



Founded in

2010

Number of Schools, Location(s)

Three in Denver, CO
GALS Denver Middle School , **GALS Denver High School**,
The Boys School

One in Los Angeles, CA
GALS LA

GALS Las Vegas is in development

Number of Students

GALS Denver Middle School: 325
GALS Denver High School: 134
The Boys School: 150
GALS LA: 280

Number of Teachers / Teacher Retention

62 across four schools
Denver: 73% retention
Los Angeles: 96% retention

Per-Pupil Funding

Denver: \$4,960,309 (average \$8,100 per pupil)
Los Angeles: \$3,728,173 (average \$ 13,000 per pupil)

Sector

Charter

Grades Served

6th through 12th

Student Demographics

	Denver	LA
White	47%	8%
Latinx	35%	82%
Black	8%	3%
Other	9%	5%
Students with disabilities	14%	15%
English language learners	20%	23%
Eligible for free or reduced meals	44%	81%

Teacher Demographics

	Denver	LA
White	81%	50%
Latinx	7%	35%
Black	7%	15%
Asian	4%	0%

Anchoring to Established Cognitive Developmental & Educational Theories

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development — Constructivism¹

Researcher: Jean Piaget

Theory's Key Tenets: Children learn as an artifact of factors both internal and external to the child. Children learn best by doing and through engaging in their environment and with the adults and peers around them.

Sociocultural Theory^{2,3}

Researcher: Lev Vygotsky

Theory's Key Tenets: Children learn through hands-on experiences. Everyone in the child's environment and the overall culture and society are responsible for developing higher order cognitive functions. Learning is inherently a social act. Adults facilitate children's knowledge development through scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development — the space between a child's prior background knowledge and what they can do on their own, and the new knowledge, understandings, or skills that they need support mastering.

Ecological Systems Theory⁴

Researcher: Urie Bronfenbrenner

Theory's Key Tenets: Children learn through both internal and external factors by engaging in several environmental or ecological systems:

- Microsystem (e.g. family, caregivers, school)
- Mesosystem (refers to relationships between those within the child's microsystem, such as parent-school partnerships)
- Exosystem (refers to larger social systems that impact the child's development, such as community-based resources or parent workplace environments that may cause stress on parents that lead to stress for children)

¹ Jean Piaget, "Piaget's Theory," in: Bärbel Inhelder, Harold H. Chipman, and Charles Zwingmann, eds., *Piaget and His School* (New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, Springer Study Edition, 1976).

² Lev Vygotsky, "The Development of Higher Psychological Functions," *Russian Social Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1977): 38.

³ James P. Lantolf and Aneta Pavlenko, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 15 (1995): 108-124. doi:10.1017/S0267190500002646.

⁴ Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Systems Theory," in Ross Vasta, ed., *Six Theories of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues* (London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992), 187-249.

- Macrosystem (refers to cultural values, customs and laws)
- Chronosystem (refers to dimensions of time and the interplay between time and a child's external life changes and circumstances as well as the child's internal development and identity)

Introduction

Liz Wolfson is chief visionary officer of Girls Athletic Leadership Schools Inc. (GALS), a network of public, single-gender, college preparatory middle and high schools. It's an unconventional title for a school network leader, one that reflects Wolfson's unconventional path and unconventional vision for education.

Wolfson traces her roots as a dedicated competitive athlete, where she learned about her power via her body. She channeled that identity into a reputation for "getting things done" professionally. In her 20s and 30s, Wolfson worked for companies, startups, and local and national nonprofits; she traveled broadly, including time in Israel.

Despite such successes, Wolfson reflected on the challenges of her early life: "I worked for patriarchal men. I didn't fully comprehend why things were this way. As an adult, the world was dwindling for me. My creativity was shrinking. I was sitting behind a computer and losing sense of self. It was all so vivid and alive for so many years of my life via competition and sport. But then I found myself as a parent, I was not moving, and I felt inactive from head to toe and everything in between."



These experiences and reflections inspired Wolfson to explore. She worked at a holistic wellness center in New York. She studied feminist movements and thought. She researched areas of the country where movement and activity are part of lifestyle and culture. She consistently asked, “How can we help students live actively? How can we help them answer questions like ‘Who am I? How do I feel? How is my body feeling?’ How can we attack gender inequity inclusive of racial inequality?” To address these fundamental questions, Wolfson imagined an approach to education that she called “embodied education,” where each child would be supported to “succeed academically, lead confidently, live boldly, and thrive physically.”⁵



This vision is steeped in the needs of adolescents.⁶ As Wolfson explained, “Middle school and high school are about puberty. Puberty is about socialization and getting to know what you

are growing into. The teacher’s job is to open everything up. Kids’ jobs are to experience everything you can in the world and relational learning and to experience physical movement and competition. Middle school is hard. Every year, you’re a different human. You will keep trying and you will find your space. In high school, it’s about YOU and individualization. It’s about finding what is MY way of eating, expressing, learning.” Calling on her own experience as a parent, Wolfson added: “I wanted an educational structure where my own two daughters could fully develop. A school whose values are steeped in human developmental values, just like my own, because I can’t raise my children without the full involvement and partnership with their schools.”

Driven by her essential questions, crystallizing vision, and knowledge of adolescent needs, Wolfson wrote a contract with herself — making herself her own client — to open a school that would address her vision head-on. Finally, it was time to “get things done” that mattered most. Wolfson, her flagship school co-founder Nina Safane — who pioneered the execution of this vision — and a committed group of early partners set out to build a model to achieve the vision. In 2010, they opened their campus in Denver, a site inspired by the active culture of the mountain West, supported by a charter-friendly environment, and known for its ethnic diversity. They built early iterations of the essential ingredients of an embodied education: integrated physical movement, explicit attention to mental health and social-emotional development, positive gender focus, excellent academics. The organization was also founded with a deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, access and opportunity, that inspired design elements such as a racially and socioeconomically diverse-by-design environment, a full inclusion model for students with special needs (and a significantly higher population of students with special needs than the surrounding district, including all of the other charters at the time), and a recognition of the fluid definition of gender.

Fast-forward nine years, and today Girls Athletic Leadership Schools Inc. (GALS) fosters its whole human approach to education across one high school and three middle schools in two regions: Denver and Los Angeles. While the model started with and centers on those who identify as female, the latest school to open is a brother school — The Boys School of Denver — showing that the power of the model spans genders.

Defining and Measuring Success

Definition of student success. GALS leaders have a long-term comprehensive vision for student success. As one leader shared, “We talk a lot about a well-lived life, self-possession and self-sufficiency. We want to prepare students to lead confidently, succeed academically, live boldly, and thrive physically. We want students to leave high school ready to approach the world the way they see fit. We want them to

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *The Association Between School Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance* (Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pape_paper.pdf; John J. Ratey and Eric Hagerman, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2008); Eric Jensen, “Moving with the Brain in Mind,” *Educational Leadership* (2000): 34-37, <http://www.pgsd.org/cms/lib07/PA01916597/Centricity/Domain/43/braininmind.pdf>.

⁶Jared, Adolescent Science Translation Funder Collaborative.

embrace embodied living and leading. We prepare students for innovative leadership in a global society.”

Current and desired ways of measuring success across domains. Leaders identify numerous indicators of success they wish to measure: whether students are known as individuals, whether they demonstrate self-efficacy including a clear understanding of embodied education, whether they are engaged in their classes, and how they are incorporating physical activity into their lives. GALS has searched for existing/normed measures of these indicators, but it has found most available measures to be insufficient. However, GALS has piloted what it labels a “self-efficacy” survey with the girls’ campuses in Denver and Los Angeles over three years. The 2016-17 survey was conducted by University of Colorado Denver and served to tease apart self-efficacy — or how one perceives her ability to successfully complete certain tasks or skills — and identity perceptions in the student population. The results revealed that:

- 94.7% of middle schoolers and 96.2% of high schoolers reported, “I could get the best grades in the class if I tried enough.”
- 91% of middle schoolers and 96.2% of high schoolers said, “My teacher thinks I am smart.”
- 89% of middle schoolers and 86.1% of high schoolers reported, “Morning movement improves my ability to focus and learn.”
- 85.7% of middle schoolers and 84.8% of high schoolers agreed, “I am smart.”

Academic success. GALS students display academic success. Again referencing the flagship Denver girls’ middle and high school campuses, leaders note that in 2017:

- GALS Middle School in Denver ranked second among Denver middle schools in terms of ELA growth, and students’ math and ELA scores outperformed their Denver Public Schools (DPS) peers’ scores.
- GALS Middle School’s special education, English language learner, and free and reduced-lunch students outperformed DPS peers.
- GALS 10th grade ranked ninth out of 47 Denver high schools on the PSAT.
- GALS High students with an IEP showed math growth scores four times the district average.
- 99% of GALS High School students graduated.

How Girls Athletic Leadership Schools Inc. Facilitates Comprehensive Student Development

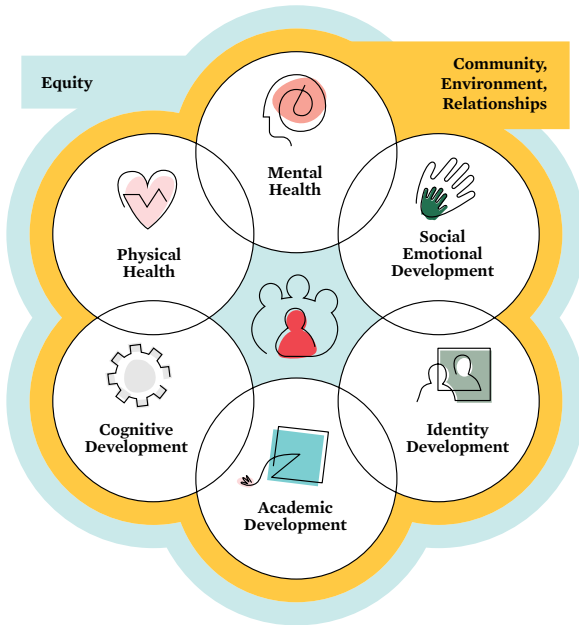
Girls Athletic Leadership Schools (GALS) demonstrates integration across multiple domains of Comprehensive Student Development (CSD). In the sections that follow, we explain what GALS’ model looks like. We also clarify how the model fuels CSD.

The following aspects of GALS’ model are critical to its success in facilitating student development:

1. Focus on physical movement in service of learning
2. Homegrown GALS Series/Boys Series (comprehensive, research-based) curriculum taught in a core class focused on social-emotional and identity-related topics; GALS terms this “relational learning”
3. Gender-responsive education
4. Mental health services and supports for all students
5. Adults as role models for development



Comprehensive Child Development



sure, students are prompted to consider what types of movement work best for them. The goal is for students to become lifelong movers not just for health’s sake, but for productivity and mental balance, so that students internalize the *practice* of mind-body connection. A common refrain at all GALS schools is, “If you have a body, you’re an athlete.”

Morning movement is designed to support multiple domains. Movement has a primary benefit on **physical health** by providing opportunity for exercise and a chance to wake up the brain. Morning movement also sets the stage for development in other areas of focus. Movement has been shown to spur **cognitive development** (supporting areas like focus and attention) while preparing the brain and body for **academic development** throughout the day. GALS also points to the myriad **social-emotional** and **mental health** benefits of movement, including associations with stress management, team-building, relational awareness, and emotional health. Lastly, movement is an important component of GALS’ approach to **identity development**, through which each girl is urged to develop her own identity integrating heart, mind, and body in the fulfillment of her unique human potential.⁸ The vignettes below illustrate what this looks like in practice:

1. Focus on physical movement

GALS intentionally plans physical movement throughout the school day. It relies on brain science as its foundation for movement not only in the mornings but also throughout every day. This emphasis on movement has wide-ranging benefits at the core to GALS’ vision; it supports each of the domains of student development.

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Movement starts each day at all Girls Athletic Leadership Schools via the “Morning Movement” block. This timing is intentional, as leaders noted that “developing minds don’t awaken until 10, so this is how we jump-start the brain via the body. We want to raise the heart rate 40-80% of its capacity for a window of 20 minutes or more. This creates a window for learning.”⁷ Students experience a range of morning movement classes over the course of the year determined by space and weather, including running, cycling, circuit training/CrossFit, dance, and yoga; participation in each class can be modified or adapted for students with special needs. Through this expo-

- Among a classroom of 20 sixth- through eighth-graders and a high school-aged teacher’s assistant, a leader introduced students to the objective for the day: a safe bike ride through Denver. A student led the group in a lesson on bike safety and the parts of a bike, while several girls snacked on pomegranate seeds to fuel them for the ride. Before the class headed out, girls checked their resting pulses. The teacher then turned on a Spotify playlist (“85 BPM” or beats per minute) to set the pace for a round of jumping jacks. After the music wound down, girls rechecked their heart rates and tracked the results. Sufficiently warmed up, the girls strapped on helmets and raced toward their bikes, donated by the Specialized Foundation #ride4focus. Before she exited, one student checked in with her teacher about how the biking has helped her focus in classes and manage her ADHD diagnosis.
- Down the hall, yoga mats carpeted a gym filled with 60 sixth- through eighth-graders. As girls moved from pose to pose, there was a look of calm focus on their faces.
- On the track, a group of students ran the mile for the second time this year. In addition to tracking their times, each girl kept a journal to document how she felt before, during, and after each run.

^[7] John Ratey and John Medina.

^[8] For more information on why movement is important, [see here for GALS’ research and impact.](#)

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Movement also happens consistently in the classroom. Brain science says that when we sit for 12-20 minutes or more, our brain cell activity decreases. As leaders explain, “Movement pedagogy is designed to engage students in their own learning and to prevent them from falling asleep or just sitting in a chair.⁹ Movement is NOT ‘turn in your homework by doing a silly walk up to the front of the classroom.’” Students value this approach, as one shared: “Movement is so much fun. When you’re sitting at a desk for eight hours a day you get tired. If you take a five-minute break in service to learning, you boost your brain and wake up.”

Movement in the classroom has a primary benefit in academic and cognitive development as movement accelerates the brain’s ability to learn, focus, and solve complex problems. Movement increases the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a naturally occurring growth hormone that is responsible for neurogenesis: the creation of new neurons. Higher levels of BDNF are associated with increased intelligence, mood, productivity, and memory (Ratey, 2013). Movement is also a teaching tool as it is used to teach and assess academic content in ways that make learning come alive. Movement in the classroom also has a secondary benefit on physical health; rather than stay sedentary at a desk, students move. Movement appears in classrooms in a variety of ways:

- One Denver student shared, “In math, I get really fidgety. Knowing there’s an option to move while learning — it really helps me. I’ll always remember an activity where our teacher would show a card with a math problem on it to add or subtract positive and negative integers. We had to run through the hallways and find the notecard with the right answer before another person did. That helped me learn better than just watching the teacher talk and talk.”
- In a math classroom, a teacher unrolled a room-sized mat of a coordinate plane. Students moved up and down the coordinate plane to demonstrate knowledge of x- and y-coordinates before learning new concepts like slope, rise, and run by navigating the mat.
- A pair of 11th-graders jogged in the hallway. Rather than telling them to slow down, a leader asked, “What are you learning?” The girls immediately replied excitedly, “We’re in the middle of this really hard chemistry lab and we

were stuck, so we decided to do a few laps of the school to discuss the problem and get our brains moving.”

2. Homegrown GALS Series / Boys Series core classes

GALS network (GALS Inc.) has invested in a daily class called “GALS Series,” in which students encounter content and instruction explicitly designed to promote relational excellence, social-emotional awareness, and identity development.

While many schools may have classes that attend to these areas of development, GALS’ model shows a particularly deep investment in this class, close attention to the connection between GALS Series and other content areas, and evidence that students apply learning from this class outside of school contexts.

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

GALS invests in substantial resources, including full time licensed staff members, ongoing professional development, for all staff; and curriculum, coaching, and family engagement practices in GALS Series. Leaders are extremely intentional about what girls learn and how girls learn it so that students develop across multiple domains. Students attend GALS Series for 55 minutes daily from sixth to 12th grade, the same number of minutes given to core content classes of math, science, language arts, and social studies. Each level of GALS Series has a defined scope and sequence aligned to five core themes: mindfulness, wellness, relationships, voice, and goals/intentions. As students spiral through these units year after year, they engage with developmentally appropriate content that builds on prior years’ lessons.

The GALS Series class integrates across multiple domains. **Social-emotional skills**, including social awareness, relationship skills, and stress management, are taught explicitly. The tight-knit nature of the classroom communities also increases a sense of belonging. **Identity development** is another area of primary focus, as students are encouraged to explore their personal identities and values via class content. **Academic development** is fueled by the rigor with which GALS Series classes are conducted. In a given GALS Series class, students may learn the science of hormones, acquire and integrate new

⁹ Richard Davidson, University of Wisconsin; Jean Blaydes Madigan.

vocabulary (e.g., naming core values), practice writing skills, or read a scholarly article. Examples from recent GALS Series lessons demonstrate development in these areas:

- To start a recent GALS Series class, girls answered check-in questions intentionally designed to let them control the level of vulnerability in their answer. The prompts included “What is your forecast? Sunny, rainy?” and “What color are you feeling right now?” Girls could choose a prompt and then could use the prompt to share as much — or as little — of their personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they felt comfortable.
- Another class started with a protocol in which girls shared three words about their weekends. After a girl shared three words, one student asked her a follow-up question about one of her words. A GALS Series teacher shared, “I have to let it breathe and let it live a little. Talking about a Halloween Fright Night may not seem important, but that is what they wanted to share. Another student may share about her brother who is going through a hard time.” The teacher managed the conversation toward a long-term learning target: I can practice various personal expression methods that help me expand the way I share my feelings, thoughts, and experiences.
- One teacher explained her work in GALS Series to support students as they approach and then enter puberty. She said, “We first learn about hormones — serotonin, endorphins. This lets them take a scientific look at something that is experienced as social-emotional.” The teacher described sixth-grade lessons featuring Q&A sessions about girls’ bodies to dispel myths and establish a basic understanding of the process. She said that by eighth grade, the focus was on equipping students to track their periods. The teacher explained the empowering benefit of this activity: “I didn’t sit there with a calendar app and track (my cycle), until I tried to have a family. It would have been useful to know at their age why I had migraines, larger breasts, water retention. We teach them to track for the sake of their wellness. I want the girls to have ownership of this.”
- Another class included girls creating their own “wheel of life,” a tool for exploring how satisfied each person is with her life. After a previous week’s lesson on defining their personal core values, students reflected on the areas of life where they put focus or energy (e.g., family, school, sports, work, etc.). They mapped those areas on a radial graph and shaded in the circle to indicate whether they were at a 0 (“I am currently putting no focus in this area”) or 10 (“I am putting a lot of focus in this area”). Students discussed where they were and where they wanted to be in each area and then developed action plans to address gaps. Meanwhile, the teacher said, “Remember, it’s not about reaching a 10 always. It’s about the process. Where is your balance? Balance is a journey, not an accomplishment.” Students in another GALS Series class used a similar tool to summarize data they had collected on their sleep and nutrition habits over the past several weeks.
- Another lesson featured a discussion on redlining in which students explored concepts of race and identity. Students looked at a map of Denver that highlighted the racially segregated nature of the city. They talked about where each student lived and how her neighborhood impacted her identity. As a few White students reflected on how their communities are racially mixed, they were prompted by others to consider who used to live in those areas.
- Another sixth-grade class focused on consent. The teacher taught students about this topic by giving the analogy of inviting your teacher over to your house. She prompted, “If I came to your house, is it okay for me to go to your room? No! But you might tell me that it’s okay for me to go to the kitchen table.” She then gave students language to talk about who is in their intimate space (e.g., someone they would hug), their personal space (e.g., someone they would welcome at arm’s length), or only allowed in public space. They then role-played asking a person in a line at a grocery store who is standing too close to them to honor their space. In a final activity, they practiced signaling and reading each other’s boundaries through an exercise where they wandered the room until prompted to partner up. Once partnered, each girl held up a number of fingers. One finger meant “I am only okay with making eye contact and waving”; two fingers meant “we can shake hands”; three fingers meant “we can hug.” Girls were instructed to complete the physical interaction suggested by the person holding up the lowest number of fingers, thus respecting the person with the strictest boundaries.
- A teacher summarized the significance of GALS Series: “We lend the same amount of time to the social-emotional piece as we do with algebra. But the GALS Series has to hold water and be rigorous. When I see how long they are able to sit and listen, I know that’s a skill they’re building. I know they’re listening when they’re asking questions.”

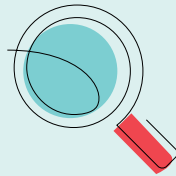
Description of GALS Series Curriculum

The GALS Series curriculum answers a nationwide call for school programming that addresses social-emotional wellness and supports comprehensive student development of the whole child, including physical health, mental health, and cognitive, academic and identity development. This unique, workshop-style class organizes relational learning lessons and practices around five themes: mindfulness, wellness, relationships, voice, and goals/intentions.

Throughout the course (which meets daily and is taught by a full-time, trained instructor) students reflect on their personal growth through self-efficacy surveys, personal statements, and project-based learning tasks documented in their personal portfolio.

Students completing the program leave middle school with the tools and skills needed to lead confidently, succeed academically, live boldly, and thrive physically. They enter high school with the self-confidence, self-efficacy, and relational awareness necessary for them to maximize their impact and opportunity in multiple and diverse social contexts.

Students leave GALS with the habits, mindsets and dispositions necessary to navigate post-secondary exploration, and are college and career ready upon graduation.



- “I hear emotional literacy appearing in how students present in the classroom. They bring voice, they advocate for themselves.”
- “We read novels that deal with big issues. We’re reading about people. We’re practicing making meaning of the people and stories around us.¹⁰ We talk about the relationships in a novel and how those relationships affect who the characters are. We do this via speaking and writing. That’s all enabled by the conversations in GALS Series. When I ask abstract, thought-provoking questions, the hands go up in the air. Students can talk about the experience the characters in the book have around identity and conflict.”

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

In perhaps the ultimate test of learning, students also report that they use the lessons from GALS Series outside of school. Students report demonstrating **social-emotional** and **identity** skills at home and in the community, including social awareness, relationship skills, stress management, or positive self-identity. A few students shared recent examples of applying GALS Series lessons:

- “I’m a dancer and at my studio there are lots of other dancers. Some of them think if you’re mad, you should just yell at the person. I was like ‘I’m not sure you should do that.’ My peers think you should handle things in one way. They don’t know emotional intelligence like we’re taught.”
- “I like learning mindfulness. I get mad at my brother a lot, so now I take a deep breath. Breathing helps.”
- “I’ve learned to give myself a lot of positive self-talk.”

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Students apply the lessons they learn in GALS Series to other classes. Teachers affirmed that “students bring all those tools from GALS Series to our other core classes and make our core classes that much better.”

This further demonstrates integration. **Academic development** in core content areas is accelerated by the **social-emotional** and **identity development** facilitated in GALS Series as anchored in the development of the “Habits of Heart and Mind”: Power, Flexibility, Focus, and Balance. Teachers point to students demonstrating social awareness and empathy when reading fiction; they note students expressing self-confidence when giving a class presentation. Several teachers described what this looks like:

^[10] Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Mihnea Moldoveanu, “Reading Other Minds: Effects of Literature on Empathy,” *Scientific Study of Literature* 3, no. 1 (2013): 28–47.

3. Gender-responsive education

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Gender-responsive education is central to GALS' total environment. This supports academic, social-emotional, and identity development.

GALS' gender-responsiveness appears in everything from the predominantly female student and staff populations, to the positive gender focus in content covered, to the gender-responsive instructional methods used. Leaders present all-girls' education as an intentional antidote to the messages that many girls receive, and are deeply impacted by, from the outside world. One shared, "I want girls to have an opportunity to be seen and heard in classrooms without boys over-talking. I want to make sure that they see women in the STEM fields. I hear women at parties say, 'I've never been good at math.' Where are they getting the messaging that girls are bad at math? It's not true! Girls outpace boys in STEM fields, college attendance. We lift up girls' opportunity to take risks."

In addition to an intentional focus on girls, GALS leans into the nuance of gender, including the range of gender identities. One administrator described GALS' gender policy as such: "We're very open. If someone identifies as a girl, they can come. If someone at the school identifies as a boy, they can stay. We hired a transgender after-school coordinator who teaches kids about pronouns and is an important role model for all students, but especially our transgender students."



GALS' positive, inclusive gender focus facilitates development of multiple domains. **Social-emotional** skills around the art of relationship-building, and sense of belonging are enhanced as students experience what they describe as "sisterhood." Girls benefit from positive **identity development** as they develop confidence in their gender identity and see positive role models with whom they share a gender identity. They also become fluent in the language and social discourse around gender fluidity in an increasingly non-binary world. Leaders also note the impact on **academic development** as gender-responsive content and instructional methods increase girls' engagement and academic success. The examples below illustrate positive gender focus throughout the school:

- In a crowded gym, 50 sixth- through eighth-graders gathered around a teacher. Girls wore the GALS uniform: athletic pants and colorful GALS T-shirts in a variety of colors, each emblazoned with a phrase like "Run Like a Girl (for Office)," "Solve Like a Girl," or "Join the Movement." The teacher read the GALS Pledge, line by line. After each line, the girls enthusiastically repeated the phrase at the top of their lungs. The gym reverberated with the echoes of "I know who I am! I know that I matter! I know what matters to me!"
- Hallways are decorated with posters and quotes from positive female role models ("Sheroes"), and classrooms are named after Sheroes. Each Shero was nominated by a teacher or student.
- Teachers are mindful of gendered language. As one student shared, "Our math teacher is so great. You know he cares about you. He doesn't call us 'guys' — he calls us 'hey girls.'"
- In a recent ELA classroom, students critically engaged with messages about women. Via a project, students identified and analyzed covert messaging about gender, sexuality, and physicality in various magazines.
- Several classrooms have adopted strategies for inspiring more girls to love math. One teacher discussed a strategy in which writing and math are integrated so as to respond to many middle school girls' engagement in writing activities. One project involved students writing about how to solve an algebraic equation. The teacher noted, "It's huge, bewildering. They find it difficult. It takes a long time, but they end up with a written and verbal walk-through of a process and procedure paper on algebraic equations."
- GALS honors intersectionality (e.g., the intersection of being of a marginalized gender and a marginalized race/ethnicity). A student talked about her experiences as a Latina at the school: "There are lots of opportunities for women and students of color. We started this thing in seventh grade called Latina GALS where we support each



other, help each other out, listen to our music, talk about our experiences, and speak our home language.”

- Parents reflected on the power of an education that develops girls in this way: “The statements of the pledge give me chills. A generation of young women knowing these things can change the discourse of the community, the world. We’re the beneficiaries as a family. We have much stronger, more empowered girls. They’re not afraid to speak up... I didn’t know about ‘I statements’ until college.”

4. Mental health services and supports for all students

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

GALS invests in the positive mental health development of all students, and it provides access to additional supports for students needing intervention. This demonstrates a positive, proactive focus on mental health that has benefits for multiple domains.

GALS does this via a large financial allocation toward mental health professionals on staff and integrated fully into the school day. One professional described her job: “We work

collaboratively with educators. We support and address the needs of our entire community. Many students experience barriers to accessing their education based on their life experiences. We help students think about who they are; learn about how what they experience in their body, mind, or being lets them know if they are okay or not; and know how to respond to various experiences internally and externally. School feels like the best place to do this work. They’re right here, we see what gets in the way, and we have access to parents. It’s not just a school telling a parent to call this number for counseling. That’s a big chasm to cross.”

GALS’ investments support **mental health** in the form of positive functioning, strong emotional health, and trauma-informed awareness of student needs. These dimensions of mental health closely tie to **social-emotional development** skills like relationship skills and stress management. Mental health is also a critical enabler of (or potential barrier to) **academic development**. Reflecting the ways that mental health integrates with other domains of development, GALS identifies ways to integrate mental health throughout the school. Scenes below demonstrate this:

- A GALS Series teacher recently demonstrated mindfulness techniques in the classroom. She reflected that this takes explicit instruction: “It’s interesting to get student feedback on what they think mindfulness is. They think it’s about being still and quiet or policing their bodies. We have to interrupt that.”
- Many classrooms feature reset corners, where students can go if they feel disregulated. The reset corners are portions of the classroom with various tools for self-regulation, including cushions for floor seating,

aromatherapy, manipulatives, and guidance on mindfulness techniques or a tool that prompts you to bring your breath and heart rate into coherence. Here, too, students must be explicitly taught how to use the tools in the reset corner. Teachers walk students through every step, from advocating for themselves that they need a break, to where they should go, to what they do once they're there, to how they know they're re-regulated and ready for return to classroom activities.¹¹

- For students whose mental health needs extend beyond what can be addressed in the classroom, GALS has created what they call the reset room. This space is staffed all day long by administrators or mental health professionals. It is used as a sort of "triage" space for students who are disregulated in classrooms or community spaces, and serves proactively as a Positive Behavior Support (PBS) that is signature GALS. Students can go to the reset room for a granola bar, a breath, or a conversation. While there, staff assess the needs of the student, enter their information in a spreadsheet linked to the MTSS (multi-tier system of supports) team, and determine next steps for intervention (nurse, counselor, dean, a call home, or just a few moments of calm before returning to class). The goal of the adults in the room is to both address the student's mental health needs and get them back into their academic setting. One mental health professional described the protocol used in the room: "They come in, opt in, and I ask what kind of mindfulness would you like to do — movement, art, breather. I'm pretty directive about it — not always asking them, sometimes just assessing. We do it together — at the point a student is outside the classroom, they need an adult as an external regulator to help them and do it with them. We do that for three to five minutes. Then we talk about why they came to the reset room. I ask them, what made you come here? What do you think you need?"
- The school's mental health professionals offer services and supports for families, too. Professionals host frequent family engagement opportunities, including family counseling groups for families of adopted children, families of transgender children, and families of kids who self-harm.¹²
- Students experience the impact of this focus on mental health as an environment where each student is known and cared for. As one sixth-grader reflected, "I have a big family and an identical twin sister. She's in a cast. She gets so much attention. When I go to school, she's not the only one anymore. I get love from the teachers." A senior

added, "Teachers ask about my personal life. They ask about how things at home are. I basically live alone, but I have support in this place. I mean something to somebody."¹³

- This emphasis on mental health also deeply moves many parents, one of whom said, "Here, it's not just getting the kids through — it's about growing. A friend of mine said that the goal of middle school is just to get your kid through intact. Here, you're going to be growing. You're not going to know how much you're growing — it's fun. You're not just passing time. What parent hasn't heard 'Just wait until she turns 12?!' as a warning. The expectation at GALS is that there is a lot going on, some things are really hard, and we can talk about that."

5. Adults as role models for development

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

GALS emphasizes the role of adults in modeling development across domains. This is enabled by administration and leaders seeing and treating adults as whole people with individual needs.

As staff model aspects of the vision — including movement, mindfulness, vulnerability, self-care, positive gender focus, values, and risk-taking — they experience their own development across dimensions like **physical and mental health** and **social-emotional and identity development**. This in turn enables adults to support student development in these areas. Led by well-supported adults, students may experience accelerated **academic development**. The vignettes below demonstrate this staff modeling:

- During a morning movement, every teacher — from a former college athlete to one with no formal athletics background — teaches a class. Some teachers excel in yoga; others prefer to teach cycling or running. Girls of various body types or athletic backgrounds see themselves in a teacher who is modeling an active lifestyle.
- Staff report ability to bring their whole selves to work. One shared, "We bring our whole selves here. Students are well-known, but staff are too." Another added, "Here, I can be vulnerable with my own feelings. For example, I've been vulnerable about my own privilege."

^[11] Research supports multiple strategies for de-escalating, such as reevaluating the emotions that drove the reaction, mindful breathing, or even physical activity.

^[12] Katherine Weare, *What Works in Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being and Responding to Mental Health Problems in Schools?* (London: National Children's Bureau, 2015).

^[13] Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: A Meta-Analysis," *Educational Psychology Review* 30 (2018): 1-34.



- Staff frequently engage in mindfulness exercises. One staff member directly connected this practice to her ability to support student wellness: “I always think: Who is holding the space? It will be hard to model these things if they’re not a practice in a teacher’s life. We’re modeling, however imperfectly, how to encounter a disregulated person and stay calm.”¹⁴
- Staff report being empowered to pursue their passions and values, such as the teacher who noted, “Here, they see into your soul and find what YOU love about teaching. Then, they give you the freedom to run with that. It’s celebrated here.”
- Teachers also model failure and resilience. One leader reflected, “It’s important for people to understand that we are a community of whole people that models being a whole human for children. If you don’t tell kids who you

are, how you’ve failed, how hard the struggle is — we’d be failing our kids. We stand in vulnerability as leadership.” A teacher chimed in: “In math class, I made an error on the board yesterday. One of the girls called it out. I responded, ‘Yes! You’re right! We’re doing it wrong!’ I wanted to show that we are able to fail as humans, that we make mistakes, and that’s how you learn.”

Conclusions

Core elements of the GALS model — focus on physical movement, GALS Series classes, gender-responsive education, mental health services and supports for all students, and adults as role models — enable comprehensive student development as the backdrop for all that happens in the schools via infrastructure such as curriculum development, scheduling, and governance, as well as in the classrooms, common space, and signature events. Across its model, GALS demonstrates particular strengths in systematically attending to integration across all six domains of comprehensive student development: cognitive, social-emotional, identity, and academic development and physical and mental health. The particulars of the GALS model are deeply informed by its single-gender, adolescent student population; however, themes elevated in this case study about what development in these areas looks and feels like and details about how this development occurs are designed to be broadly applicable.

What enables this success?

The section that follows summarizes aspects of the GALS school model that enable its success in Comprehensive Student Development. This section is intended to demonstrate the intentionality and comprehensiveness of the school’s approach.

The “What”: Mission, Vision, and Definition of Student Success

Mission/Vision

- GALS’ holistic vision is for students “to succeed academically, lead confidently, live boldly, thrive physically.” This encompasses multiple domains of student development.
- GALS translates its vision into a focus on movement (i.e., “Embodied Education”), positive gender focus, and rigorous academics.

The “How”: Curriculum and Educational Approach

Community engagement

- GALS schools intentionally recruit student populations that reflect the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of its communities.

¹⁴ Stephanie M. Jones and Jennifer Kahn, “The Evidence Base for How Learning Happens,” *American Educator*, 2017–2018.

Instructional methods

- Teachers incorporate movement in classrooms to teach and reinforce content and to boost student focus. During one class, students may take a brain break to run around the school; during another class, a pair of students may jog while they discuss a challenging problem; during a math class, students might learn about plotting points on a graph via an interactive activity on a classroom-sized coordinate plane.

Curriculum and materials

- Every morning begins with Morning Movement, designed to wake students' brains for learning, promote wellness, and build community. Students circle through various Morning Movement modules, including yoga, cycling, running, circuits, team sports, and dance.
- Curricula and materials across content areas promote positive gender focus. A literature class may focus on female authors; a science class may emphasize the contributions of female scientists.
- The GALS Series class, which students take daily from grades 6-12, explicitly teaches social-emotional and identity development. A recent GALS Series lesson focused on consent and setting boundaries.

Student Culture

- GALS consistently communicates a focus on community and sisterhood. Bonds are strengthened within and across grade levels via shared experiences like Morning Movement and school-wide traditions (e.g., Wellness Squads, weekly Community Meeting, and an annual Galympics competition).
- The GALS pledge, which includes a series of positive affirmations, is regularly recited by students (GALS Denver has its own similar — original — version, slightly different than LA). GALS Denver Student Pledge: *I know who I am. I know that I matter. I know what matters to me. I pay attention to what I feel and what I need. I make choices and decisions that are good for me. I take good care of my body. I stand up for what I believe in. I let people know what I think, even when I'm angry or confused or in disagreement with everyone else. I am a valuable friend. I know I can make a positive difference in the world in my own unique way.*

Assessments and measures

- GALS has defined rubrics for GALS Series Curriculum Long-Term Outcomes/PLOs, movement, social-emotional habits, and mastery of academic content/skills.

This provides students and teachers a common language to discuss goals and progress.

Interventions

- GALS classrooms include a reset corner, which students may visit during class time if needed for self-regulation. In the reset corner, students can access tools for guided meditation or other self-regulation resources.
- GALS staffs a reset room throughout the day where students can go if they need additional support to manage dysregulation. In this room, students have access to mental health professionals who can help them regulate, access additional supports as needed, and eventually return to the classroom.
- GALS has a full inclusion model, via which students with special needs are fully integrated into general education classrooms (while receiving appropriate supports).

The "How": Operational Systems

Use of time

- GALS reserves significant time each day for elements of its model that address multiple domains of student success. Morning Movement occurs for 45 minutes each day; every student attends a 55-minute GALS Series each day.

Use of physical space

- GALS has prioritized school locations with ample space for movement. For example, schools have access to dance studios, fields/tracks, public parks, and weight rooms.

The "Who": Talent

Leadership

- GALS professional leadership is predominantly female, thus illustrating the school's vision for students.
- GALS visionary leadership has invested in defining a bold vision and translating that vision into a strong school model.

Staff

- GALS teachers are expected to model development across domains for students. For example, teachers of all levels of athletic ability lead Morning Movement.
- GALS teachers report a strong, collegial staff culture at the school. Staff report being treated as whole people.

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