How They Came to Be

Da Vinci RISE High’s XQ Super School Journey

In Los Angeles County, there are more than 63,000 homeless students. Another 28,000 of the County’s children are in foster care, and close to 20,000 students in Los Angeles are incarcerated. When the team at Da Vinci Schools recognized the lack of adequate educational, social emotional, and material resources for these students, they knew they had to develop a new approach. Based on a pilot that began in 2015, Da Vinci RISE High was launched in 2017 to provide a highly responsive, holistic, and integrated model that meets the unique needs of youth navigating the most challenging types of disruptions to academic journeys. Through collaborative work with youth and community members, the team at RISE learned the importance of providing not only equity of outcome, but equity of experience. Built upon the Da Vinci Schools model, RISE provides youth with a hybrid learning as well as competency based and project based learning curriculum to prepare them for a competitive and changing world. RISE provides these resources through co-locating and integrating services with non-profit organizations around Los Angeles. RISE currently has three locations all uniquely designed to meet the particular needs of the student body at each site.

RISE High works to provide an empowering education by partnering with service providers, leveraging student voice, and centering the school experience around youth who are most frequently written out of the larger educational narrative.
Discover Da Vinci RISE High

For young people in the foster care system, juvenile justice system, or experiencing homelessness, school may be the only place where they can reliably find stability and security. Da Vinci RISE’s mission comes in the form of a simple but powerful sentiment: meet students where they are and get them where they need to be—both physically and academically. To accomplish this, educators at RISE work with students to create a learning environment that nurtures personal and academic growth while cultivating the confidence they need to successfully navigate their futures in an uncertain world. The passionate commitment and solidarity of the RISE staff with their students, co-location partners, and stakeholders is changing the game for these young people. Youth in foster care and/or who have experienced homelessness typically attend at least three schools per year. RISE disrupts this trend entirely: 90% of foster and homeless students return to RISE each year, a number that speaks volumes about the quality and depth of their wraparound services.

Da Vinci RISE High opened in 2017, is authorized by the Los Angeles County Board of Education as a Countywide Charter, and serves approximately 250 students in grades 9-12.
Da Vinci RISE High Design Features

1. Supporting students in every way

RISE operates year-round and offers extended hours, flexible scheduling, and both face-to-face instruction and an online curriculum that teachers customize to each student, so students can complete their academic work when and where they are able. There are no rigid course sequences or grade levels. Instead, educators and students customize Personalized Learning Plans (PLP’s) based on where students need to catch up and what they need to graduate with a diploma that counts for their individual post-high school goals. Students progress at their own pace and according to their unique goals and needs. To support personalization, pace, and pathway, the RISE team developed a customized build-out of the school’s learning management system. RISE also provides students with transportation through a rideshare program to make sure students don’t miss school, work, or appointments.

2. A culture of trust built through community

Caring relationships, rebuilding trust, and valuing each student are essential underpinnings to the structures and practices in the RISE community. Student voice and empowerment are reflected in multiple ways in the school’s culture, systems, and routines, and teachers integrate social-emotional support and academics. For example, students share their perspectives on school policies and culture with the staff through one-on-one conversations and in surveys. Rather than traditional punitive disciplinary practices, RISE uses restorative practices designed to solve problems and help students who violated norms reflect on their actions. Community building circles occur at least twice weekly, where students have an opportunity to raise issues and resolve differences through authentic, respectful conversations. Smaller advisory circles focus on personal reflection and feedback, while larger circles focus on school-wide issues and concerns.

Erin Whalen
Principal

“In a city with such high numbers of homeless youth, such high numbers of foster youth, there’s really no other option but to create something that is gonna be different. Something that’s gonna really rethink the needs of those communities. And the work that we’re doing is really to provide equity for communities who have never seen that.”

Kijera Williams
Second Year

“I’ve become extremely passionate about Los Angeles’ housing crisis. I can’t vote yet but through my time at RISE I’ve become an advocate for those experiencing homelessness and supporting changes for this community in LA.”
3. Empowering educators for impact

RISE intentionally recruits staff members who want to work closely in a small, tight-knit team and to build a strong, nurturing community from the ground up. Staff members receive professional development to help them adapt to the school’s unique teaching and learning norms and processes, and they also receive special training in adolescent development, strategies for helping students cope with the effects of trauma, and the workings of the legal and foster-care systems. RISE staff members are also deeply involved in case management for many of their students and provide additional support through home visits, online availability, and connecting students with services. RISE also offers specialized academic coaches who go with students to core courses to ensure they get the support they need.

4. An ecosystem of student-centered supports

RISE partners with social services agencies and operates from three locations: one on the campus of a Da Vinci charter school in Hawthorne; one at A Place Called Home, a “safe haven” multi-service agency for Los Angeles youth that provides a nurturing environment with proven programs in arts, education, and wellness; and one at New Earth, a non-profit that provides mentor-based arts, educational, and vocational programs that empower juvenile justice and system-involved youth ages 13-25. Each serves as a familiar home base for students, where they can develop deep relationships and attachments. This model allows students to access critical services and resources without taking them too far from their academic experience. The atmosphere of trust, care, and community ensures students can step out of class, as needed, to take advantage of available services without judgment, stigma, or discipline.

Ana Resner
Case Manager

“In the shift to remote learning, we created a crisis team for higher-need students, which included a teacher, an academic coach, a special education teacher, and a counselor. These teams were structured around a point person to make sure that the students weren’t overwhelmed with five calls a day.”
Theory Into Action

Student work: Presentations of learning and reflection

In the lead-up to graduation at RISE, students undertake a culminating project and presentation of learning that is aligned to their interests and demonstrates their learning. “In spite of the pandemic, RISE students continued and completed a semester-long multidisciplinary project between four content areas, applying literacy skills, deep quantitative and qualitative research, and mathematical investigation. One student recently researched immigration reform and shared the negative impacts that current policies had on their life, and then shared their ideas for more just and humane policies moving forward. Others focused on issues such as gun safety, healthcare, or climate change. Many students chose to research the history of voter suppression and racial injustice. After this project is complete, students are required to reflect not only on their culminating project and presentation of learning but on their time at RISE as a whole. They are asked to consider which components of the RISE vision they felt they embodied and to provide examples of how they had lived out that part of the vision while at RISE. They also share the ways they feel they grew, and how the lessons they learned at RISE would lead to their success in their post-secondary goals.

Competencies Met:

- Effective Communicator
- Skilled Problem Solver
- Empowered Citizen

State Standards Met

- SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence (e.g., reflective, historical investigation, response to literature presentations), conveying a clear and distinct perspective and a logical argument, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks. Use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

- HSS.11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.
Kari Croft
Founder

“The biggest thing we are doing is putting kids back in the center of everything. We really are trying to gather their input, their schedules, the different learning pathways, then they have the services they need. [The current education system has always] taken kids and put them into a system, and now we’ve flipped that. We’re bringing a kid in and changing the system for them.”

Empowerment through art

Learn the history of voting rights and how to increase voter awareness through an interactive session with teacher Lauren “Lo” Murray, two high school students from Da Vinci RISE High, and actress and activist Logan Browning.

Student data

Da Vinci Rise High serves 224 students in grades 9-12 this school year.

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Blogs and Media

- A Guide for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning
- Beyond MLK Day and Black History Month: Making social justice a part of school all year round
- How to Build Strong Relationships with Students Using Culturally Responsive Teaching
- Actor and Activist Logan Browning Teaches High School Students to Advocate for Change This Election
- Expert Advice on Student Trauma To Help You Help Students
- Tips on Creating an Inclusive School and Why It Matters

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