



Welcome to

# Círculos

Santa Ana, California

A school developing connected lifelong learners

## How They Came to Be

### Círculos' XQ Super School Journey

Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) is the sixth-largest district in California, where over 80 percent of students are English learners and 100 percent of students participate in the free and reduced lunch program. When Santa Ana Unified School District leaders entered the XQ Super School competition, they wanted to design a school that could boost young peoples' access to opportunity. Acknowledging feedback and input from parents, students, and the community, the group drew up plans for Círculos—an innovative new approach to school that would connect students with the county's industry, arts, and culture through powerful place-based learning. The model would leverage learning circles to empower young people, build out their agency, and channel that agency into fuel and transform it into constructive action. After piloting the model in three comprehensive high schools in SAUSD Círculos launched fully in Fall 2018. The school's design remains focused on shaping a vision for the future of education at-large, while staying connected to the unique values and hopes of the local community.

True to its name and rooted in its culture, every student at Círculos is part of a tight-knit learning circle of peers, teachers, and community members.



## Discover Círculos

Círculos is not just an example of a community rethinking high school; it's a powerful picture of how a community can rethink its commitment to young people. The goal? For Círculos students to graduate with rigorous academic knowledge and skills as well as the social capital and relationships they need to succeed in life after graduation. The Círculos community has made great strides towards this goal by integrating students into local organizations and businesses; by encouraging students to build connections that support them academically and socially; and by fostering a vibrant community where students are empowered as active contributors.

**Círculos is a school in Santa Ana Unified District that opened as an option for students in 2018 and currently serves 116 students in grades 9-12.**

## Círculos Design Features

### 1. Circles of Success

At Círculos, students meet in circles where they are seen and heard every day and given the opportunity to develop and cultivate their voices. Students come together in circles to discuss their personal goals, victories, and setbacks. These candid discussions set the students' trajectory for their daily learning. Beyond their focus on wellness and emotional health, these circles also have an academic focus. They serve to develop students' abilities to engage in academic discourse and take the form of a Socratic workshop. This unique approach to community building allows students to develop their abilities to collaborate, communicate, engage in, and practice academic discourse. For example, students may engage in a critical discussion of an assigned reading, an activity that fosters their critical thinking and analysis skills. At Círculos, circles exist in a broader sense as well. Students regularly meet with mentors and community leaders outside the classroom to expand their network and connections across the city.



**Jessica Salcedo**

School Leader, Círculos

*"Our school is all about making connections; we do that through circles, our signature pedagogy. Circles provide an intentional space for all students to be seen and heard—to develop their voices and identity in relationship to each other, their community, and their learning."*



**Bryan Davis**

Curator of Talent, Círculos

*"We believe students want to have fun and experience success as they learn, so we work hard with our staff and our community partners to co-create authentic opportunities where students can experience success now and beyond high*

### 2. A Strong Academic Foundation

Students at Círculos are held to high academic standards and receive support in reaching their goals. To help students progress toward post-secondary readiness, thematic interdisciplinary units are organized into seasons. These seasons are broken into 13 episodes that follow a path of increasing cognitive demand. Students move from making meaning to investigating and creating to presenting and sharing, and, finally, to reflecting and curating. The life cycle of a season allows students to engage in synthesis and analysis.

The team at Círculos is rolling out a digital platform to monitor student progress and provide students, parents, and teachers with data on each student's path. A data dashboard will illuminate each student's success through detailed information about rigorous college- and career-ready standards across the curriculum. Moreover, the scheduling tool allows students to personalize their schedules during "Power Flex" weeks.



### 3. Community Connections

Orange County, home to beautiful beaches and theme parks, is among the wealthiest areas in the country—but it's also a place of great income disparity and stark economic contrasts. Círculos students, most of whom are first-generation Americans and 100 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch, go into the community at least twice a week to visit and work on competency-based projects with businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations partnering with the school. Through these partnerships, Círculos helps students build social capital and make connections, and in doing so creates more access to the resources of Orange County for students of all backgrounds. Ultimately, the school's community builds students' identities as empowered community members. The school's leaders aim to break the structures that have isolated the low-income communities of Orange County from access to new opportunities. For example, students can enroll in dual-credit classes at Santa Ana College, a local community college, while still in high school.



## Andres Medina

12th Grader

“Círculos is not your typical high school. We get to take dual-enrollment classes. They get difficult, but I like challenging myself. A lot of the partnerships help us to know we have other people out there in the community who are willing to support us or guide us.”



## Ana Luviano

12th Grader

“We have a lot of connections with experts. We have a project each year, and mine was on separation of children in Santa Ana. We got to talk to experts at Latino Health Access and have another point of view from experts who are connected to our community and making an impact.”



## Alexies Benitez

12th Grader

“During my sophomore year, I created a literacy program for kids during the summer called Children Read Together. This was funded by the Dragon Kim Foundation. My partner and I had our program at local libraries and the OC Rescue Mission. Working with the foundation gave me power and made me feel that I was born with a purpose and that my voice matters. For the first time I was not just a student, but an educator. I had the power to impact other students’ lives.”

## Círculos Design Features

### 4. Learning through authentic, place-based projects

Students at Círculos work on projects and in partnership with a wide range of local organizations including the Santa Ana Business Council, Santa Ana Public Works Department, Well-Beings Studio, Visioneering Studios, and Latino Health Access. Educators at Círculos integrate these place-based projects with interdisciplinary courses. These projects inspire students' learning goals that align to the school's competency framework. To ensure that community partners share an authentic understanding of these competencies, Círculos educators work with community partners to co-create lessons and project ideas, co-teach the interdisciplinary material, connect these projects to core content areas, and conduct pre- and post-project surveys to measure student growth in specific competencies.



**Deborah Park**

Curator of Projects and Partnerships

“Students participate in community impact projects throughout the year. We have different partnerships that are embedded in our interdisciplinary core content courses, where our community partners co-construct learning experiences and often co-teach with our teachers. By placing students' learning in authentic spaces, where they have access to experts in the field, we are able to increase students' social capital and networks.”

## Theory Into Action

### Community impact research projects

All students at Círculos develop and present pitches for community impact projects. These pitches include a discussion of driving questions, a comprehensive literature review, an outline of the competencies covered in the project, and a summary of the impact they hoped to make. Guest evaluators like district leaders, curriculum specialists, administrators, and community partners participated in providing feedback to students. Students kept track of their progress by updating a kanban board, moving tiles from in process to done. In the past, students have covered topics like public arts, reducing community consumption of single-use plastics, problematic representation of Black and Latinx people in the media, and drought preparation in California.

#### Competencies Met:

- ✓ Learn Independently
- ✓ Lead Inquiry
- ✓ Design Solutions

#### State Standards Met

- ✓ CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7 - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- ✓ Social Science 11.11 - Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.



### Jaime Caldwell

History Specialist

“Círculos reimagines high school by placing the learner at the center of instruction. Círculos cultivates student’s creativity, voice, and inquiry by designing instructional opportunities that connect our student’s lived experience and the larger community.”

## Empowerment through art

In spite of newfound challenges like remote learning, students at Círculos grappled with hardships through their participation in an arts residency program with Well Beings Studio, a local non profit in Orange County working on arts and literacy-based programs to promote emotional well being for youth. The residency helped students explore personal expression. They shared their stories through song, dance, poetry, and more for the [Ash+Feather](#) Exhibition. Reflecting on her experience with the program, one student shared, “It’s just like a little boost of empowerment.”

### Student data

Círculos serves 116 students in grades 9-12 this school year.

<b>0%</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>Asian</b>
<b>97%</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>American Indian or Alaska Native</b>
<b>2%</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</b>
<b>0%</b>	<b>Other</b>		
<b>100%</b>	<b>Free Lunch</b>		
<b>16%</b>	<b>Special Education</b>		

## Blogs and Media

- [The power of this project-based learning and place-based learning school](#)
- [Social Emotional Learning & Why It Matters in the Wake of COVID-19](#)
- [Teaching for Remote Learning: Lessons We've Learned So Far](#)
- [13 Teacher Tips for Building Student Voice and Agency](#)
- [What is Latinx? Tracing Its History and Defining Its Meaning](#)
- [Stay Humble and Keep Learning](#)
- [What Do Students Want? Ask Them.](#)
- [Círculos High Arts Partnership helps students find their voice](#)

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