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## Why Kids Love Maharishi School

### A Balance of Rest and Activity Makes Children Better Students

BY LINDA EGENES



**Parents Carol Chesnutt and Paul Winer moved to Fairfield, Iowa, so their children—Evelyn Chase and Philip—could attend the Maharishi School. (photo by Lin Mullenneaux)**

Carol and Paul Chesnutt-Winer lived the American dream—Paul had a good job as a business consultant, they lived near extended family, were active in their church. Their two children, Evelyn Chase, 6, and Philip, 9, attended one of Atlanta's best schools.

Yet Carol was unhappy with the tense atmosphere at the school. "The children were learning in an environment that was significantly stressed, where the teachers, though truly excellent, were under tremendous pressure to produce high test scores," Carol says.

The pressures extended to their son Philip, who participated in a gifted program, yet suffered from nightmares and felt less and less motivated to keep up with the extra work. Then the Chesnutt-Winers visited the Maharishi School in the summer of 2007. "When we saw the children, how relaxed yet focused they were, I thought, 'This is the answer to my prayers,'" Carol says.

By the end of September, Paul located a consulting job that would allow him to be based in Fairfield, and Carol, who had a consulting and engineering background, was offered a job teaching personal finance and business math at the upper school. Within two weeks, they had bought a house, pulled up stakes, and moved to Fairfield.

In another part of the country, in Cleveland, Ohio, Lisa Rizer was on a search. A recently divorced mother, she was looking for a loving, caring educational environment for her two school-aged children, Matthew, 8, and Autumn, 5. At one point, she felt the only alternative was to start her own school.

"I had put my two older children through public school, but I was constantly looking for something better, where my kids could learn without the stress of ridiculous amounts of homework being piled on them," she says. "For me personally, it was the biggest 'aha' when I found out about Maharishi School. I found myself not searching anymore. It was just a matter of moving to the place where that education was."

What is it about this school that causes people to literally pull up stakes overnight and start over in a small Iowa town?

#### Stress-free Learning

Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment (MSAE), founded in 1981, is a K-12 private school located in Fairfield. It's a school with an open-admissions policy, yet upper school students consistently score in the top 1 percent on standardized tests, 95 percent of its graduates are

accepted to four-year universities, and students on all levels regularly garner state and national awards in everything from science fairs to state drama competitions. During the past seven years alone, this small school has produced more than 10 times the national average of National Merit Scholar finalists.

One cold December day, I find myself sitting in Dr. Richard Beall's office on the second floor of the light-filled Maharishi School building. Dr. Beall, although one of the founding faculty of the school, is himself a recent transplant, having spent the last five years running a charter school in Charlotte, NC.

"Kids everywhere know stress, whether they are high achievers or low-performing students," he says in his quiet, authoritative voice. "To see a school that offers a college-prep curriculum and yet the kids become less stressed as they learn—that's not a common formula in education."

The main difference is something called Consciousness-Based education, Dr. Beall explains. "Consciousness-Based education acknowledges that learning depends on how conscious or awake we are, so every part of the curriculum develops the awareness of the student, waking up the total brain functioning."

Dr. Beall notes that this is primarily achieved when the students practice the Transcendental Meditation technique, as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, at the beginning and end of each school day. The technique has been shown in peer-reviewed research studies to significantly reduce stress, improve health, and boost academic performance. Dr. Beall also points out that every influence during the school day—from daily yoga to eating organic lunches to the design of the building—is specifically designed to develop the full potential of the student.

"You see the differences in so many ways," Carol Chesnutt-Winer says. In Atlanta, her children had six hours of pure academics, she says. At MSAE, they start school an hour later, with only five hours of academic instruction, plus meditation, physical education, art, and music.

Recent research concurs that a later school starting time boosts grades. Notes Lisa Rizer, "Children need more sleep; their biological clocks don't work the same as ours. My child can wake up naturally, have breakfast with me. It's not so rush-rush."

"There's a balance of rest and activity," Carol adds. "The school lives what they talk about. There's very little homework in the lower school. Of course, that jumps up dramatically when the children are older, but for the younger kids, they're trying to set the tone that learning is non-stressful, a joyful event."

She feels this is critical for learning. "In the Atlanta schools, the primary purpose was to teach the kids from a basic curriculum, to teach to the standardized tests," she says. "The emphasis at MSAE is on the whole child, and that brings about a stark change in the classroom. The children here are achieving as much but at the same time are remarkably calm, focused, comfortable with themselves, and ready to learn. It's very striking when you've experienced both worlds."

Lisa agrees. "The proof is in the children, how they are. They look you in the eye, there's an open affection and kindness between them. They have a different quality—it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

### **A Green Curriculum**

One of the big draws for both the Chesnutt-Winers and Lisa Rizer was the sustainability curriculum at the school. With a four-season greenhouse and edible landscaping that allows children to snack on raspberries, strawberries, asparagus, and herbs while passing through the courtyard, the school offers one of the top sustainability programs in the country.

"The sustainability curriculum, like the rest of our school, is all about making connections," says Dr. Beall. "When you connect to deeper values of yourself, then it's easier to see the connection between yourself and your environment."

The students are taught a "seed to plate" concept, where they grow lettuce and other vegetables in the greenhouse and then sample them.

Carol appreciates the emphasis on growing and eating healthy food. She says, "After harvesting greens he had helped grow, my son, Philip, said, 'Mom, the bok choy in the salad tasted so good!' Of course, I had been trying to get him to eat salad for years without success."

Carol also likes the fact that there's a full hour for lunch, and parents are encouraged to eat with their children at home or in the cafeteria, which serves organically grown and local food.

"In Atlanta, we were always swimming uphill when it came to food," says Carol. "The cafeteria menu there included no fresh vegetables because they were considered too expensive."

Last fall the school's sustainability coordinator, Diana Krystofiak, helped students build cold frames out of locally milled lumber, cook with solar ovens, plant trees, transplant seeds, and participate in other community-wide projects. Students have also installed a solar-powered drip-line system that pumps rainwater to the plants, and they handle the school's recycling and composting.

## Expansion Plans

The school plans to expand its green curriculum, institute a boarding school option for the upper school, and recruit more international students.

That's good news to Byung-jun Park, a 14-year-old South Korean student who enrolled in the eighth grade at MSAE last November. Brendan, as he is called in America, followed a typical schedule in Korea, attending his public school from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., then taking a subway for further study at a private academy each afternoon. There he studied English, Korean, math, and science until 10:30 or 12:00 at night, arriving home as late as 2:00 a.m. when preparing for exams.

"When I was nine or ten, I was a top student," he says. "But then I started to feel stressed and started to gain a lot of weight. My grades went down." After one of his teachers recommended the Transcendental Meditation technique in March 2007, he says he lost the excess weight and felt less sleepy when studying at night.

"The first time I heard about MSAE, I knew I wanted to go there," he says. He started the application and visa process over a year ago. With the encouragement of his parents, he traveled to the U.S., and now boards with his science teacher and family while attending the school.

He misses his family and friends but so far is happy with his decision. "This school is better because it doesn't serve junk food, because I can go to bed early and practice TM, and when my friends here have free time, they want to play basketball instead of addicting and stressful video games."

### Establishing Quiet Time in More Schools

In 2005, the film director David Lynch started a foundation to fund students, teachers, and parents to practice the Transcendental Meditation technique as part of a "Quiet Time" program during the school day. During the past two years, the David Lynch Foundation has funded more than 3,000 students and faculty in 20 U.S. and Canadian schools to start the Quiet Time/TM program, with hundreds of schools awaiting funding. Over 60,000 students in 19 Latin-American countries have also been funded. These schools (many in high-stress urban areas) have reported a dramatic decrease in violence, improvements in test scores, and a reduction in symptoms such as ADHD.

The basis for this rapid expansion is the continued success of the Maharishi School. Because it is the model school for all Consciousness-Based schools, it is continually working to improve its curriculum and develop new programs for similar schools around the world. It depends on fundraisers to support its expansion programs.

The David Lynch Foundation's efforts to bring the Quiet Time/TM program to every child has recently gained support from Paul McCartney and other world-class entertainers, who will headline an April 4 benefit concert in New York City.

As Carmen N'Namdi, a principal who has instituted the Quiet Time/TM program in her school in Detroit, Michigan, says, "In students, we have seen the TM program enhance study skills, academic performance, critical thinking skills, interpersonal and social skills—all because of the deep rest that the body is receiving. We are looking forward to the years to come when more and more schools and work environments will realize that not much gets done until the stress is out of the way.

*Linda Egenes is a Fairfield-based freelance writer who writes about alternative health and lifestyles.*

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written by Al Gabis, February 20, 2009

Part 2 of 2

That's really the critical point I think: the posing of questions -- engaging in open discussion (as we're doing here) -- the freedom to think and act, and speak, as you, yourself, perceive is the correct way. It's hugely important. We're not dummies. People at this university, and in this town, are very intelligent. Why do you never hear questions and answers (other than David Lynch, bless his heart, who talks for a couple of minutes, and then \*invites\* questions)? Now kids, on the other hand, may not be sophisticated enough, not mentally developed enough, to enter into such

discussions. They don't know the right questions to ask. But even if they did, are they allowed to ask them at MSAE? I'm not being negative, I'm just asking. Are the kids encouraged to be thoughtful, to carefully consider, to get to the bottom of things (as Vernon Katz, in his talk at the dome, described Buckminster Fuller as doing)? Not to be just parrots, mimes who recite back to the teacher the same words that he/she spoke, but to pause and reflect. Where does that independent thinking come from? And, for that matter, where does the independent \*action\* come from -- the famous "spontaneous right action" that we heard Maharishi speak about so many times way back when? I myself think it comes with long-term practice of TM, and the internal growth that accompanies it -- and yet -- I don't always see folks acting spontaneously when it comes to asking questions about such topics -- not even meditators.

Look -- at the dome we're told to leave our intellects at the door. Fair enough. It's all about experience. But at some point the intellect \*must\* be satisfied, and so far mine just isn't -- not with Vastu, or Jyotish or Yagya or a number of other things -- and I suggest that yours shouldn't be either -- unless you're one of the very rare (may no longer exist) people who can honestly, \*honestly\* say they have \*cognized\* what Vastu, etc., does for you. Stars and planets affecting my life!! Wow! Come on! You don't need to be an Einstein to see that even the hint of such an idea is utterly astonishing! I'm mystified, in complete awe at what those ancient "seers" or whatever they were, who invented, created, the Vedic text, accomplished. Looking up at, say, the planet Mars and thinking "this has to do with anger" ... yikes! Mind-blowing! Who would have even \*conceived\* of such a thought? Is it any wonder that a Western trained mind, an objectively trained scientist, would be seriously skeptical of something like this? As little as I know about it, it's simply astonishing, the breadth and detail of Vedic practices and traditions. Mind boggling. Still -- again -- we're not sheep, we're not mindless automatons -- we have the same potential as those ancients did. We shouldn't abandon our bottom faculties just to be one of the crowd. Get to the bottom of things. Be a Buckminster Fuller.




Dr. Beall was at one time the lay leader of the Boone, NC Unitarian-Universalist church, which I attended briefly. At their Sunday service they would often have a guest speaker, and afterward they would invariably allow a "talk-back" session. Wonderful. Are there any talk-back opportunities here? I truly hope that the MUM and MSAE students are getting them.

Again -- thanks for answering. (And thank you Iowa Source for enabling the discussion.) You're one of very few people it seems who wants to talk about these questions.

best

ag

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written by Alexander Gabis, February 20, 2009

(Note: I'm breaking up this comment into pieces because the system won't accept it's length)



Hey Mary: I'm glad someone replied! I'm sorry you gave me a thumbs down on my comment. I guess the quotes were not necessary around Vedic, you're right. I must tell you that I'm not sure what Vedic actually means. I realize there are hundreds of millions of Indians whose traditions and heritage are derived from some ancient practices termed Vedic, but beyond that I confess my ignorance. I've heard Dr. Morris and others comment that much (?most?) of the ancient wisdom has been lost, and that furthermore, many (most?) of the millions of Indians who are practicing things that appear to us Westerners as Vedic, are not authentic, or at least, not endowed with the essential element of transcendental experience that connects the outer to the inner. So how, then, do we term what all those people are doing? And how can any westerner, without any other contact with Indians, of their culture, possibly be able to judge that Maharishi was truly distinct and different from all those other millions of people who came from that tradition? I don't think we can. Is Maharishi the only true Vedic master? I simply don't know. I think we respect what he taught people here, and what he accomplished, we say thank-you, and that's all that's necessary.

As for the indoctrination part, I can't say what other term might be appropriate, because I've never spent any time inside a classroom with MSAE students. But judging by what I myself have been exposed to, I might argue that it's not too far off the mark. Look -- TM and TM-sidhi are \*techniques\*. Very concrete, very precise. Things I can \*do\* and not even have to believe in them. In fact, right from the start we were told to be as skeptical as we want, but simply practice, be regular, and the results would come. Later on there came some solid studies (such as what Dr. Sarina Grosswald just did with ADHD kids), to back up the experiences. With the other stuff -- like Vastu and Jyotish -- it's a whole different thing. There isn't any technique involved, unless you want to say a sort of "wishful thinking" is a technique, and I don't imagine even Maharishi would have encouraged that. We don't get any explanation of, say Vastu, that satisfies the intellect. Maharishi, and then others, simply said south is bad, or whatever, so go and tear down your non-vastu house! What is this!? Why should any clear-thinking person, anyone who has even the slightest degree of analytical thought, abide by such a totally strange notion (at least to our Western minds) -- the

abandonment and even outright destruction of your home simply because of the direction it faces -- regardless of who told him/her to do it -- Maharishi or anyone else -- without \*some\* cognition or \*some\* intellectual foundation? Yet people just go along with this without the slightest questioning of it. Yes? Isn't that how it is? So I don't think it's too far off the mark to say they are being indoctrinated -- not forcefully, perhaps, -- voluntarily, maybe -- but tell me what else to call it when people act simply out of, what? A desire to be like everyone else? To go along with the crowd? I can't figure out people's motivation. And then on top of it, no opportunity to raise questions about the whole thing.

End of part 1

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written by Mary, February 11, 2009

Dear AI,

Why use the word "indoctrination" with all its negative connotations? And the quotes around "Vedic"? (If the Maharishi Vedic approach to education is not Vedic, than who or what really is?)

Although TM forms the foundation for good mental and physical health, good social behavior, and of course good grades, Consciousness-based education includes much more than meditation (quiet time) for kids and their teachers. Everything you mention above about the "attending beliefs" are each a small but important part of the OVERALL learning experience that is producing such beautiful educational outcomes.




Kids have been attending the Maharishi School now for decades. As a group, they seem to be much happier and leading more successful and productive lives. You can see it in their behavior and in their glowing faces at all grade levels.

It is a tremendous joy to live in this great rural Iowa community and interact with these amazing kids.

They are TRULY amazing!

Mary

Votes: -1

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written by [Alexander Gabis](#), February 04, 2009




Hello: Can the author (or Dr. Beall) comment about whether kids at MSAE are in some way indoctrinated into Maharishi's "Vedic" system -- that is, with all the attending beliefs and practices, like Vastu, Jyotish, the Vedic Calendar, the pujas and ceremonies, and so forth, over and above their simply learning to meditate? I am a long-time TM meditator myself, and I find there has been in recent years an increasingly blurred line between the outer practices, the ceremonial stuff, and the specific, inner technique of TM itself. I suppose kids in their innocence don't really mind, but adults, and parents in particular, with a Western outlook and an American upbringing, may be leery of sending their child to what could easily be taken as a religious school, again, given all the external, non-meditation-specific activities and teachings. I believe Dr. Beall himself ran up against such resistance from local regulators in setting up his North Carolina charter school.

best

AI Gabis

Fairfield

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