Re-Imagining “School” at Da Vinci
Da Vinci Schools

Spring 2023
Da Vinci Schools

Fast Facts
Introduction
01 Signature Practices to Support a Shared Vision
02 Continuous Innovation at DV Connect
03 Empowering Youth to Survive and Take on the World at Da Vinci RISE
Da Vinci Schools seeks to improve the quality of life for our students by cultivating a caring culture, building future-ready skills, developing meaningful partnerships, and creating impact in our work to solve complex educational problems.

**MISSION**

We cultivate a caring and compassionate culture that is rooted in trust, collaboration, and growth.

We build future-ready skills through learn-by-doing and real-world, workforce skills.

We collaborate with thought partners and share best practices beyond the Da Vinci community in our work to connect education and the workforce.

We seek to close the opportunity and skills gaps, particularly for historically disadvantaged students.

**VISION**

A new generation prepared to lead, innovate and thrive in the modern world.

**FREE/REDUCED LUNCH**

- 5% Free
- 96% Reduced

**GRADUATES COMPLETED A-G REQ'TS**

- 96% higher than the state average

**COLLEGE ATTENDANCE**

- 87%

**PERSIST & RETAIN COLLEGE ENROLLMENT**

- 92%

**1 of 10 HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE NATION**

To win a $10 million XQ ‘Super School’ grant to reimagine high school

**1 of 8 SCHOOLS IN THE NATION**

To win a Wave III Next Generation Learning Challenges grant for innovation in college readiness and completion
Da Vinci Schools, a public network of five schools and one college-and-career program, serves students from 122 zip codes in the Los Angeles, California, metropolitan area. In 2008, the K-8 Wiseburn School District in the coastal city of El Segundo authorized two independent charter schools to provide a neighborhood high school option for its residents and other students. At an ideation workshop, learners came up with the names of the new schools, Da Vinci Design and Da Vinci Science, after the artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci. To them, and to the educators and learners who followed, the name Da Vinci means innovation, accomplishment in both the arts and sciences, and learning by doing. This experiential and integrated approach to learning has been the vision for Da Vinci (DV) Schools ever since.

Today, Da Vinci Schools includes three in-campus high schools—the original two schools plus Da Vinci Communications—housed in the same innovative building in El Segundo. The network also features three hybrid programs, Da Vinci Connect, Da Vinci RISE High School, and Da Vinci Extension, a dual enrollment program in which 12th grade DV students may stay at DV to earn an AA, BA, or one year of general education college credits for free.

In keeping with Da Vinci Schools’ identity as a community of innovators, each of the schools is unique, offering different focus areas for learners, such as STEM at DV Science or design thinking approaches at DV Design. Each school is also empowered to organize time, space, and staff in ways that will best support their learners to reach success on their chosen pathways.

Yet all schools in the system are united by a shared mission and vision that, like their Renaissance namesake, is both visionary and human-centered. They are deeply committed to putting “people first,” by building a caring and inclusive culture within the schools as well as partnering with industry, higher education, and community organizations.

Da Vinci Schools’ identity is built on recognizing the challenges posed by the modern world, and—regardless of approach—each school’s definition of learner success is an interpretation of the phrase “future-ready skills.” In the following Q & A, Da Vinci Schools leaders and learners describe what “the Da Vinci way” means to them in their own words and tell the story of how their schools support learners for lifelong success.
To start, Megan Martin of Da Vinci Institute describes the **Signature Programs and Practices**, the practices that define Da Vinci Schools, providing a throughline across each school’s unique, innovative approach to developing future-ready skills and learner success.

Next, Michelle Rainey of DV Connect discusses the school’s **Habits of Heart and Mind**, a set of capabilities and dispositions which, like a Portrait of a Graduate, defines for their community what learners need to be successful in college and beyond.

And then Erin Whalen of Da Vinci RISE High School presents the **RISE Graduate Profile**, five skills that integrate social-emotional and academic learning to define success for their graduates: they know who they want to be and where they want to go, and they are prepared to take on the world around them.
Megan Martin, who was a teacher of English and an assistant principal at Da Vinci Design High School, is now the director of Da Vinci Institute, the professional learning center created to meet the growing demand from educators from across the U.S. and throughout the world seeking to learn more about Da Vinci’s approach. The Institute hosts multi-day conferences and provides adult professional development on Da Vinci’s practices, including project-based learning (PBL), mastery-based grading (MBG), positive school cultures, STEM education, and authentic industry partnerships. According to Megan, Da Vinci’s commitment to sharing what they’ve learned with the field is one defining characteristic of the Da Vinci identity.
Our CEO/Superintendent, Dr. Matt Wunder, reminds us that charter schools were designed to be the research and development hub of education. At Da Vinci, we take that to heart. We are provided space to research, develop, fail, and try again.

In my previous school, we were required to use pacing plans which felt constraining to my creativity and autonomy and, ultimately, not good for kids. I heard about Da Vinci, an innovative school network in development down the road, and its use of project-based learning alongside mastery-based grading, and I was intrigued. In the early years, we experimented with structures like master schedules and cohort sizes, and we played with project scales. We tried out smaller projects in single classes and were also challenged to create larger interdisciplinary projects that connected to the world outside our classrooms.

The main question that has always driven our curriculum design is, “What problems are we trying to solve?” We’ve categorized the answer into three: the college completion crisis, the misalignment between education and workforce, and how we prepare students for the modern world. These are the reasons we’re innovating with new school models, programmatic structures, and reimagining outdated systems of learning. We believe that preparing students for the workforce should play a significant role in education design.

Another reason I love working at Da Vinci is the “people first” mentality. This shows up in our intentionally small school sizes and commitment to building strong stakeholder relationships. When I was a new administrator, one of the tricks I learned from co-founder and former DV Science principal Steve Wallis was to print out ninth grade student pictures in the first few weeks of the school year and keep them on a clipboard while walking around campus to learn names right away. This was his way of building a deep sense of connection and community for our youngest students.

When ninth grade students enroll in a Da Vinci school, we take them on an overnighter camp to ground them in our culture of connection. The overnighter creates opportunities for new friendships to be formed—both with students and adults—and introduces students to Da Vinci’s culture and way of being. We notice that when ninth graders return from camp, they’re able to navigate high school with more ease, excitement, and confidence.

What is the Da Vinci way, and what about it attracted you?
We have a lot of conversations about what we want our kids to be able to do and how we want them to thrive in the world when they leave us. We recently revisited our vision, mission, and values statements. Leadership teams and various stakeholders were all a part of that conversation. We have through-lines across all our campuses and the shared goal that our students will become confident leaders and innovators after their time with us.

We regularly ask our industry partners, “What skills and competencies do our kids need to learn to be successful in your field of work?” Then teachers design their curriculum with their feedback in mind, which in turn generates higher levels of student engagement because the content is relevant to the real-world modern workplace. Our students also know that their projects will be shared with a wide audience that includes families and industry and community partners. Students’ deliverables are not for their teachers’ eyes alone. Exhibitions and presentations of learning are more commonplace in schools now, which is so amazing, but they weren’t when we started in 2009, when we were inspired by these ideas from High Tech High. The sharing of student work is still a major differentiator from traditional school settings.

How does Da Vinci define success and support learners to be ready for their futures?

Exhibitions, a Da Vinci Schools Signature Practice, provide an opportunity for the community to come together to witness and celebrate how much students have learned and grown in the project-based environment.

Although each school has a unique identity and definition of student success, they share a commitment to the Da Vinci Signature Programs and Practices.
In my experience, the schools that are able to transform have both an invested team of teachers and inside champions at the leadership level—innovators from the central office, the superintendent, the principal, or a board member. It is critical to have someone on the team who has the ability to adjust master schedules and calendar days as needed. I don’t know how schools can successfully implement PBL without ample planning time together, so don’t leave the district level or board level out of the conversation.

One of the early decisions made at Da Vinci was to increase the number of professional development days our school sites have together in a school year. The founding team asked, how are we going to implement our signature practices well and authentically? One of the responses was to have more uninterrupted planning and learning time together. The decision was made to include 22 or 23 professional development days a year. At the time this was revolutionary because PD was often very limited in traditional school settings.

Through the Institute’s work with other schools, we’ve also learned that signature practices don’t have to be implemented all at once. In fact our recommendation is to do it slowly and bite off a piece at a time. Even if that’s a summer reading book about a particular innovation that all staff reads, you can slowly build from there. Visit inspirational hubs—schools and places and programs that are doing innovative work—and keep talking to a lot of other educators. You’ll find your way.

Based on your experience at the Da Vinci Institute, what conditions and structures need to be in place to enable transformation of education?
Da Vinci Connect’s high school, the most recent addition to the Da Vinci network, launched in the fall of 2020. Because the school was intentionally designed as a hybrid, with remote learning as part of its model, Connect was able to open successfully and on schedule in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding on the existing Connect TK (transitional kindergarten)-8 hybrid model, today the high school experience combines hybrid (on-campus and remote) learning with early college, social-emotional learning, and real-world learning. The high school provides equitable access to higher education for all students at no cost to students or families. DV Connect’s competency-based model supports learners by offering wrap-around supports, including office hours, individualized counseling, and personalized experiences, to help learners earn a high school diploma while at the same time building confidence and knowledge in navigating the college experience and curriculum.

While completing California’s A-G high school graduation requirements, DV Connect students earn an AA degree in General Studies with an emphasis in business from Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). In their senior year, students may choose to continue with SNHU to pursue a bachelor’s degree or focus on meeting transferable general education requirements through partnerships with El Camino College and UCLA Extension. To mirror the higher education experience, DV Connect’s program schedules learners to be on campus two days each week and then work independently, with support, the other three days at home.

After a decade of experience in other Southern California schools, Michelle Rainey joined Da Vinci Schools in 2009 as a founding English teacher at DV Science. She later became the principal at DV Connect K-8 and is now the executive director of DV Connect in its current TK to College form. As an educator, school leader, and DV parent, Michelle offers a broad perspective on Da Vinci Schools and its newest innovation, DV Connect.
Da Vinci has an ever-evolving, reflective process around what we do, why we do it, and how. We are reinventing spaces in the educational world. What Da Vinci does well is we don’t subscribe to one curriculum or even one philosophy. I know it sounds cliché, but it’s that lifelong learner phrase—really thoughtful people who are reading a lot and going to webinars and conferences, interacting with educators in other parts of the educational community. We are constantly surveying the landscape of what is expected of these learners when they graduate high school, when they graduate college, and when they enter the workforce. We think about how we can be continually responsive to that in our program.

Based on your varied roles at Da Vinci Schools and in other districts, what do you see as core strengths at DV?

One of my favorite things about Da Vinci is also one of the hardest things, which is that we are willing to continuously examine our practice and say, “This isn’t what we thought it would be. Let’s revise.” The problem is it can sometimes feel a little bit wishy-washy for our staff or families, even for ourselves, the ones who are making the changes. It can feel like we are constantly in creation mode. So I think we always toggle this push and pull of innovating for our kids, being responsive to their needs, while creating sustainability and stability for our staff and for our families.
The social-emotional learning philosophy is really important to our work. In the Connect schools we have our own version of this, the Habits of Heart and Mind. We want to prepare our kids for all possible outcomes, and we talk openly about how content is maybe 50 percent of what we teach kids. There’s so much more around how we support positive and effective communication with students and between students and their peers. We talk about how to develop agency, resourcefulness, a sense of self-efficacy—the belief that my hard work is what causes my success; I’m not just lucky or unlucky. And we talk about the fact that some people are working harder than others, that we don’t all come to the same table with the same resources.

There is an equity aspect, which weaves into the empathy habit of always being able to see others and see ourselves through a lens of empathy. We try to hold students accountable, having quality of work, quality of intention, and integrity. And we talk about how to be reflective and always doing our best.

We also try to prepare our kids with a large expanse of experiences around accountability. Some of our teachers believe very much in rubrics, and some want quality indicator checklists. There isn’t actually one right or wrong way to do that, so we give flexibility as long as they are guiding students. For example, like at other Da Vinci Schools, we have student-led conferences across every grade level, from TK through high school. We also have exhibitions and presentations of learning. We want kids to work collaboratively and for their contribution to a collaborative experience to be part of what’s assessed. As a learner you can’t opt out of collaboration, but we’re also going to make sure that you’re ready for that experience and be flexible when you’re not.

At Connect TK-8, students don’t earn any grades, and that’s really intentional. It’s just the revision process: reflecting and revising, redrafting our work until it reaches quality. At the high school we use mastery-based grading in alignment with other Da Vinci schools. Mastery-based grading is a nice middle ground for moving kids from a non-graded system into a more strictly graded system in college, or jobs, which don’t have grades, but have really clear, high-stakes outcomes. We also use competency-based learning and grading through the Southern New Hampshire University coursework.

How does DV Connect define success, and how are learners supported to develop these skills and dispositions?

The high school version of DV Connect’s Habits of Heart and Mind expresses the capabilities and dispositions learners will need to be successful in college and beyond. It is based on the philosophy that students need to be known, seen, and heard to thrive.
Mastery-based grading, a Signature Practice at Da Vinci Schools, pushes learners to focus on skill development and showing evidence of their mastery. It supports excellence by providing meaningful feedback to learners and parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Evidence demonstrates detailed understanding</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Evidence demonstrates understanding</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evidence demonstrates basic understanding</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Evidence demonstrates partial understanding</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No evidence (Generally a missing or incomplete assignment)</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Providing real-world audiences for learners, such as public exhibitions and performances of learning, is one of Da Vinci Schools' Signature Practices.

Although DV Connect’s early college high school is new, these data provide evidence of learners’ success with college-level coursework.

**EARLY COLLEGE SUCCESS DATA**

- **SNHU Business Course - 91 total 9th graders took classes**
  - 95% of all 9th graders mastered a college assignment or competency
  - 86% of all 9th graders mastered 3 competencies which is equivalent to 1 college course
  - 66% of all 9th graders mastered 2 college course or goals which is the minimum required by SNHU per trimester
  - 40% of all 9th graders mastered all 3 college courses!

- **UCLA Extension Statistics Math Pilot Class**
  - 18 Students took the course (17 - 11th graders and 1 - 10th)
  - 8 earned an A, 7 earned a B and 3 earned a C
If I was looking through a traditional school lens, then probably we would be on the “great” side of the good-to-great spectrum, but I would say in terms of where we want to be, we are good, but not yet great. We have strategies in place and we are constantly looking for more. One example is including student board members who share about their experiences in our schools at every board meeting.

Additionally, our hiring process involves student interview panels and sample lessons where students get to debrief and give feedback on candidates for positions like counselors, administrators, front office staff, and their teachers. We really value and want to see what kids are looking for in their learning experience. And we learn a lot when we review that feedback and data. It’s not just whether they liked or didn’t like a candidate. It’s, “What were learners looking for? What is it that the candidate said that spoke to them? And what can we take away from this as something that’s missing or that we have here that we need to make sure to continue?”

So there’s a kind of iterative process of seeing through our students’ eyes.

We try to create spaces where kids don’t feel like they’re being watched. We put a lot of trust in our kids to use the space effectively, so they get to use furniture that most schools don’t trust their kids to use, like fabric-covered seating and things like that. They get to sit in unsupervised spaces, but they’re still within eyesight of adults. We all clean up after our space, because this is our space and we all have responsibility to keep our space clean and organized.

We take out the hierarchy. I’m called by my first name by the people I supervise, by the students, by the parents. I would say 90 percent of us go by our first name, which makes us more approachable. We have open door policies. I’ve visited schools and tried to connect with principals who are barricaded at the back of the office down a long hallway. And you have to get past multiple dragons to get to them. Traditional systems are created to keep people away from the people who make the decisions. We do the opposite. My office was always right in the main corridor, door always open, where I could see and hear everything happening on that campus. And kids would walk by and wave and say “hi” all day long. Same thing with our counselors. Smack in the middle, not down a long dark hallway with closed doors. Those logistics make a really big difference regarding who has a voice within a school community.

We hope that these intentional decisions result in students and families feeling comfortable sharing feedback. Kids feel really empowered going to a counselor, administrator, or teacher and saying, “I don’t get it. I don’t understand what it is they want from me,” or complimenting their teachers or telling an administrator what they like or appreciate about the learning that’s being offered. So I know that’s not a strategy, but it is a cultural norm that makes authentic communication and feedback constantly happen.

In what ways do learners have agency over their learning experience at DV Connect?
I think some of the hardest work that our administrators do is to toe that line of how to be responsive and flexible to students. For example, we revised our Habits of Heart and Mind annually until we got them right... and we know they still may change again.

And when we were first establishing them for Connect High School, I remember working so hard on them in the summer. We thought we had them right. And then they changed the next year. At first it felt like, “Why did we spend so much time on them if we’re just going to change them?” The teachers have the Habits on their classroom walls, on worksheets, or embedded into lessons. So even a little change can cause a lot of chaos, and yet it’s really important work.

The staff who struggle the most are the ones who really need a very black-and-white process or outcomes. [They tell us] “You said we were doing this, so why aren’t we doing this?” I understand and empathize with that. But it’s not how humans work, and it’s not the world we’re preparing our kids for. So we definitely seek staff and individuals who can handle the ambiguity and the chaos and all those things we say in education like trust the chaos, trust the people, trust the process, fail forward fast, reflect and revise.

I think we need to be better about quantifiable measures. Our schools are pretty great places. My own children have both only attended Da Vinci schools and have had really great educations, including social-emotional learning support. But we recently hired a data and equity coordinator who has created dashboards and spreadsheets and updated us on things that we weren’t really seeing, like which students are accessing their counselors and are they the students that need to be accessing our counselors. Administrators annually review the survey questions for staff, students, and families and wonder, “Are we getting the information that we need to get?” Much of what we did in the past was qualitative. We are still learning effective ways of measuring the work that we’re doing and the learning we value, such as the Habits, in quantitative ways.

What are the challenges associated with continuous change and innovation?
It starts with having the autonomy and the agency to say, “We want to change this.” It makes us responsive to our students’ needs. As an example, I could sit down with my staff in August and say, “We’re going to completely rethink our Habits of Heart and Mind. Let’s go back to scratch with these and how would we do that?” And that would be really good professional learning. And we may end up in a very similar place, or we may end up in a completely different place. But the process and the outcome will be good for kids. I don’t think a lot of educational communities have that much autonomy. In a lot of places a principal doesn’t get to reshape a norm that is established across the district.

We also have 20 plus days of professional development annually. All of our schools have two weeks together in August, a week in January, a few days at the end of the year, and then three to six Fridays throughout the year. At DV Connect, we use time on Wednesdays because our hybrid model has students on campus Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wednesdays are staff meetings, collaboration between staff, meetings with families, and office hours to support students.

How are DV Connect educators supported to innovate and redesign the learning experience?

Our staff works hard to support students and their families in a hybrid model, including topics such as the “learning logs” students complete to document their asynchronous learning. The staff is also constantly iterating and sharing resources. We learn from each other but also the research put out by Getting Smart, NGLC, Aurora Institute, and SNHU, who do the hard work of researching and synthesizing what is happening in the educational world.
In 2017 RISE High was one of only ten schools in the nation to win a prestigious “Super School” grant from XQ: The Super School Project, a high school redesign competition funded by Laurene Powell Jobs. Da Vinci RISE High opened its doors to families in the fall of that year. Da Vinci RISE High is authorized by the Los Angeles County Board of Education and serves approximately 200 students across its three learning sites: one in Hawthorne, co-located at Richstone Family Center; one in South Los Angeles, which operates in partnership with A Place Called Home; and a third site in Culver City in partnership with New Earth.

Erin Whalen, the executive director of Da Vinci RISE High School, has been part of the RISE leadership team since 2016, when RISE was a pilot program within Da Vinci Schools and not yet the full-fledged charter it is today. As a founder and leader of this innovative alternative high school, Erin shares his experiences and what he’s learned about providing at-risk youth with the resources and the social, emotional, and academic skills they need for success in their future lives.

Listen to learner Kijera (Kiki) Williams share what it’s like to be seen as family and rising to success at Da Vinci RISE.
Who are Da Vinci RISE High School's learners, and how does RISE's approach support them to succeed?

Da Vinci RISE is built on the belief that if we can create a school for the most at-risk students, we are able to create a school that's well rounded and empowering for any student. We designed a school with the needs of the kids who don't traditionally fit well, and thus are often pushed out of more traditional schools—youth experiencing homelessness, foster care, housing instability, the juvenile justice system, and populations considered transient, meaning they've gone to more than three high schools. Many of them are over-aged and under-credited.

Our whole goal and model is to create schools with and for those kids. And so we center student voices in everything that we do, including when we began to build the school. We were doing round tables with youth within those populations, specifically foster and transient, to see, “What are the things that usually result in you dropping out of school or feeling like you can't be there?” or “How are you greeted when you're coming from these long stints of being out of school? And what does that feel like?”

And for many of them, it was challenges of transiency, which they can't control. Because, they said, “I'm either moving from home to home or moving from placement to placement,” or “I've gone through this terrible life circumstance.”

What our society does is have students who are most at risk make a decision about whether they are going to prioritize their survival and their basic needs or prioritize school. And that should never be a decision that a youth has to make. And so what we've done is we've tried to figure out different methodologies to make that never be the case.

We are chartered as an independent study school, and we call ourselves an independent studies hybrid, which basically means that our kids are not penalized for not being able to meet seat time requirements. We are able to support them by providing them with learning when and where they are. All of our students are asked to come to school at least twice a week, which is significantly more than a traditional independent study school. That's why we call ourselves a hybrid. We have immense amounts of flexibility to make it work for our kids.

If a student does have a terrible circumstance in their life, or they simply need to have a job and take care of themselves because they're living on their own at 18, they can continue to log in and get support through our teachers. They can come in three times a week instead of the traditional five times a week and get the work done. Or they can take days away from the traditional classroom and then go back into it. And then they just change the pace at which they meet graduation, but never is there pressure.

We are able to create personalized learning plans for our students based on their needs. When they come to RISE, we work with every student—with our counselor and our social workers and our admin—to create a learning plan that breaks down their transcript into credits. We unpackage our course trajectory from the traditional school year and timeline because many of our students may have dropped out mid-year [at their previous school]. So say there's 10 credits within an English course. They may have earned 3.5 credits. Most traditional schools will say, “We don't do partial credits. So we're actually going to start you at the beginning of that English course and make it simple for adults.” What we do at RISE is we say, “That's not fair. We're going to give you those 3.5 credits and give you a mastery assessment to see what skills you're really good at and the skills that you need more help in. Then we're going to spend the rest of those credits on these areas you really need.”

We have three school sites across [Los Angeles] county. We co-locate with nonprofit organizations who can provide baby supplies for our young moms, meals for our kids, and paid internships so that we can have kids working in the building while they're also going to school. All of our sites are no more than about a hundred students. We intentionally keep our enrollment pretty low so that our kids can have more of the individualized care that they deserve and need. The small student-to-teacher ratio allows us to find that sweet spot where we can really create individual plans, meet them where they are academically as well as scheduling-wise, so that they never feel like they don't fit.

Especially as an alternative school trying to do alternative things, we always pick the fight to do things that are different. We're not going to over-test our kids. We're not going to punish them for not being in school when they're handling their survival needs. We're gonna always prioritize them as humans.
We want kids not only to graduate. That’s not our only goal. It’s really that they graduate knowing who they want to be, knowing where they’re going, and having the support to get there. The essence of the Graduate Profile is that they’re empowered, they’re prepared to take on the world around them. And they also know themselves and their challenges well enough to be able to speak and advocate for themselves and make use of the resources that are in our world.

The way that [the Graduate Profile work] started is we had our vision and our mission, which we wrote into our initial petition [for a charter] and that has not changed. Before we had even been educated as school builders on what a graduate profile was, we created our social-emotional focus. It was called the four C’s. It was care, connect, challenge, and create. We wanted all of our students to be able to do those four things for themselves, for their immediate community, and then for the world around them.

That was what we had for a few years, and it was the heart of advisory and everything around that, the core DV practices. Thinking about student-led conferences and exhibitions, we realized that, as beautiful as those overarching focus areas were, we really needed to do some work in directly connecting our day-to-day actions and our courses with the big picture and actualizing our vision.

We saw the tenets start to come authentically as we read our vision and spoke to our students and our communities about it. But we didn’t concretize it or know what to do next. So we did a workshop with XQ where they took us through this process of breaking down your vision into the key phrases and words that stand out—the things that you want to see live for your students.

For example, one of the tenets in our graduate profile is being a tactful collaborator. What other competencies already exist in that? So speaking and listening, presentation, analysis, and argumentation. Those are four competencies that we already focus on in our instructional program that you need to master—or at least practice—to be a tactful collaborator. And so [the Graduate Profile] really was the marriage of social-emotional learning and academics. It’s like competencies embedded within this bigger social-emotional skill. It’s interdisciplinary and more challenging than some of our standards and Common Core.

XQ leaders often talk about [our process]. They are like, “We’ve never seen a school pop out their Graduate Profile faster than RISE,” but it was because we were so ready. We knew all of the different pieces. We just had never put it together. From there we met with our community, we shared it. We said, “What’s missing? Does this resonate?” That’s where we got the fist with each of the fingers. RISE is all about equity, about justice, about revolution. All these pieces fell into place.

[The Graduate Profile] was also about providing shared language for our parents, for our stakeholders. At RISE we don’t only have parents. We actually have very few parents. We have attorneys and social workers, folks who touch our students but are maybe not in education. So our goals for students need to be easy to digest. We have to be able to say that we’re working with a student about being a tactful collaborator—this is what it looks like, and this is what it means. And this is what you might see in your group home from her if she’s doing great at it. We needed to create shared language around it.

Working to build out RISE, I would say the heart of the Graduate Profile for our kids is those five tenets, the five skill sets. For building anything, whether it’s an organization or a beauty salon, whether it’s making a really intense decision with some kind of political power, I would hope that they would think, “These are the five things that I need to see for my staff or for myself or for my partner in order to know we really made a good decision.”
RISE has always had a really strong advisory culture. In our founding years, every single staff member, no matter what your title, including principal, would have an advisory community. And a lot of it was co-generative conversations with kids around what it feels like to be a RISE student and what they want to see. A lot of the iterations within our curricular model, within our day-to-day SEL (social-emotional learning) practices, and within our Graduate Profile tenets, all came from student voice around what their focuses are, what their passions were, where they saw the school going, what we needed to focus on.

An example is our students reflecting on what it felt like to be a new student at RISE, because we have rolling enrollment. They were sharing that in order for them to feel like an empowered citizen, which is one of our tenets, they would need some kind of liaison, some kid in the community already to help them become adjusted and feel comfortable, especially because many of them have gone through so much trauma. It’s harder for them to trust.

How does DV RISE provide learners with opportunities to own and develop these mindsets and capabilities for success?

RISE has always had a really strong advisory culture. In our founding years, every single staff member, no matter what your title, including principal, would have an advisory community. And a lot of it was co-generative conversations with kids around what it feels like to be a RISE student and what they want to see. A lot of the iterations within our curricular model, within our day-to-day SEL (social-emotional learning) practices, and within our Graduate Profile tenets, all came from student voice around what their focuses are, what their passions were, where they saw the school going, what we needed to focus on.

An example is our students reflecting on what it felt like to be a new student at RISE, because we have rolling enrollment. They were sharing that in order for them to feel like an empowered citizen, which is one of our tenets, they would need some kind of liaison, some kid in the community already to help them become adjusted and feel comfortable, especially because many of them have gone through so much trauma. It’s harder for them to trust.

They shared that need within our advisory culture. From there we created student advocates who would welcome new students into the community, into the fabric, get them to meet new kids who might have similar interests. We realized that was absolutely a part of the practice that RISE needed. Adults would never have come up with that. Not in a way that was so authentic to their student experience.

In terms of our competency based program, I would say we’re innately interdisciplinary. So instead of focusing on very content-heavy standards, where the student should not graduate without knowing this fact about World War I, we’re saying that a student won’t leave our school without having a deep understanding of analysis across multiple content areas. I would say that competency based means understanding that deep and engaged learning cannot be about vomiting up a fact that you can Google. We’re looking at the skills that our students need to navigate this information age, not just being able to regurgitate the facts that we already have machines to do. It’s about what I actually do once I look up the fact and my understanding of how many other facts I need to really get a good picture.
For a long time, learning was so based on the Carnegie unit, on rote memorization, that many people have anxiety around moving away from that. And I think it’s also kept educators comfortable, because it means that what I teach you is what I teach you. And I don’t need to actually learn or intersect with other content areas for this to make sense.

For example, writing is a huge category. What we know as adults in the working world is that if I can only write in English courses, then I won’t be successful with my career because I often need to write with a more scientific mindset or a numeracy mindset, or with a more historical lens. But if I’m only thinking about one of those worlds, I’m not effective in any work that I might do.

RISE staff is about 60 percent educators. We also have mental health practitioners/a mental health team that helps train our teachers. And teachers help train our mental health team so that there is a continuity of understanding of the two worlds that impact our kids. That’s very intentional, and it fills in this gap that I faced when I was working at huge schools with a huge population of at-risk kids. We need educators to feel and be successful and also not burn out. What I find is teachers often burn out when they see a kid struggling with very real life circumstances and have no materials and no way to help.

That’s like what makes the RISE educator. Our humanities teacher and our STEM teacher know a lot about probation. They know a lot about juvenile justice. They know a lot about foster care. We give our teachers space to learn about these worlds, but also have professionals in the building to help kids navigate them. It’s like, “I need to understand the social services agencies and the different organizations that are impacting our kids. I’m still a teacher. It’s not my sole job to learn them, but I know about them. I know my tools.”

In terms of the hiring processes, honestly our best method that we’ve been sharing with other schools is to center your students’ voices in that hiring process. They actually have a huge say in the personnel at RISE. We do what’s called hiring symposiums where students interview our candidates and do round tables with one another around what they see as a positive strength, what they see as areas where maybe they have some flags and we want to know more. And then they report back to our staff. It’s really powerful. Those voices are important. We don’t do any kind of change without students having a say because it’s their school.

In what ways does teaching look different at RISE?

As partners in the hiring process at RISE, learners discuss candidates and provide feedback to school leaders.
What advice would you offer to educators who are transforming their schools and districts for equity and lifelong success for all learners?

What I would say to a school is, 1) solicit community voice, and 2) really know your mission and vision and center that. If your mission and vision is in fact what you want to see from your students, then the Graduate Profile’s already there. It’s not something new.

Embedding the Graduate Profile in advisory is probably the place to start because then it can be living and breathing every day, and it sets a model and a precedent for teachers to put the tenets in their curriculum. Kids need every sticky opportunity for [the tenets of the Graduate Profile] to be named. If everyone on the campus, from office manager to janitor, can speak the same language around, this is what it looks like, that’s how you make it live and breathe. And then the heart—the goal—is for students to start saying, this is what it looks like. This is what it needs to look like to speak power, truth, and justice in the world.

We did a lot of work and we’re going to be doing more work on intentional lessons because it also needs to be explicitly taught. On our learners’ Graduate Profile, you see all the bullet points underneath. These are the different examples of what it looks like, and there’s probably more, and we find that out throughout every year. It’s not that the Graduate Profile is the exact epitome of what we want to see for every kid. We would not say there’s a perfect RISE student. There’s not. But if a kid can think about those five tenets before they make a decision and it’s embedded in who they are, then we’ve done a good job.

See a RISE student’s slide presentation of reflections on and evidence of learning.