Chan Zuckerberg Initiative

Van Ness Elementary School

Founded in

2015 (restart after nine years vacant)

Number of Schools, Location(s)

One in Washington, D.C.

Number of Students

325

Number of Teachers / Teacher Retention

26 teachers
95% teacher retention

Per-Pupil Funding

$10,281

Sector

District

Grades Served

Pre-K (3-year-olds) through 3rd

Student Demographics

1% Asian/Pacific Islander
60% Black
5% Hispanic (across all races)
29% White
8% Two or More Races/Ethnicities, Other
1% Native American

20% students with disabilities
0% English language learners
40 – 50% students eligible for free or reduced lunch

Teacher Demographics

37% White
4% Hispanic
56% Black
2% Asian/Pacific Islander

8% Bilingual

Anchoring to Established Cognitive Developmental & Educational Theories

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development — Constructivism[1]

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 Theory [4]

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)*
- 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)*

[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.

Introduction

The love and commitment of parents are at the heart of Van Ness Elementary, a growing school within DC Public Schools.

Parents were instrumental in the reopening of Van Ness after the school had been closed for nine years. Until 2006, Van Ness served the Navy Yard community in D.C.'s Ward 6, which has historically had high rates of students in poverty. When public housing in the area was demolished, however, the school lost a significant portion of its student population as families were forced to find housing in other parts of the city. The school was closed, leaving the families who *were* able to remain with fewer educational options. One parent recounted the ten-mile round-trip walk she and her family took each day to bring her child to another elementary school.[5] After several years, local parents began to rally the district for Van Ness to reopen, especially as new development in the area with a focus on mixed-income housing created an uptick in the number of elementary-aged students. After nearly five years of parent advocacy to reopen the school, DCPS announced that Van Ness would reopen, starting with prekindergarten classes for children aged 3 and 4. Demand for the school was so high, however, that parents successfully lobbied for the school to launch with prekindergarten *and* kindergarten classes, then growing year by year until fully enrolled as a prekindergarten through fifth-grade campus.[6]

Parents also were deeply involved in defining what kind of school Van Ness would be. Parents prioritized strong leadership in hopes of a school leader who would nurture their children, not only academically but beyond. The district identified Cynthia Robinson-Rivers, a seasoned D.C. administrator, as the new leader of Van Ness. Robinson-Rivers worked alongside Van Ness parents to design the vision and school model. Collectively, the community shaped a vision for the school, where "children, families, and educators come together to create an inclusive community that provides authentic experiences and engages the whole child. Our aim is to cultivate critical thinkers and develop a generation of confident, curious, and compassionate members of society." This vision is further

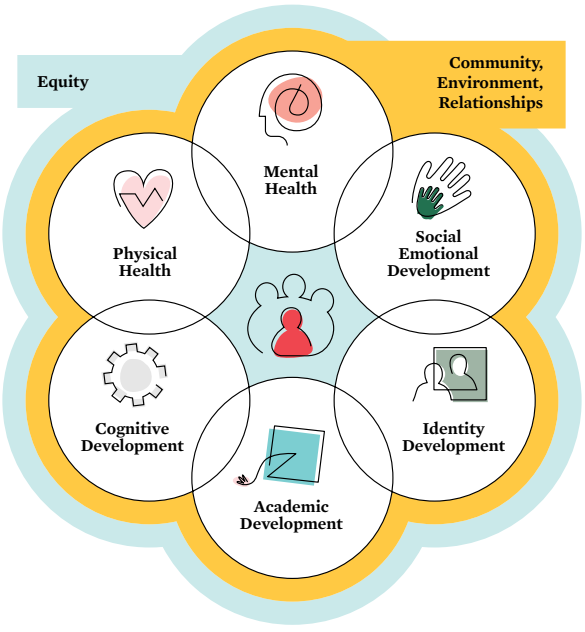
[5] E. V. Downey, "The Reopening of Van Ness Elementary School," *Hill Rag*, September 25, 2014, http://www.capitalcommunitynews.com/content/reopening-van-ness-elementary-school.
[6] Natalie Wexler, "A Redeveloped Mixed-Income Neighborhood Revives a Closed DCPS School," *The Washington Post*, July 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/all-opinions-are-local/wp/2015/07/16/a-redeveloped-mixed-income-neighborhood-revives-a-closed-dcps-school/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.01c430974266.

detailed through definition of what Van Ness' approach to educating the whole child looks like, and why. This includes a graduate profile (i.e., what a student should know, think, believe, or do as a result of a Van Ness education), graduate aims (i.e., competencies, skills, and mindsets the school seeks to develop in its students), and beliefs about learning (i.e., the research-backed statements about how children learn best that inform Van Ness' model). Each of these anchoring concepts provides the foundation for the specific systems, structures, and processes that Van Ness has developed.

These systems, structures, and processes have been thoughtfully designed by Van Ness, which has invested in a well-defined and codified model anchored on three components: **student well-being** (i.e., embedded social-emotional support), **student as maker** (i.e., integrated maker-centered learning), and **student-driven academics** (i.e., rigorous, personalized, engaging academics).

With this clear articulation of the education it seeks to provide, Van Ness has grown to be a pre-k (3-year-old) through fourth-grade campus serving 325 students, with plans to expand to serve through grade five. Under Robinson-Rivers' leadership, Van Ness has also begun the process of sharing its successful and well-defined model to five additional schools within DC Public Schools — with the aim of sharing its model more broadly across the city and beyond. The high demand for Van Ness' model reflects a community appetite for approaches such as Van Ness', that support children to thrive academically and overall. The replication process also demonstrates DCPS' commitment to educating the whole child, ensuring excellent schools, and empowering people — key priorities in its current strategic plan.

Comprehensive Child Development



Defining and Measuring Success

Definition of student success. Van Ness holds a broad definition of student success, which it defined with input from a range of community stakeholders. This definition is captured in the school's graduate profile, or a statement of what it wants a graduate to think, say, do, or feel as a result of a Van Ness education: "I am a curious, confident, and compassionate member of society. I find and pursue opportunity to make, alter, or re-design objects and systems in ways that improve my life, my community, and the world."

Current and desired ways of measuring success across domains. Given its intensive focus on social-emotional development, Van Ness has invested in several measures of student, family, and educator social-emotional well-being. For example:

- Van Ness gathers data on student engagement via the Tripod survey; teacher engagement via the annual TNTP Insight survey; and teacher, student, and family engagement via Panorama surveys
- The school measures student social-emotional development (e.g., student persistence, inventiveness, flexibility in thinking) using Teaching Strategies GOLD, an authentic, observation-based assessment system based on a rubric outlining indicators based on stage of development from birth through third grade
- Early childhood classrooms are assessed using the CLASS observation tool. In 2018-19, Van Ness outperformed every district school on the CLASS assessment in all three domains measured by the tool: instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization.
- The school tracks trends in student behavior (e.g., number of referrals, number of major behaviors, number of kids in RTI) and attendance

While these sources provide some common language and data regarding the effectiveness of its work, Van Ness leaders identify robust measurement of social-emotional development as an unmet need. They specifically indicate need for a student-facing survey with questions tailored to their model and aims.

Academic success. Van Ness tracks a range of academic measures, for example:

- Standardized test results via PARCC (now that the school hosts tested grades)
- Lexile levels
- Literacy skills, using tools like DIBELS for kindergarten to second-grade students, the Scholastic Reading Inventory

for second- to fourth-grade students, and Achievement Network (ANet) interim assessments, as well as formative assessments aligned to core language and literacy programs such as Wilson Fundations

- Math skills, using assessment from its curriculum, Eureka Math from Great Minds, and its digital assessment tool Affirm as well as i-Ready math assessments three times each year

When assessing that data, the school pays close attention to evidence of achievement gaps. For instance, it has critically evaluated data showing that students who start at Van Ness (in pre-k to k) tend to perform better on academic assessments than students who join the school later. Additionally, the school has identified achievement gaps along lines of race, socioeconomic status, and special needs classification. In identifying this data, leaders and teachers have begun the process of developing strategies and plans to address gaps.

How Van Ness Facilitates Comprehensive Student Development

Van Ness demonstrates integration across multiple domains of Comprehensive Student Development (CSD). In the sections that follow, we explain what Van Ness' model looks like. We also clarify how the model fuels CSD.

The following aspects of Van Ness' model are critical to its success in facilitating student development:

1. Staff grounded in human development and committed to ongoing improvement
2. Embedded supports to promote student well-being
3. Real-world, hands-on learning experiences to develop the student as maker
4. Student-driven academics built on student interest and learning needs

1. Staff grounded in human development and committed to ongoing improvement

Cognitive	Physical	**Academic**
Mental	**Social Emotional**	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

"Robinson-Rivers, a former district director of teacher retention and recognition, knew the vital role that educators would play in achieving the Van Ness vision; as such, her leadership team has invested in staff development and continuous improvement.

Staff consistently encounter principles of human development that describe the "why" behind the school's structures and practices. School leaders defined a set of research-informed "beliefs about learning" and expectations for the role of adults, pulling from the work of multiple leading organizations focused on bringing the science of human development into school structure and practice (e.g., Conscious Discipline, CASEL, Harvard's Project Zero, the Center on the Developing Child, and Turnaround for Children). Because staff learn about the research (behind everything from the school's approach to language and tone to the classroom structure, and the student-driven approach to academics), they are better equipped to implement the model with fidelity and quality.

Van Ness also invests in staff development so they can effectively enact these principles. All staff receive training and coaching in Conscious Discipline, a district-supported and research-backed program for social-emotional development. This training is reinforced by weekly emails sent to staff with articles and/or video links designed for ongoing learning. Additionally, all staff engage in two book studies per year on themes aligned to core aspects of the school model; for example, leaders had a focus on anti-bias education during the 2018-19 school year.

Van Ness Beliefs About Learning

- **Students must feel physically and psychologically safe and have their basic needs met.**
- **Students must have trusting, caring relationships with adults and peers.**
- **Students must be trusted and taught to regulate their emotions, address conflict, pursue work that matters to them, and play a meaningful role in their school community.**
- **Students learn from every interaction. The way we work with them everyday reflects the way we hope they work as compassionate members of society.**
- **Students in distress need trauma-sensitive support that validates their emotions and teaches strategies they can use to de-escalate.**
- **Students bodies and minds must be engaged in learning.**
- **Students must be engaged in rigorous work in ways that meet their specific needs and interests.**

Van Ness Expectations for Adults

- **We are intentional about our own behavior. We build trusting relationships with students and consistently model, teach, and practice the skills that we most want them to learn.**
- **We use compassion to empathize with a student, teach them to identify and manage their emotions, and make choices that are driven by their executive state rather than their emotions. (We don't use compassion to "rescue" students from emotional upset).**
- **We use assertiveness to name what we want to see and to set respectful limits.**

Van Ness personalizes ongoing educator development, just as it personalizes learning for students. Van Ness prioritizes funds for teachers to access targeted professional development aligned to an area for growth and/or area of interest. For example, a teacher interested in trying something new may test and review a potential new curriculum and make a formal recommendation to the principal for school-wide adoption of that program. Or an emerging teacher-leader may visit other schools to learn best practices to inform her own work.

Van Ness staff are supported to pursue continuous improvement, just as students are taught this important cycle of learning. For example, teachers engage in regular data cycles with colleagues to identify trends and problem-solve. Teachers have also piloted approaches to address challenges and opportunities at the school.

Van Ness' approach to staff development promotes comprehensive student development. With a firm grounding in the science of human development, staff are equipped with knowledge and skills to not only promote student **academic development**, but also student **social-emotional and cognitive development**. The following examples illustrate Van Ness' approach:

- Van Ness has clear expectations for educators — based on the science of learning — to ensure that the school's model is implemented with fidelity. For example, the Safe Place Implementation Guide details how a teacher can set up a "Safe Place," or a cozy corner of the room where students can go when they need to self-regulate. Instead of a checklist, the guide is a thorough explanation of how to set up a Safe Place, why the structure is important (based on principles of human development), and what resources exist to help teachers lead the structure. This robust information supports educators to implement the Safe Place structure with a high degree of quality (versus a more surface-level or watered-down version). In another example, Van Ness has a guide on educator language and tone with tips and examples of how to effectively communicate with students in a range of scenarios. The guide emphasizes research on the importance of trusting relationships and adult modeling in communications with children.

- Teachers emphasize the importance of educator development in enabling Van Ness' success, and the benefits they receive as a result of learning more about the science behind the model. As one educator noted, "The moment I stepped into Van Ness the feeling was different: warmth, community, students using social skills in an independent way. I didn't get it until I was a classroom teacher here. It is not a scope and sequence. It begins with teacher work around what our own brainspace is. We need to understand our own triggers and use our own executive skills. That takes a lot of self-reflecting and undoing skills from my past. I had to think about my response to children in the moment: What do I want to teach in this moment vs. what am I teaching in the moment? Am I building skills or just getting kids to do what I want them to do?"

- With a focus on continuous improvement, Van Ness teachers have led the way in piloting several of the model's components. One recent pilot focused on measurement systems to better track challenging student behaviors and inform interventions. Another pilot focused on building staff competency in cross-cultural collaboration. The school's renowned makerspaces even were the result of a teacher-led pilot. Several teachers were enthusiastic about the potential for makerspaces to improve their students' school experience and learning outcomes. The teachers defined key questions (e.g., "What is a makerspace and why are they used? How might a makerspace integrate with other academic and social-emotional aspects of our model? What will it take in terms of costs and resources for this to be effective?"). They went to training, visited other schools with makerspaces, and piloted makerspaces in their classrooms, eventually inspiring Van Ness

to emphasize "student as maker" as one of the school's major model components.

2. Embedded supports to promote student well-being

Cognitive	Physical	**Academic**
Mental	**Social Emotional**	**Identity**

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Van Ness has defined three parts to its model for student well-being: "CARE," "Boost," and "Family Circle."

Via its CARE model — which stands for "Compassion, Assertiveness, Routines, and Environment" — Van Ness has identified several levers to develop students academically, social-emotionally, and cognitively. "Compassion and Assertiveness" describe Van Ness teachers' intentional use of language and to the trauma-informed behavior system the school adopted. These systems provide students with clear expectations, predictability, and connection. "Routines" are also used throughout the school to promote predictability, teach and model social-emotional and cognitive skills, give students ownership, and help them focus on learning. Lastly, "Environment" (i.e., the school's physical space) is carefully attended to so that students feel comfortable and have ownership over the space, and distractions are limited.

These structures and processes are intended for the benefit of all Van Ness students; at the same time, Van Ness developed "Boost" strategies for students who require additional support. These Boost strategies are employed with students who have identified special needs (i.e., in an IEP), but also with any student who has demonstrated a need for additional support.

Lastly, Van Ness recognizes that student well-being is not solely determined by in-school factors; thus, it invests in family engagement via "Family Circle," an approach informed by the work of the Flamboyan Foundation. The intention of Family Circle is to foster deep alignment between supports a student receives at home and at school. The first element of Family Circle is to establish strong, trusting relationships with families; Van Ness does this (in part) through home visits with each student before the start of the school year. The second element of Family Circle is academic partnering; Van Ness supports this work through regular one-on-one and group meetings with parents. In these meetings, teachers speak with parents about their child's development, model what the day is like, and provide parents with strategies to support their child's academic, social-emotional, and cognitive development. Lastly, Family Circle also includes a focus on ongoing communication to maintain relationships. At Van Ness, this looks like classroom Shutterfly accounts that enable teachers to share photos with parents, or a text a teacher sends a parent at the end of the day, or a weekly class newsletter that goes out to all parents.

Van Ness' strategies for student well-being were designed to support **social-emotional development** by ensuring that each child forms strong attachments at the school, experiences a sense of belonging, and is explicitly taught stress management, social awareness, and self-awareness skills. These same strategies promote development in other domains, however. Students engage in **cognitive development** as they set goals for the day; they practice self-regulation by visiting the Safe Space. Attention to students' social-emotional and cognitive states then creates the conditions for them to productively engage in **academic development**. The following examples illustrate Van Ness' approach to attending to student well-being:

- Educators are expected to demonstrate compassion and assertiveness via what and how they communicate with students; there is an entire manual (referenced in the prior section) that helps teachers communicate most effectively with students.

- Educators also have tools to support strong communication, based in compassion and assertiveness. For example, teachers use social stories throughout the school day to communicate expectations for all students. Social stories provide pictorial representations of the desired action or behavior. The visual cues even feature Van Ness students, such as a picture of what the expected behavior in the lunch room looks like. Whereas this approach is elsewhere used only for the highest-need students (e.g., those with autism), Van Ness uses this practice with all students as a way to support each child's social-emotional development.

- Van Ness has Strong Start — a set of routines conducted each morning, in which every student is greeted at the front door by a staff member, invited to set a goal for the

day, given a nutritious breakfast in the classroom, engaged in community-building exercises with peers, and taught a technique for self-regulation.

- On a recent morning, a student entering the school was warmly greeted by an instructional leader who asked, "What sort of greeting would you like today?" The child pointed out his selection — a hug — from a poster that provides different options: a smile, wink, wave, high five, handshake, fist bump, or hug.

- One student met with an adult "buddy" she had been assigned as a "Boost" strategy to give her extra connection and support. As per the daily routine, the buddy asked, "What goal are you going to set today?" The child replied, "I'm going to commit to rule number five: Make your school happy" (a reference to the school rules). The buddy extended the conversation by asking the girl, "How are you going to make your school happy today?"

- During a classroom community-building exercise, students are invited to give one another "shout-outs" if they've demonstrated one of the school's graduate aims: compassion. One child recognized a classmate's compassion, indicating that "every time someone cries, she comforts them." Another child honored the teacher: "You demonstrated compassion when you let us know we would have visitors today; that way we could prepare."

- A teacher brought her class together for the morning lesson on a new self-regulation technique. The teacher demonstrated and then had students practice the "STAR and balloon" method, which involves deep breaths and slow body movements. As one student said, "This is about getting us ready for what we are about to learn."

- A kindergarten classroom conducted the Wish Well ritual as a way to practice compassion; this is one of several practices the school has directly implemented from the Conscious Discipline model. Students take attendance and note which of their classmates is absent. Absent students' names are moved onto a heart, and the class chants to acknowledge them: "We wish you well, we wish you well, we really really miss our friends and we wish you well. We hold you in our hearts. We hold you in our hearts. We really really miss our friends and hold you in our hearts. We miss you, we love you, and hope you're having a good day." During this time, students are also invited to focus on intentions of love and kindness for themselves, for other members of their family or community, and for others far away (e.g., those affected by a recent natural disaster).

- Throughout the day, some students periodically visited the classroom Safe Space (the corner in the classroom designed for self-regulation, as described in the previous section). Because teachers have thoughtfully and intentionally set students up to use the space, students demonstrate independence in interacting with the various tools for self-regulation. One student did a breathing exercise, another used an interactive chart to express his feelings, and a third reviewed a book she had created earlier in the year to remind herself of the people and things that bring her peace and comfort. One student said, "When you're feeling upset, this is a place to calm your body down."

- Classroom environments at Van Ness are designed to be welcoming and student-centered, drawing from research on what makes learning spaces most effective.[7] Van Ness classrooms include pictures of students and examples of high-quality work, without being distracting. Classrooms have significant access to natural light through windows, and are equipped with lamps as an alternative to overhead lighting. These design elements are intended to be "warm and welcoming, to meet students' physical needs as well as academic, social, and emotional needs, to be owned by students, and to minimize stimuli that may overwhelm or trigger."

- One Boost intervention that the school instituted is known as the "Check-In/Check-Out" (CICO) system, an evidence-based approach to improving student behavior. The system specifically supports students in grades K-4 who are identified via the RTI process as having behavior needs and as potentially benefiting from teacher time. In the system, students are invited to choose a buddy, for example a favorite teacher or friendly maintenance person. The child's buddy meets with him each morning to build a relationship, set goals for the day, and discuss what strategies the student can use for success that day. Then, the child's buddy checks back in at the end of the day to facilitate review and reflection.

- A second Boost intervention, Time-Love-Connection (TLC), is designed to increase connection between students and school. The system specifically supports students in pre-k through fourth grade who have been identified via a survey as potentially needing more supportive connections at school. In the system, students are paired with an adult at the school who dedicates time each day to building a relationship with that student.

[7] Melina Uncapher, "The Science of Effective Learning Spaces," *Edutopia*, October 14, 2016, https://www.edutopia.org/article/science-of-effective-learning-spaces-melina-uncapher.

3. Real-world, hands-on learning experiences to develop the student as a maker

Cognitive	Physical	**Academic**
Mental	**Social Emotional**	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Van Ness promotes maker-centered learning, in which students learn and explore through various design challenges. Each Van Ness classroom features a makerspace, or workshop for this hands-on work. Students access the makerspace to conduct curriculum-based projects that align to rigorous standards; they are also able to use the space to tackle a passion project.

The makerspace helps students develop in their ability to empathize, plan, innovate, fail productively, and collaborate. Whenever students use the makerspace, they are guided through a process of defining a need (using empathy skills necessary for design thinking), creating a plan, testing solutions, noticing results and tinkering as needed, and debriefing/reflecting. One Van Ness leader emphasized the value of this process of tinkering: "We can't increase grit or growth mindset just by talking about it. We have to actually give students the opportunities to engage in productive struggle." Thus, this process is seen as critical to student success not only in a given makerspace project, but in the broader aim of developing students' critical thinking skills and orientation to constant learning.

Teachers and students both elevate how the makerspace also heightens student engagement in learning. Students are able to apply learning in meaningful ways with real-world relevance, to engage with problems and materials that interest them, and to work collaboratively on projects. As one leader noted, "The makerspaces reinforce learning and make school fun." This sentiment was echoed by a student who reflected, "I like how we learn stuff here. A lot of time schools don't structure things in a fun way. Like with math, we do it in a fun way with projects on trains and magnets and how they attract."

This orientation to student as maker facilitates comprehensive student development. **Academic development** is fueled as students actively engage in projects aligned to the curriculum and standards. **Social-emotional development** also occurs; for example, the makerspace encourages student curiosity, self-direction, and growth mindset.

- In a second-grade class, students dove into a unit on activism. Students read about various activists, during which they used a protocol to practice considering others' viewpoints/motivations while also considering their own. In one video, a young Muslim girl successfully advocated for the creation of an emoji wearing a hijab; this served as inspiration for the unit's makerspace project. Students engaged in a protocol to identify and describe a problem regarding representation of an identity that they hold. They then used the makerspace and its Perler beads, ironing board, and technology tools to design and create an emoji that responds to the problem they identified. Simultaneously, students engaged in a rich writing process, where they gathered evidence to describe the problem, practiced using linking words, edited each other's work, and presented their opinion piece and final products to the class.

- In a kindergarten classroom, two students completed a makerspace challenge to build a catapult. As one child described, "Our challenge is to see if we can launch it farther and higher." The pair worked together to create a plan for how they would use clothespins, rods, and spoons to fashion catapults. They tinkered with various options for the angle of the spoon atop a base made from rods. As they tested, they discussed what they noticed. One mused, "I can make it go farther by picking it up." At the end of the day, the pair shared their learning with the classroom.

- In a prekindergarten classroom, a colorful tapestry was undergoing final touches before being mounted in the hallway. The tapestry showed a detailed, accurate map of the surrounding neighborhood. The map was designed and developed by students, who practiced their directions and communications skills throughout the process as they built the map for accuracy and used it to describe how they navigate their neighborhood. As students planned the map and practiced building it, they went through several iterations and made improvements along the way, first plotting the map on paper, then on cardboard, then eventually on canvas.

- One teacher reflected on the power of this maker-centric approach to education: "Makerspace approach is teaching: It's trial and error. It's noticing that everyone learns differently and holds on to information differently. It's tinkering and constantly switching things, taking these away, adding things in. It develops perseverance, grit, collaboration. It's a place for creativity."

- In a third-grade classroom, students were building understanding of area, per one of the third-grade math standards. To build mastery of the standards, students modeled different spaces with different areas. Robinson-Rivers challenged students to redesign the school's first-floor office suite to be more effective. Students were thrilled by the real-world nature of the challenge, and eager to see the district's contractors enact the winning design.

4. Student-driven academics built on student interest and learning needs

Cognitive	Physical	**Academic**
Mental	**Social Emotional**	Identity

■ Primary Domain ■ Secondary Domain

Educators at Van Ness recognized that students have different academic interests and learning needs, and that this requires personalized approaches to academic development.

Van Ness tailors implementation of district-provided curriculum to each student's needs. Classrooms in kindergarten and up adopt a station rotation model, in which students cycle through learning goals in a mix of full-group, small group, and independent learning activities. Each student's station rotation schedule is crafted by the teacher, who is deeply attuned to each student's interests and academic needs. Students are provided access to their personalized schedules — which are printed each day and placed in their cubby holes — so that they can plan for their days. Students are also provided data and information in order to understand their learning progress, such as the sticky notes in students' cubby holes that indicate their reading level. This individualization is also present in pre-K, where children explore and learn in different interest areas; each student's time in an interest area is based on student choice, not a specific rotation model.

Within their personalized learning pathway, students are afforded opportunities to make choices in their academic development. For example, students have significant choice when engaging in writing workshop, where they have autonomy over their topic and format. They demonstrate choice in designing and building of makerspace projects, in completing art assignments aligned to the academic units of study, or in completing special curriculum-aligned projects.

This approach to **academic development** enables students to get tailored, in-depth instruction. It also fuels student **social-emotional development**. When students are provided information about their learning and given opportunities to meaningfully engage, they build self-direction, appreciation for the relevance of school, and academic tenacity (i.e., the ability to set and pursue higher-order or long-term goals, even in the face of challenges).[8] Lastly, this approach also provides opportunities for student **cognitive development** as students practice executive functioning and self-regulation necessary to manage and focus on one's own work. The following examples illustrate what it looks like for Van Ness to tailor students' academic learning:

- During a recent station rotation portion of class, a student pulled a book from the classroom library to read in a comfortable chair. The student checked her cubby to find her reading level before picking out a book aligned to both her reading level and her interest in dinosaurs. The student also selected a more challenging read — one above her reading level — about another one of her areas of interest, the U.S. presidents.

- In another classroom, a small group of children worked on the classroom computers, where they engaged with a short, interactive online math lesson. Each child received personalized coaching and feedback through the computer program, which identified and addressed individuals' misconceptions and helped each student learn new math concepts.

- Another small group featured a teacher sitting with a small group of classmates who had all been identified as struggling with a specific phonemic awareness skill. The teacher engaged the students in a series of interactive activities to practice the skill, thereby targeting the support they received.

- One teacher described how this personalization looks in her classroom: "We are centered on the kids so that throughout the day, everyone gets access to the general education curriculum and we are meeting kids where they are at. When you walk into the room, you wouldn't be able to tell the kids who are behind grade level, because we give them the support they need to participate in the classroom in ways that are comfortable to them. All of that starts by building connections with students and building a sense of safety. All of our students would say they feel connected to me and my co-teacher."

- Another added, "Throughout the day, students have a lot more opportunity to use executive functioning skills to make decisions, persist through work time, self-regulate. Kids are used to knowing what their schedule is and where they go at different points in the day. They get specific directions and visual prompts to help them manage their time. Most importantly, kids are then trusted. It makes students more self-directed and it also allows for more customization — if some students need more guided reading, they could do that every day."

[8] Source: Dweck et al., 2011.

Conclusions

Core elements of the Van Ness model — staff grounded in human development and committed to continuous improvement, focus on student well-being, hands-on learning experiences, and academic learning personalized on student interests and needs — enable Comprehensive Student Development. Across its model, Van Ness demonstrates particular strengths in systematically attending to integration of social-emotional, cognitive, and academic development (though other domains are emphasized via discrete components of the model). Themes elevated in this case study about what development in these areas looks and feels like, as well as details about how this development occurs, are designed to be broadly applicable.

What enables this success?

The section that follows summarizes aspects of the Van Ness 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

- The Van Ness mission puts forth a broad definition of student success, with explicit reference to the need to develop the whole child: "Children, families, and educators come together to create an inclusive community that provides authentic experiences and engages the whole child. Our aim is to cultivate critical thinkers and develop a generation of confident, curious, and compassionate members of society."

Standards

- Van Ness' graduate aims translate its vision and graduate profile into specific qualities the school seeks to develop in students; this provides a clear picture and common set of language for describing what quality learning looks like.

The "How": Curriculum and Educational Approach

Community engagement

- Van Ness was founded by members of the community who sought high-quality, whole-child-focused educational opportunities in their neighborhood; thus, the very existence of the school — as well as the school model — is based in community voice.

- Van Ness' model includes explicit focus on family engagement (i.e., through the family circle) so as to ensure alignment between the school and broader community.

Instructional methods

- Van Ness prioritizes hands-on learning opportunities (e.g., in the makerspace) that engage students, help them see the relevance of their learning, and enable them to build important skills like planning, perseverance, resilience, and collaboration.

- Van Ness orients to personalized instruction, through which it identifies each individual learner's strengths, challenge areas, and interests; it then uses a range of instructional methods — including full group, small group, independent, and tech-supported — to promote student learning.

Curriculum and materials

- Van Ness leverages district-selected curriculum and materials for core academic subjects and for learning in other domains (e.g., the Conscious Discipline curriculum for social-emotional development).

- Van Ness supplements district-provided materials with additional materials, for example the materials used in the makerspace.

Assessments and measures

- In addition to academic measures, Van Ness uses a suite of social-emotional surveys and tools to measure student progress.

Interventions

- Van Ness established the Check-in/Check-out system for students requiring additional supports; through this sys-

tem, each child has an adult "buddy" with whom they establish a strong relationship. The buddy helps the student set a goal at the beginning of each day and reflect on the goal at the end of each day; the buddy is also available for support should a student encounter a crisis.

The "How": Operational Systems

Overall ecosystem

- Van Ness has developed and sustained an ecosystem that places students' voices and needs at the center of the work, and a culture of "Connection over Compliance."

Use of physical space

- Van Ness pays close attention to the look and feel of its classrooms to promote student safety, ownership, and predictability. School guidelines ensure soft lighting, scents based in concepts of aromatherapy, and classroom decor that features Van Ness students and their work.

Use of time

- The first hour of each day is dedicated to preparing students for learning by focusing on community-building, nourishment (in the form of breakfast), goal-setting, and strategies for self-regulation.

The "Who": Talent

Leadership

- Principal Robinson-Rivers ensures consistent focus on the science of learning across the school's model. She also ensures teachers are well-versed in this knowledge so that they understand the "why" behind the school's systems and structures.

Staff

- Staff receive significant training in the school's model for social-emotional development, Conscious Discipline.
- Staff are encouraged and empowered to pilot new systems and structures to enhance the school; staff have led the charge in piloting the school's makerspaces, methods for identifying students for behavioral intervention, and the approach to building staff cultural competence.

Learn more at chanzuckerberg.com/whole-child

Voice of a Leader

What are you most proud of at your school?

Van Ness is a school where the teachers and staff focus on students' emotional and physical development without compromising high academic standards. Our teachers plan how they'll teach students to gain composure, resolve conflicts, and persevere through difficult tasks as meticulously as they plan their close reading lessons. This results in a school environment that is both supportive and rigorous. The quality of instruction and the humility and commitment to hard work displayed by teachers at Van Ness are critical in maintaining this balance and one of the qualities of our school of which I'm most proud.

What keeps you up at night? What's been hardest?

The intensive needs of a small percentage (~5-7%) of our most vulnerable learners has been the challenge that has been hardest for us. As we focus on supporting these students who are furthest from opportunity, we also recognize that life circumstances and a lack of some of the most basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, safety) profoundly impact our students' experience at school. While we have continuously worked to develop interventions specifically to meet the socio-emotional, mental health, and sensory/motor needs of our students, we will have to continue to refine and improve these practices, as well as develop additional supports that go beyond the traditional definition of what school provides. Working closely with mental health clinicians who can provide direct family therapy and developing pantries to support students and families with food insecurity or clothing needs are two areas of focus we want to expand.

Where to next? If your wildest dreams came true, what we would we see at your school if we were to visit five years from now?

A dream come true would be for our students to perform at the highest academic levels (with achievement gaps closed) in the next five years. We would be providing a robust set of fully developed services for families, including mental and physical health services. Our physical space would be expanded to include areas to further enrich our students' experience, including a yoga studio, community makerspace, and additional green space areas for outdoor exploration. Our students would consistently show compassion for each other and their community through kind acts and service. They would also demonstrate agency and empowerment and tackle neighborhood and community problems. Lastly, we would truly be successful if all of this is taking place not just at Van Ness, but within a larger ecosystem of schools and district agencies all similarly oriented toward supporting the development of the whole child.