talking about mindfulness at the time. No one was talking about this. So I had a lot of building up to do for people to respect and understand what it was, you know, talking to administration about it, talking to other teachers about it.

But then also my own students, right? How do I get that buy-in? When it began, it did not go well. And I will tell you a little story about that. So I, I was trying it in the classroom and they would, kids would do it, but they would roll their eyes and you know, I teach middle school, so they're not afraid to tell you when they don't like something.

So it was very clear to me by the words that they used and how they responded that they did not like practicing mindfulness. There were groans, like 'Oh, this again.' And so I was at the point where I was like, and is this worth the battle? I was ready to stop because, you know, they don't like it.

I'm fighting the fight, like trying to, to talk to other people about the importance of it. I'm pulling in research, I'm really trying to, to be at the forefront of this, but I, I'm not sure that, like, who am I doing this for? If they hate it and no one wants me to do this, why am I doing it?

So one day it's state testing. It's like NJSLA or something at the time. On my way to school, it had just rained. And now in the school district I teach in, when it rains, it doesn't just rain and pour. It also floods. So every road to get to school was closed like every road. And it's supposed to take me 30 minutes. It took me two hours.

So now I'm very late. It's state testing. I had to call the VP. She knows I'm coming in late, so I kind of tiptoe in the back of the classroom. They already started. And as soon as the kids see me, they're like, "She's here! Thank God she's here. Where were you? There was no one here to breathe with us!" And I was like, what?

I'm sorry, where is this? The Twilight Zone? What is happening right now? I was like, you guys, I thought, I thought you hated this. Like, you roll your eyes at me, you complain. You made it very clear that you don't like this. And they were just like, yeah, well, but like, but we actually need it.

So I think my other message is if you're starting this, kids aren't always gonna tell you when something's helpful, right? Not always going to tell you that they like it. And so there might be some eye rolls. There might be a little bit of complaining, but the way I think about this work is that we're planting seeds.

We're going to keep doing this a little bit at a time, and I don't know how those seeds are going to grow. I don't know when they're going to germinate. I don't know when they're going to blossom into beautiful flowers, but I do know that each of those seeds, everything that I'm sharing, has all the resources they need so that they have those skills when they need it. So that that can bloom into whatever kind of flower that they're ready to utilize.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** There are a lot of things about kids that I love. I have nieces. We would watch a movie. She says she hates it, and then I come back and she's quoting the movie. So I don't know how many times she's watched this movie, but she definitely likes it enough to remember all the quotes. We've talked about mindfulness and given a lot of attention, but it represents just one lever we can pull to support and foster a more healthy school climate. Stefanie, how does mindfulness fit into a larger movement towards supporting wellbeing in our schools?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** That's a great question. So to me, mindfulness is like the start. Like mindfulness is the base, right? Because mindfulness is present moment awareness, right? Kindness and curiosity or



non-judgment. But it's in the present moment. And so when we're teaching students to pay attention to the present moment, to pay attention to how they're feeling, right?

Step one is I notice how I'm feeling and then I can do something about it. Like the regulation strategies follow that, right? 'cause if I don't recognize that I'm mad, I have no control over the mad, right? So I think it helps to place that control. All of our control, all of the power we have is in the now, it's in the present moment.

So it helps students to be in that space. And then from there, there's so much that we can build on. We can teach more regulation strategies. We can work on building more things in our school climate and culture. We can work together with our other teachers and we can partner on different projects.

So there's a lot more that we can do with that. But mindfulness to me, really is that step one to really get started. Uche, what is next for mindfulness in the state of New Jersey?

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** That's a great question. Here at the New Jersey DOE, we're building out our student wellness page. On our website, we're going to include instructional videos, mindfulness guided practice handouts, where we walk you through different techniques. Box breathing, butterfly hugs, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding techniques. We also have additional resources as well, pointing educators to different organizations that sort of specialize in mindfulness and also just some background information so parents and students can read and learn more about what mindfulness is.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** That's awesome.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** Stefanie, what do you think is one key takeaway for educators who want to get started?

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** I think the big thing you can takeaway is in order to start, you should just start. So try mindfulness practice for yourself, and like we said, mirror neurons, right? So you are the most important resource in that room.

So even if you're not ready to bring it to your students yet, if you practice mindfulness for yourself, that alone will have a huge impact on your classroom, but also for yourself.

**Dr. Uchenna Orji:** That's great advice. It all starts with one, in order to walk around the world, you take one step.

Stefanie, thank you so much for sharing your insights and experiences today. It's clear that mindfulness is a powerful tool that can really make a difference in the lives of students and teachers across New Jersey. We understand that mindfulness won't solve every problem, but it does help create a more supportive and focused learning environment. To our listeners, if you're interested in learning more, you can check out the student wellness page that we've talked about and start your mindfulness journey. Thank you all for tuning in.

**Stefanie Lachenauer:** Thank you.