



LIFE

Legislation, Appropriation, and the Battle Over Yoga in Schools

An attempt to reverse a law banning yoga in Alabama schools raises questions about how to provide children with the benefits of yoga without erasing its culture.

MARCH 25, 2021

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“Did you hear about how Alabama is going to un-cancel yoga but also appropriate it and whitewash it at the same time?” Susanna Barkataki posted on Instagram.

The outspoken yoga advocate and author of *Embracing Yoga's Roots* was responding to news reports that the Alabama legislature had passed a bill that would allow yoga to be taught in schools. This move would reverse a ban on the practice that had been in place for

28 years.

But what seemed like a win for proponents of yoga in schools turned sour when the bill's full content became known. Students will be able to do asana and pranayama—but they won't be able to call it that. The bill stipulates that any school-based yoga practice would have to be devoid of Sanskrit terms. There's to be no chanting, mantras, mudras, or mandalas.

Barkataki and other South-Asian influencers and yoga teachers immediately [cried foul on social media](#). They are concerned that putting these restrictions on how yoga is practiced will negate yoga's Indian cultural origins.

Is yoga a religion?

Opponents of the bill actually agree that yoga is inseparable from its South Asian roots. Eric Johnston, a lawyer who represents the church-based Alabama Citizens Action Program, which opposes the Alabama bill, told the [New York Times](#) that yoga is “a very important part of the Hindu religion.” He says that's exactly why it should not be taught in school.

Yoga represents a slippery slope for Johnson's Christian constituents. In a [Washington Post](#) article, he evokes tech-savvy kids Googling yogic concepts. “[T]hey will immediately find information on the spiritual aspects of it and look at it,” he said. “And if they look at it, it might lead them to believe that's something they should be involved in.”

Proponents—including Alabama Representative Jeremy Gray, who pushed the bill through—say kids would be “involved in” some harmless exercises. Indeed, the bill limits the practice to “poses, exercises, and stretching techniques” taught in English. It could describe any generic gym class.

But that also rankles yoga advocates like Barkataki, who believe the bill strips yoga of both its history and the other elements of the practices that could be beneficial to children.

So who is right? The debate hinges on how we define yoga and where it lands on a spectrum between simply stretching and seeking samadhi.





Research shows that yoga and mindfulness practices help children manage their emotions.

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Yoga improves kids' moods

“Schools need this,” says Marsha Banks-Harold, a yoga therapist and owner of PIES Fitness Yoga Studio in Alexandria, Virginia. She has taught yoga to children, including those with special needs, and says she’s seen behaviors shift, bullying stop, and grades improve. “By not allowing your kids access to yoga, you’re prohibiting them from gaining access to help with ADHD, executive functioning disorder, and stress management,” she says.

Many school systems have embraced yoga with positive results. Schools in Denver, Baltimore, and the Bronx are examples of those that offer rooms where students can go to breathe, meditate, or practice asana. Some schools send students to these “calm down” areas instead of using detention or other disciplinary actions—and report a decrease in behavior problems.

More research is emerging that supports yoga as a prescription to help children regulate their emotions and moods. [A recent study](#) found that adolescents who participated in an after-school yoga program were better able to deal with anger, depression, and difficult emotions. Another study cited in *EducationWeek* shows a significant drop in referrals to the principal’s office when students have access to yoga and mindfulness practices. Anecdotes from teachers confirm that yoga supports students’ social and emotional regulation, as well as their academics.

Banks-Harold’s own children have individual education programs (IEP) that include access to a quiet space where they can recenter and meditate to help them cope with the multiple traumas they experienced before they came into her life. She credits yoga at home and at school with positive changes in their behavior and their grades.

Kids who do yoga have better grades

Academic improvement is a natural byproduct of asana practice, says Crystal McCreary, a yoga, mindfulness, and health educator who teaches at K-12 schools in New York City. She says physical poses help kids shake off stress and regulate their social and emotional responses. When children aren’t hijacked by their emotions, they can better access the thinking part of their brains.

“In a classroom, that’s what teachers are trying to do all day long: get kids to access the prefrontal cortex,” she says. “Because that’s where learning is, that’s where creativity is, that’s where your capacity to think critically is.”

Does yoga in schools blur the line between church and

state?

This isn't the first time yoga in schools has been debated. A Georgia vice principal [sued her school district](#) which she said transferred her in response to Christian parents who objected to her bringing yoga to the classrooms. In 2013, parents in a [San Diego school district](#) [sued](#) to keep yoga out of schools on the grounds that it had religious overtones.

When legislators tried to lift Alabama's ban a year ago, Joe Godfrey, executive director of ALCAP, is quoted as saying, "What you're doing is blatantly teaching a religious exercise that would violate the Establishment Clause" that Constitutionally separates church and state. Groups who pressed for Alabama's yoga ban in 1993 even claimed that yoga could lead to psychological harm, according to a [Montgomery newspaper](#).

That's hypocrisy and Hindu-phobia, says Anusha Wijeyakumar, meditation and wellness advocate and advisory board member for [Yoga Ed](#), an organization that offers classes in schools and colleges, as well as yoga training for teachers.

"I've lived in four countries and I can tell you that the separation of church and state is not happening in America. It's within our political system. It's within the criminal justice system. It's within every single institution in this country," she says. "Quite frankly, the public education system in America doesn't have a problem with including Christianity as part of its curriculum, we're just not openly calling it that."

Advocates for yoga in schools suggest that parents and caregivers need to be better educated.

"I think there is a misunderstanding of what Hinduism is," says Anjali Rao, a yoga educator and social-justice activist. "First, there is no such thing as Hindu-*ism*. It's not an *ism*. It's a big range of thought, and it's a way of life."

Parents need not worry about their children being "recruited," because Hinduism is not evangelical; there's no conversion process, Rao says. And it's not dogmatic. "We don't believe that our path is the only way, or the right way. It is one of many paths," says Wijeyakumar.

Can Christians do yoga?

Rao, who says her entire school experience was in Catholic convent schools in India, says that practicing asana or using Sanskrit does not make you non-Christian. "There are Christians who have practiced yoga in India for centuries."

There are plenty of devout Christians practicing yoga in the states as well, says Michelle Thielen. She's one of them. She founded [YogaFaith](#), one of several Christian yoga organizations, to offer Bible-based practice and teacher training.

"Sometimes I just have to scratch my head," she says. "I'm like, 'Christians, are you not reading your Bible? Because meditation is in there.'" So is chanting, mudras, and even some of the yoga postures, Thielen says. She suggests that yoga techniques are benign if you are using them to worship according to your own beliefs.

Families who protest yoga in schools by citing fear of Hindu dogma are being hypocritical, yoga advocates say. By setting limitations on what parts of yoga can be taught, “they’re taking a very dogmatic approach rooted in evangelical Christianity, rooted in white supremacy,” says Wijeyakumar. “That is problematic because that goes against yogic philosophy.”

Ultimately, Hinduism’s non-dogmatic, all-are-welcome approach is beside the point. Because yoga and Hinduism aren’t interchangeable. Yoga, especially as practiced by yogis in the West, is a largely secular practice, the South Asian yogis agree.

“Yoga is a full philosophical system and ethical worldview,” Barkataki says. In that way it’s no different from the teachings of Plato or Aristotle—and should be treated as such, she says.



Yoga lessons should be taught in ways that are age-appropriate, according to yoga educators.

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Yoga is more than bending and stretching

The key to putting yoga in an educational setting is to keep it secular, make it age appropriate, and align it with curriculum goals that don’t white-wash the practice, yoga educators say.

“Schools are not going to sit down and go through the Bhagavad Gita, right? Let’s be honest. That’s not even happening in yoga studios,” Wijeyakumar says. “I do feel quite strongly, though, that teachers need to give an education about where the practice comes from. That can be done in a one- or two-sentence way. We’re not having to give a history on colonization and the history of India. We’re just saying, ‘This is where these practices come from.’ It can be as simple as that.”

South Asian history and culture could be touched on in social studies, geography,

literature, or world history classes.

What about references to Hindu gods and goddesses? “That’s mythology,” Rao says. “Yes, the names are names of gods, but they’re not telling you to worship that god by calling that asana out in Sanskrit.” Students could learn about Hindu deities the same way they study the Greek and Roman pantheon.

There’s one thing many yoga teachers agree on: If you strip yoga down to only stretching and breathing, it’s not yoga. You might as well be doing calisthenics.

“I think of honoring yoga’s roots as going way beyond just the physical—beyond stretching, beyond working out the body, even beyond stress reduction,” says Barkataki. Ideally, she says, yoga in schools would incorporate other limbs of yoga—including yamas and niyamas that could be used to promote positive social behaviors, and meditation that’s proven to help emotional regulation.

“I teach yoga in a secular way,” says McCreary, who is also the author of *The Little Yogi Deck*, cards that describe simple yoga practices to help kids address difficult emotions. “But I’m definitely supporting my kids to practice love and compassion. I’m definitely supporting them to come to know their most authentic selves, and to respect the authentic truth of others. I’m supporting my kids to have more capacity to be free in a world that makes it extremely hard to be free.” If people consider that a spiritual practice, she says, so be it.

What happens next?

The Alabama bill must get enough votes in the state Senate to pass. If the ban is lifted and yoga can be taught—in whatever form—yoga experts say that it’s imperative that teachers be well-trained to offer it in a way that is safe and age appropriate.

“I’m very strategic about the yoga and mindfulness pedagogy that I use to teach those skills,” says McCreary. “I’m always asking myself, *What is the objective of this lesson?* and *What specific tool from the yoga and mindfulness traditions are going to help me?*”

It will be important to avoid **egregious mistakes**, like the Delaware teacher who used plow and boat pose to talk about slavery during Black History Month—a gross misuse of the practice.



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