

Learning Differently, Succeeding Academically, Leading Confidently, Living Boldly, and Thriving Physically: The GALS Denver Middle School

Girls Athletic Leadership Schools (GALS) is a network of three tuition-free, public, all-girls college preparatory schools in Denver, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles. The flagship school in the growing network, GALS Denver, envisions a world where all young women are given access to a personalized and holistic education that provides them the opportunity to access the skills, knowledge, and self-determination to succeed at school, in their postsecondary pathways, and in their careers, and to develop as leaders.

Student Demographics GALS Denver Middle School

White	48%
Hispanic	32%
Black	10%
Asian	4%
Students with disabilities	11%
English language learners	14%
Eligible for free or reduced meals	36%

This brief tells the story of how GALS Denver Middle School works to provide an equitable education for students with disabilities and all other students – a story grounded in the science of learning and development, rooted in inclusion, and brought to life with physical movement.

A School for Every Girl

The founding philosophy of GALS Denver is based on the positive impact of physical activity on academics, social-emotional learning, and a pattern of lifelong good habits. GALS Denver students gain joy, energy, and confidence from movement – and research demonstrates that daily exercise improves memory, attention, and cognition.

Students have a block of time set aside each morning for exploring different types of movement, including running, cycling, circuit training/CrossFit, dance, and yoga.

Founded in 2009, GALS Denver is a single-gender school where anyone who identifies as female or was assigned the female gender at birth is welcome. The school has created an environment where girls and young women engage in opportunities to know themselves well, discover their agency, and develop their voice. Further, as this brief discusses below, the GALS curriculum and culture provide for deeply personalized experiences and environments for students to develop deep content knowledge and practice skills that will serve them in becoming their most authentic selves in the world.

The Science of Learning and Development: What Is True for All Young People

Converging research from the science of learning and development tells us there are essential characteristics of equitable and excellent educational settings for all students, including those with disabilities. The best educational settings:

- foster *positive developmental relationships* that build emotional connections and enable children to master knowledge and skills, grow in competence and confidence, and take on new challenges;
- provide *environments filled with safety and belonging* through shared values, routines, and high expectations, demonstrating cultural sensitivity and affirming identities;
- provide *rich learning experiences* for each student that deepen understanding and help transfer skills and knowledge to new contexts and problems;
- help *develop knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits* by simultaneously developing academic mindsets, knowledge, and skills along with cognitive, emotional, and social skills; and

- provide *integrated systems of support* including health, mental health, and social service supports to bolster the assets and address the unique needs of each child.

GALS Denver’s approach to delivering a transformative student experience that is personalized, empowering, and culturally affirming has deep roots in the science of learning and development.

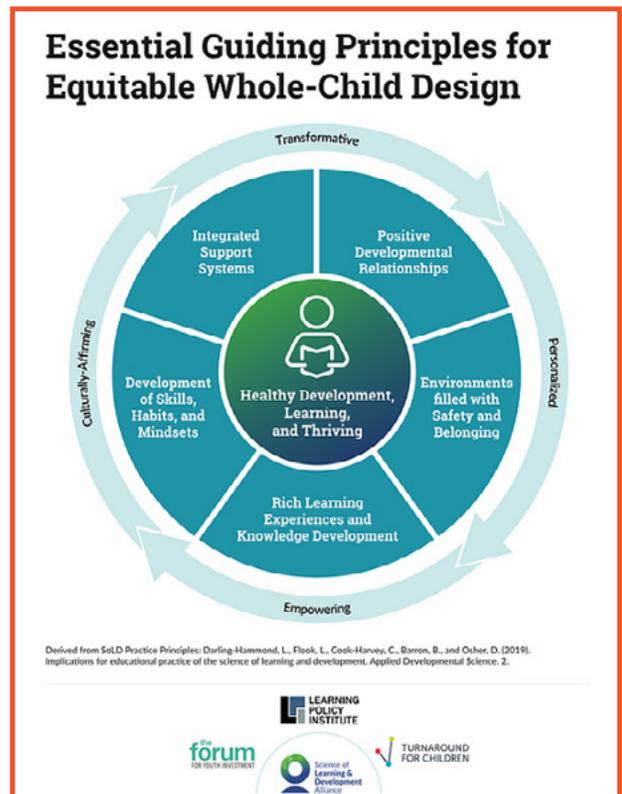
Even the timing of the school day is based on adolescent brain development. Every morning begins with movement and electives. Core content classes (math, science, language arts, social studies, and GALS Series) don’t start until 9:00 a.m. and rotate every day, because students absorb knowledge differently at different periods of the day.

The GALS Series. “We say at GALS that all students are well known and well seen,” said Director of Instructional Coaching and Curriculum Sara Dishell. “The relationships between staff members, families, and students are paramount to what we are doing every day. We know that humans need to feel safe and feel known in order to be their best and most authentic selves in the world, and we believe that the opportunity to practice that authenticity must start in the school building.”

The [GALS Series](#) curriculum provides GALS students with the tools needed to become more aware of their individual and community identity, the skills to navigate through challenges and decisions successfully, and empowerment to drive them. The GALS Series curriculum encompasses five themes: mindfulness, wellness, voice, relationships, and goal setting. Classes also focus on the continued development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, with grade-level, Common Core standards.

Although not technically an academic course, the GALS Series is a centerpiece of the GALS experience and is assigned the same amount of time and priority in the curriculum as science, math, social studies, and language arts. Why? Because GALS believes that social and emotional development are as important as core academics. The GALS Series class includes specific units about relationships, employing role playing, among other techniques, to build skills for developing a healthy relationship with oneself and with others.

For example, one of the first GALS Series lessons is about control and boundaries: “Saying no means you can say yes to what you want.” Through these lessons, students learn how to understand their locus of control and how to handle life’s challenges as “my best self.” As Dishell explained, “You can walk into a sixth grade classroom and watch students work through how to tell a friend that she’d hurt her feelings. Then, walk into a seventh grade room and hear girls talking together about how to handle it when someone is being passive-aggressive. And last, go into an eighth grade class to hear girls talking about race, class, and privilege.”



The GALS 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 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 if I am 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.

These social-emotional skills are core to relationship-building. As Dishell said, “We know our students really well. That knowledge helps us guide them to become their best, most authentic selves inside and outside the school building.”

Students with disabilities affirm that is true. In a 2020 survey, 67% of students with disabilities agreed that “When I get upset, I feel that I have options of adults to support me.”

Full Inclusion Promotes Safety and Belonging

Considered a full inclusion model, GALS Denver is classified as “cross categorical” and serves students with a variety of disabilities, including developmental, physical, intellectual, and emotional. Unlike many schools, GALS Denver’s infrastructure is intentionally designed to welcome students with mild or moderate disabilities, as well as students with more intensive physical and developmental needs. “GALS is a very attractive option for families of special education students,” said Dishell. “Because of our full inclusion model, focus on movement, and full-time social-emotional curriculum, students with a diversity of learning differences are able to thrive and feel welcome at GALS.”

Middle-schoolers face so many changes, from academic expectations to puberty, that any given school day can become overwhelming. GALS deeply understands that when students are upset or frustrated, they can’t concentrate or focus on the tasks at hand. To mitigate those bumps in the road, every student has access to schoolwide systems for social-emotional care.

As one example, GALS Denver teachers have mindfulness corners in their classrooms, where the goal is to teach students healthy coping mechanisms. The school also has a “reset room.” There, a counselor is always ready with techniques and activities to help students take the time to get back on track and back to class. At the end of each day, GALS Denver staff evaluates when and why students felt the need to leave the class. If the pattern is emerging in a particular class, GALS Denver works with teachers, students, and families to overcome the obstacles.

UDL Comes to Life as GALS Works to Provide Rich Learning Experiences and Develop Critical Skills, Habits, and Mindsets

A hallmark of the GALS Denver approach is centering students with disabilities when designing what the school day looks like. “Our students with special needs are not an afterthought; we practice Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in every area of our programming, including movement, core academics, and the GALS Series class when we plan academics, physical activities, and social-emotional learning,” said Dishell. “Our prioritization of those students defines us.”

Over 90% of teachers at GALS Denver write their own curriculum grounded in Colorado’s Academic Standards. To do this, they define a standards-based end goal applicable for all students and then build the scaffolding needed to provide support for students with special needs. Specific ways GALS Denver personalizes and helps UDL come to life for students with disabilities include tailoring expectations for physical movement, customizing assignments, expanding the ways classroom lessons are used in the real world, and personalizing sex education classes to those with developmental disabilities. Class unit plan end goals are UDL designed and then general education teachers work with special education teachers to make accommodations and modifications, while ensuring that all students are aiming for the same end goal. For example, the GALS Series classes culminate in a project-based event called “Voice Night.” All students learn the academic, executive functioning, and public speaking standards and skills that are required of the project, but all the projects are tailored to each individual student’s needs and learning goals.

“Because we do not plan our schoolwide systems to be one-size-fits-all, things can get messy. And I hope we can stay messy, because humans are messy. This is humanizing pedagogy – when things are messy, we know we are doing what we need to as a school to center the individual.”
—Sara Dishell

Integrated Supports Enrich the Learning Experience

Students with disabilities at GALS Denver are fully integrated with their general education classmates, aside from an academic accelerator period where students with disabilities have dedicated time with a special educator. “We thought it was abundantly important that this time was real world relevant and reinforced the skills on the students’ IEP goals — math, literacy, and social,” said Dishell. So students with disabilities at GALS Denver participate in a business lab where they run their own in-house coffee shop. Here, students practice integrated social, emotional, and academic skills by developing and managing their own enterprise. Within this project-based, student-led learning setting, students develop a plan for how the coffee shop is to be run, including things like greeting their “customers” (school staff) and taking beverage orders; using listening skills to communicate specific coffee orders; and using their math skills to accept the money, make change, and calculate the coffee shop’s revenues and budget. Additionally, students learn how to market their products and set up a delivery system. This class is specifically designed to incorporate math, literacy, and communication practice.

Alongside recognitions for academic excellence, effort, and improvement, students at GALS Denver are regularly recognized for embodying the school’s “Habits of Heart and Mind.” These habits include: power, flexibility, focus, and balance. When a student falls short of these aspirations, the school’s discipline systems are based on restorative justice, not punitive measures. In addition to the GALS Denver emphasis on movement to help students regulate, seasoned counselors are on staff for one-on-one social-emotional care.

Building a Team to Support Students

At GALS Denver, programs are designed to wrap around students and their needs — and the hiring and staffing model reflects that. “Because of our full inclusion model, we try to make sure in hiring and in ongoing professional development that every core academic teacher sees themselves as a special education teacher,” said Dishell.

The team invests in a staffing structure that provides additional support for students, including:

- an additional teacher in every grade-level team, who focuses exclusively on the GALS Series;
- a robust counseling team with three full-time counselors and three or four interns who gain hands-on experience in the classroom; and
- a special education team that includes a director, seven paraprofessionals, and four full-time providers.

This investment in staff comes through when surveying students about their experience at GALS Denver. Highlights from a 2020 survey showed that:

- 92% of students with disabilities said they have the mental health support that they need to focus on learning (compared to 80% of students without disabilities).
- 83% of students with disabilities said they see the counselors at GALS to be people who can help them when needed (compared with 68% of students without disabilities).

In the most recent round of district and statewide data (pre-pandemic), GALS special education students ranked second for highest growth in math and seventh for highest growth in English language arts. GALS Middle School was the only school in the Denver Public Schools that was in the top 10 of both lists.

By building on insights from the science of learning and development, GALS Denver strives to live up to its mission to empower students to succeed academically, lead confidently, live boldly, and thrive physically. As one parent [said](#), “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.”



For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email: info@nclld.org
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