

**AT A GLANCE**

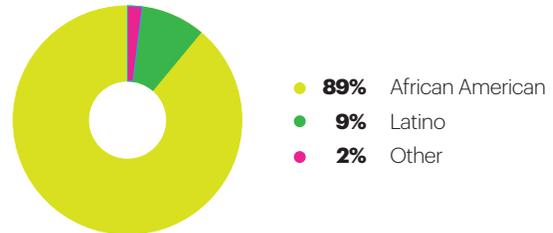
*Da Vinci RISE High launched in fall 2017 in South Central Los Angeles at A Place Called Home and in Hawthorne, a community near the Los Angeles International Airport. The school grows out of a successful 2015–16 pilot program called Da Vinci FLEX.*

**Founding Principal:** Kari Croft

**Founding Assistant Principal:** Erin Whalen

**Projected Student Demographics  
(at Full Enrollment)**

**Student Enrollment:** 400 Students (Grades 9-12)



**RISE HIGH**

*AIMS TO SERVE "DISCONNECTED" STUDENTS, INCLUDING STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS OR LIVE WITH FOSTER FAMILIES*

**A DEEPER DIVE**

More than 63,000 homeless students reside in Los Angeles County; another 28,000 are in foster care; and close to 20,000 are incarcerated. Many more are disconnected from school because of family and life circumstances beyond their control, or are struggling to stay in high schools where adults just don't seem to understand the challenges they face. While a good education is literally the only chance many of these young people have to lead stable and productive lives as adults, the county's 80 different school systems simply aren't set up to support these learners.

Leslie Heimov, executive director of the Children's Law Center of California, has often been at a loss when trying to find good high schools for the teens her organization serves. "When faculty and staff aren't aware or sensitive, what we end up seeing is a lot of kids dropping out," she said. "They don't trust the system and don't believe what we say we're going to do."

Da Vinci RISE High is an effort to change that by creating a school that "wraps its arms around" its students, providing them, not just with a good education, but with support and the extra services they need to thrive. With locations at A Place Called Home, a "safe haven" for

underserved youth in South Central LA, and at a facility in nearby Hawthorne, the school will expand over time to include additional sites embedded in the facilities of social-service providers, creating a citywide campus where RISE students can master a competency-based, college- and career-ready curriculum in ways and in places, that work best for them.

Co-location with youth and social service agencies is a promising way to ensure that students have accessible wraparound services—which means they won't have to miss school to get help like medical and mental-health care, legal assistance, and health, fitness, and well-being supports.

Just as the RISE team aims to eliminate barriers to students' well-being outside school, it also aims to eliminate the rigid structures that impede opportunities inside most high schools—structures like traditional bell and course schedules, the 9 a.m.-to-3 p.m. school day, a single lock step path through a predetermined "one size fits all" curriculum, advancement based on seat-time rather than mastery, and standardized test scores as the sole measure of achievement.

# DA VINCI RISE HIGH

## (LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA)



### Public Charter School

*(Continued)*

“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 have the services they need there. [Traditional schools have] taken kids and put them into system, and now we’ve flipped that. We’re bringing a kid in and changing the system for them,” said Da Vinci RISE High cofounder Kari Croft.

RISE will replace the usual, rigid structures with a competency-based framework that enables multiple, flexible pathways for students to learn at their own pace and according to their unique goals and needs. There are no rigid class pathways or grade levels. School staff are customizing schedules and course offerings around what students need to graduate college ready. RISE operates year-round and offers extended hours and flexible scheduling so students can complete their academic work when they are able—even if that falls outside the traditional school “day” or “year.” The RISE team has developed a comprehensive curricular framework that goes into great detail on a set of learning pathways and benchmarks called “chapters.” The framework uses a competency approach, meaning that RISE students move through a series of three increasingly demanding “chapters,” each of which includes performance assessments and opportunities to demonstrate proficiency. Because the entire approach is competency-based, the student experience is flexible, and learning can be customized to what each student needs, and when.

A digital platform houses each student’s personalized learning plan, curricular materials, and school/family communication tools, so teachers and students always have a clear picture of each student. Academic and socio-emotional skills are included. Teachers and students meet regularly to track progress and recalibrate learning goals.

Members of the RISE team are not naïve about the challenges they face. Many students’ expectations for school have been shaped by a history of impersonal, bureaucratic, discouraging encounters. Most are easily discouraged and may shun challenging classes, due to a lack of confidence or perceived incompetence. Strong relationships with adults are essential to create transformative educational experiences that allow all students to achieve.

That’s why relationships are the heart of the Da Vinci RISE model. The school uses practices from trauma-informed research and a strength-based approach to develop a cohesive school community where every student is known and valued. “Students have gotten so used to checking their identity at the door,” says Croft. “We flip that mindset. We say, ‘We want all of you here. Bring it all in. Your strengths and your weaknesses. Your trauma. Your experiences. Bring it all in.’”

All this requires RISE teaching staff to spend time in students’ homes and communities. Staff members get assistance with positive youth-development strategies, deep training in working with students who have experienced trauma, and extensive professional development in integrating the history, structure, and terminology of the legal and foster-care systems so they can help students analyze their own experiences. The hope is to graduate “revolutionaries” who have a strong sense of self, are able to think critically about their present realities, and are empowered with skills necessary to press for changes in the very systems that have kept young people like them on the margins for so long.