



Moving from a Narrow Focus to →

A Whole-Child Focus

Too often schools are focused narrowly on academic knowledge and skills, with learners engaging in experiences focused primarily on the cognitive dimension of learning. This is reflected in the current definitions of student success, the experiences and content students engage with, and the support they receive. As a result, students' emotional and physical selves are often neglected. While the cognitive and academic dimensions of learning remain critical, for all young people to truly thrive in and transform the world, school must increasingly nurture the *whole* child. This includes the totality of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors that impact their learning, development, character, and overall health and well-being.

Having a whole-child focus is essential because learning and development is a complex process influenced not only by how we cognitively process information, but also by how we feel physically and emotionally, our knowledge of ourselves, and our skills and mindsets. For example, destructive emotions stemming from loneliness, anxiety, or insecurity, as well as physical discomfort stemming from hunger or illness, can make it hard to focus on, manage, and make meaning of learning. Nurturing students' social, emotional, and physical selves helps buffer against this and places students in a state conducive to deeper, more lasting learning. In addition, a whole-child focus builds knowledge, skills, and mindsets critical for successfully navigating one's professional pathways, personal relations, and health. This is especially relevant given trends like the rising prevalence of mental health challenges and employers' increasing interest in skills like self-direction and collaboration.

This Leap Means...

- ▶ Learners bringing their full selves—including their life experiences, emotions, ideas, aspirations, and more—to school.
- ▶ Learners building positive, productive individual mindsets and strong relationships with others.
- ▶ Learners being supported to understand, process, and express their emotions in personally affirming and developmentally appropriate ways.
- ▶ Learners exploring and deepening their understanding of themselves including their unique background, strengths, interests, and goals.
- ▶ Learners having experiences that nurture their physical and mental health and well-being.



Inequitable, Industrial-Era Learning

Narrow Focus

Learners engage in experiences focused primarily on the cognitive dimension of learning.

Equitable, 21st-Century Learning

Whole-Child Focus

Learners engage in experiences that nurture the totality of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors that impact their learning, development, character, and overall health and well-being.

Transcend's Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning are informed by the [science of learning and development](#); equity in education; and [contemporary societal, political, economic, and scientific trends](#).

Whole-Child Focus at Van Ness Elementary School

Van Ness Elementary School, part of DC Public Schools, serves an intentionally diverse group of young people ranging from ages 3–10 in Washington, D.C. The community strives to support its learners in becoming compassionate, creative, critical thinkers who are constantly learning and working to be positive, contributing members of a cross-cultural community. Van Ness believes that, to achieve these goals, the school must take a whole-child approach, which entails a variety of practices:

- ▶ **Strong Start** – First, to begin each day, students engage in a predictable set of routines that foster both safety and connection, and that give them practice with strategies to disengage stress. These routines include being greeted by a staff member upon arrival and then receiving a personalized greeting from their teacher at their classroom door to help kids feel connected to at least one adult. Students eat breakfast in their classroom and engage in activities aimed to foster social connection with their peers. As the day begins, students participate in mindfulness activities and set a commitment for how they will contribute to the community that day.
- ▶ **Safe Place** – Each classroom has a “safe place” where students can go during the day to regain focus or a sense of calm. In these areas students have a menu of activities they can engage in to help them build deeper awareness of what they are thinking and feeling and self-regulate.
- ▶ **Multi-Tiered Supports** – Strong Start and Safe Place are Tier 1 supports that are available to all students. Students who need more support also have access to customized interventions and mental health supports designed to promote appropriate participation. For example, a sensory-motor room allows students to meet sensory and motor needs, facilitating their appropriate participation throughout the day.

Additional School Examples to Explore

The Girls Athletic Leadership School (GALS) – The GALS network includes one high school and three middle schools in Denver, Colorado and Los Angeles, California. The “GALS Series” is a core component of the GALS model. It engages students in learning activities explicitly designed to promote interpersonal skills, social-emotional awareness, and identity development.

Valor Collegiate Academies – Valor has an expanded definition of student success that includes the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge, skills, and mindsets like identity, courage, kindness, and integrity.

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