

SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH & THE WHOLE CHILD

Transcend's Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning describe the key ways we believe the student experience must change so that schools can prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. Supporting student mental health is a large part of the Whole Child Leap: moving from a system in which learners engage in experiences focused primarily on the cognitive dimension of learning, to one in which 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.

Mental health is not just about individual factors like emotional regulation or brain chemistry. Mental health is deeply impacted by an individual's larger context: their relationships, whether their basic needs are met, and whether societal structures are serving as a catalyst or a barrier to success. Viewing mental health through the three layers of Individual, Relational, and Societal is critical to a school's ability to identify appropriate and effective ways to support young people.

THREE INNOVATIVE MODELS

Learn more from innovative schools that are not only building social-emotional skills, but are also addressing students' greater context and realities, to make the Whole Child Leap (and are improving student academic outcomes in the process).

This document includes mini case studies on:

- Van Ness Elementary School
- Valor Collegiate Academy
- Da Vinci Rise High

VAN NESS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GRADES PREK-5, WASHINGTON, D.C.

When Van Ness opened in 2015, the entire community was involved in the school's design. Students, families, and educators wanted a school that would nurture their children academically and beyond. The resulting Whole Child Model (WCM) that the community developed is rooted in the understanding that children's academic success is inextricably linked to their overall well-being, and in the belief that we can—and must—attend to the development of the whole child. Explains founding principal Cynthia Robinson-Rivers, "If kids don't feel physically safe and emotionally safe — if they don't have a sense of belonging, if they don't feel cared for and loved — they are not able to access the parts of their brains that are needed for critical thinking and academic learning."

What sets Van Ness's trauma-informed model apart is its tailored design for the most challenged learners, allowing them to transition into a regulated state conducive to effective learning. It has three key components: a set of schoolwide supports and practices (CARE); tailored interventions for students who need more support (Boost); and a partnership with families (Family Circle). Together, the Van Ness community helps students build the intra- and inter-personal skills they need to regulate their emotions, manage stress, and handle conflicts productively.

"We have a centering space in [our] classrooms and if we're upset or anything we go there and have breathing exercises to help us calm our bodies down and feel relaxed," explains a young Van Ness student. (continued on next page)



School communities across Washington D.C., Texas, and Tennessee have re-imagined their local education offerings with the Whole Child Model. [Learn More Here](#) about the beliefs and practices that make student well-being not just a priority, but the central focus of school.

VAN NESS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GRADES PREK-5, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The approach is working. In fact, early data from Van Ness became a catalyst for expanding the Whole Child Model to 30 Transcend partner school communities. After four years of implementing the model, in 2019 Van Ness — a District of Columbia Public School — had the highest early childhood education Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) scores of all elementary schools in the district. The school's rankings on classroom organization, emotional support, and instructional support reflect the loving and collaborative school environment that the community set out to build and CLASS continues to be strong in 2024. "I've seen students be able to manage their emotions and also help their friends with problem solving skills throughout the day," says preK-4 teacher Aneesah Blount.

After spreading the model, there is evidence it is working to improve student well-being at partner schools across the district. By spring 2023, schools with strong implementation had a higher favorability rating on the Loved Index of the Panorama Survey compared to non-partner schools. In addition, out-of-school suspension rates are lower at WCM schools and decreased on average 75% over the first four years implementing the model.

VALOR COLLEGIATE ACADEMY, GRADES 5-12, NASHVILLE, TN

Valor Collegiate Academies is a network of three public charter schools serving 1900 students in grades 5-12. Valor was designed to address several crisis facing young people, including educational inequity, mental health, and a lack of skills to speak across lines of difference. By bringing a diverse community together to support each other in identity and relational development, Valor aims to help all students step into the world with a sharp mind, big heart, and a clear sense of their noble purpose.

“Without recognizing students as whole humans with desires and dreams and setbacks and obstacles then we’re truly missing out on half of a student,” explains Natalie Nikitas, lead A.P. U.S. History Teacher at Valor. In line with this sentiment, Valor created the Compass Model to go beyond academics by helping students develop interdependent Compass Disciplines that represent excellence in each human dimension—body, heart, mind, and spirit.

Compass ensures that all members of the community (young and adult) are engaging in deep, holistic, and adaptive development work—helping participants experience more social acceptance, social concern, and social reciprocity as well as less emotional exhaustion. One groundbreaking Compass practice is “Circle,” a guided experience that brings students and staff together to share how they’re feeling and support themselves and each other in their personal development.

“Expressing my worries about school and the stress and the overwhelming feelings that I usually have throughout the day in class, I think talking about those is pretty relieving because you realize that almost everybody is feeling the exact same way,” reflects a student Circle participant.

Valor is the only charter school network in the state of Tennessee to earn an A+ rating on the Tennessee Department of Education’s School Letter Grades, with a perfect score on all four key indicators of Academic Achievement, Academic Growth, Growth of Highest Need Students, and College & Career Readiness. Valor attributes its students’ academic success to the educators who nurture students holistically, fostering not only their academic prowess but also placing equal emphasis on scholars’ social and emotional growth.



Through the **Compass Camp** training partnership, more than 65 schools across the country have adopted the Compass model. In addition, the community of **Certified Powered by Compass Schools** continue to collaborate and coalesce around a shared commitment to restoring a sense of wholeness to schools. Listen to the journey of **Breakthrough Schools’ Village Prep Cliffs** as they implemented the model for their students in Cleveland, Ohio.

DA VINCI RISE HIGH, GRADES 9-12, LOS ANGELES, CA

Da Vinci RISE High School is a progressive independent studies hybrid public charter high school designed around the intricate needs of youth navigating foster care, housing instability, probation, and/or other circumstances that have caused disruptions in their academic journeys. RISE's theory of innovation is that, "if we can build a school that effectively supports, empowers and educates youth who have been historically underserved and underestimated, we can create a holistic institution capable of serving any youth."

With this in mind, RISE serves a diverse array of students from a multitude of backgrounds and lived experiences. "In a city with such high numbers of homeless and foster youth, there's really no other option but to create something different," explains Executive Director and Co-founder Erin Whalen. Serving 210 students across three sites, the RISE model takes a responsive approach to education, acknowledging and adapting learning to accommodate the additional responsibilities and priorities students have in their lives outside of school.

Students are at the center of the RISE Model, with all aspects of the school experience designed to support student success academically while also caring for their mental, physical, and social-emotional needs. To that end, the student experience involves instructional, behavioral, and holistic components—and includes each RISE student and support group co-creating an individualized plan outlining their unique pathway to graduation. "Growing up without a mother and a father, I knew I needed to do things on my own and decided to catch up on my credits," shares Kia, a RISE graduate who navigated the foster system. Kia went on to successfully graduate, attend college and re-joined the RISE community as a staff member before relocating to Las Vegas with her family. RISE has had 4 alumni return to the school as professionals on staff.

The RISE Model also incorporates trauma-informed, restorative practices like community and advisory circles. A school-based wraparound team responds nimbly to young people's evolving mental, physical, social, and educational needs. RISE sites also co-locate within social service providers in the community to address student needs that cannot be met in house (e.g., medical or dental services, extracurriculars). RISE's student-centered approach is making a difference for students most frequently written out of the larger educational narrative.



"Before we didn't like school...Now look at us," shares a RISE student. "In our community, there's a lot of people out there going through struggles who might not want to say nothing. But this school can really change people."