

**A DEEPER DIVE**

Vista High School (VHS) is a comprehensive high school that has served the small California community of Vista since 1936. Once the only high school in the district, VHS is now one of three comprehensive public high schools in this fast-growing, fast-changing community in northern San Diego County. Largely white and middle-class during the school's early days, the VHS student body is now mostly Latinx, and two-thirds of students come from low-income families.

As the community has changed, so have the needs of VHS students. To address these changes, a team of eight teachers and 165 11th-graders piloted a Personalized Learning Academy (PLA) during the 2015–16 school year. The goal was to create a personalized and highly challenging environment for each student, aimed at preparing them to become inspired leaders, able to solve any challenge with an open and empathetic perspective. This pilot, and the lessons accumulated along the way, formed the basis for a fully personalized model for all Vista High School students, beginning with the class entering in fall 2017.

At the heart of the new model is a “contemporary curriculum” that broadens what students learn in order to prepare them to compete and succeed in the global economy. Students build their skills in areas such as digital literacy, which includes vetting, describing and curating information; media literacy, which includes recognizing bias and generating media to communicate what they learn; and global literacy, or the ability to investigate the world, recognize diverse cultural perspectives and take ethical action to improve the world.

In a dedicated “Challenge” course, students examine and research the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs), an international framework for ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity worldwide. Students have completed projects on a variety of topics, such as poverty, hunger, health, education, clean water and climate action. Teachers work with them to understand the problems from multiple perspectives, make interdisciplinary connections and propose solutions.

**AT A GLANCE**

*Vista launched a “school-within-a-school” pilot program focused on personalized learning in 2015–16 that was being implemented with the entire freshman class in fall 2017. The redesign will expand to serve all students by the 2020–21 school year.*

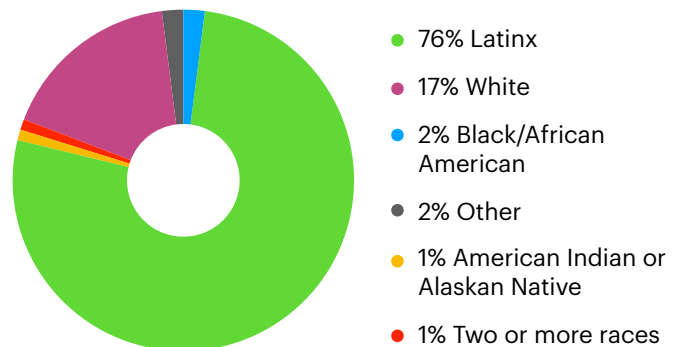
**Principal:**  
 David Jaffee

**Director of Curriculum & Instruction:**  
 Craig Gastauer

**Assistant Superintendent of Innovation, Vista Unified School District:**  
 Matt Doyle

**Students of Vista**

**2018-19 Enrollment: 1235 Students**



**70%**  
 Qualify for free or reduced price lunch

**16%**  
 Qualify for special education services

**13%**  
 Are English language learners

**A DEEPER DIVE CONTINUED**

Students collect and analyze data, take action in the local or global community to help solve the problem, learn how their actions can be tied to possible careers and build entrepreneurial skills and dispositions. Ultimately, each student selects the goal they are most passionate about to design and implement a major project that links international issues to local context.

To complement the new approach, the Vista team has designed an innovative way to organize students and the learning day. Instead of the traditional bell-schedule broken down by classes, students and teachers are organized into six “houses.” Each house includes 130 to 140 students and an interdisciplinary teacher team of five teachers who cover core academic subject areas for each grade. Based on student needs and progress, teachers develop plans weekly, using the available 240 minutes per day flexibly.

As the school fully implements its personalized learning approach, access to technology by students and their families plays an important role. Students, staff and families will have the tools they need to explore, communicate, create, invent and innovate. Students will be able to conduct inquiries, deepen their awareness of global issues, and generate and communicate ideas and information.

Vista educators believe that students learn best when they possess the habits and mindsets that support success; when they have opportunities to collaborate, exchange ideas, and gain feedback from peers; and when they feel connected, empowered, engaged, safe and supported. To build productive habits and mindsets, Vista educators incorporate the Habits of Mind framework into their work and create space and structure for students to understand and develop the required dispositions. To improve school culture and climate, the VHS team also implements restorative justice practices. In addition to intensive initial training, teachers have ongoing monthly professional development to ensure that restorative practices become a part of Vista’s DNA.

A “Wellness Seminar” course for ninth graders serves as an important onboarding experience and builds a common foundation for all Vista High School students. The class

covers character development, health and wellness, “power skills” (sometimes referred to as “soft skills”) and “Vista Pride,” which the school envisions as a distinctive way to relate to the local, national and global community. Students have access to adult mentors, tutors and counselors during the Wellness block.

The path from school-within-a-school to a fully transformed school is never an easy one, especially for a large, comprehensive high school. But the quality of the planning at Vista, together with the dedication of the team and strong support from the district office, provide ample reasons for optimism.