



A CULTURE MEMO

The Work We Do

KHAN LAB SCHOOL · AUGUST 2026

KLS MISSION STATEMENT

Khan Lab School is a community of learners empowering every student to navigate their own path.

This is our mission statement and it shapes how we make decisions across the school, from the daily schedule to how we hire to how we evaluate our own work.

As you might imagine, KLS is an exciting place to work. The faculty, staff, and administrators who thrive here are smart and curious, flexible and adaptable, persistent questioners of the status quo, embracers of the new, intrepid explorers of the future of education. This document describes the culture we are working to build here. If you see yourself in what you read, we would love to hear from you.

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WHAT GUIDES US

Five Core Ideas

What We Believe

We are guided by five core ideas that together guide how we operate, what we value, what we expect of one another, and what distinguishes a KLS education from what most students experience elsewhere.

- 1 Students at the Center.** We make decisions based on what serves student learning, even when that comes into conflict with tradition, with adult preferences, or with what other schools are doing.
- 2 The Human Work of Teaching.** A teacher's primary role at Khan Lab School is to coach, mentor, question, and give feedback. We are working toward a model in which curriculum is developed at the school level rather than built classroom by classroom, so that time and energy go toward student-focused work, including creating opportunities for students to teach one another. We look for teachers who want to spend their careers doing that human work.
- 3 Everyone's a Student, Everyone's a Teacher.** This is our mantra at Khan Lab School. The person who disagrees with you is offering you information about your own thinking, and the most insightful person in the room may not be the one with the most senior title.
- 4 Mastery, Not Minutes.** We measure whether students have actually learned the material, not how long they spent in the classroom. Students are still expected to show up and be present — mastery does not mean minutes don't matter, it means minutes alone are not the goal. This is more demanding than the traditional approach — for teachers, for students, and for families — and we believe it is worth the additional effort.
- 5 A Lab, Not a Museum.** The word Lab is in our name on purpose. We are willing to experiment with how a school can work, and we do not preserve traditions simply because they are traditions.

Students at the Center

Many schools say that students come first. We try to mean it in how we actually operate.

When a policy, a tradition, a piece of curriculum, or an adult preference comes into conflict with what is actually good for students, students win. In practice this has meant rethinking the schedule when it is not working, dropping a unit a teacher had spent years refining because a better one came along, or telling a family something they didn't want to hear. None of those decisions were easy, because letting adult comfort set the agenda is one way schools slowly stop serving students.

We know that learning is hard, and being student-centered does not mean we are trying to make things easy. Rather, it means we find ways to support students as they put forth real effort.

We also take seriously the idea that our students are learning to navigate their own paths. A Khan Lab School education is designed to help them do exactly that: set meaningful goals, take ownership of their learning, recover from mistakes, ask hard questions, and lead with empathy. We call these

traits Purpose, Agency, Teamwork, and Heart, and we expect to see them in students and in the adults who teach them.

We also believe that preparing students to navigate their own path means preparing them to live and work in a world filled with people whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives differ from their own. Students should learn how to listen carefully, engage respectfully across differences, evaluate ideas on their merits, and revise their thinking when presented with compelling evidence. These capacities are not separate from academic excellence; they are part of it.

People who went into education because they love working with students and want them to flourish tend to feel at home at Khan Lab School. The role goes beyond what happens in a scheduled class period — it includes mentorship, coaching, and the relationships that shape a student's thinking over time — and people who see teaching as ending when the class period does will likely find that a different school suits them better.



The Human Work of Teaching

At Khan Lab School, the teacher's primary role is to teach and to cultivate student growth through mentorship, questioning, feedback, and intellectual partnership. In practice, that means coaching a student through a piece of writing until it says what they actually mean, or knowing which part of a concept a student hasn't yet mastered and what to do about it. Teachers shape curriculum as part of a shared, ongoing effort, which keeps that time in service of teaching rather than spent rebuilding material each year.

We have strong convictions about what students should learn and how they should learn it. Our curriculum is developed collaboratively across the school and refined continuously through teacher insight. We value teacher creativity deeply, but a student's education should not rest on the idiosyncrasies of a single classroom. Across classrooms, there should be coherence, shared expectations, and common intellectual experiences. This applies most to our core curriculum. When a teacher (or student) wants to develop a new course, particularly in a fast-moving field where the best way to teach something is changing, there is a clear path to propose and build it.

This is why we centralize much of the curricular architecture, so that a good curriculum is built together, refined continuously, and improved over time. This frees teachers to focus on the uniquely human work of teaching: coaching students, building relationships, facilitating discussion, giving feedback, noticing misconceptions, and helping each learner move toward mastery. It also creates room for students to do some of the teaching, particularly in high school, where peer instruction is one of the most powerful ways for a student to deepen their own mastery.

We also believe students learn best by doing — by thinking, building, writing, solving, debating, and reflecting. The classroom should hum with student activity, not teacher monologue, and we minimize passive lectures accordingly.

Students are given clear learning goals, transparent pathways, and substantial ownership over their time. We do not spoon-feed assignments day by day; students should learn to manage complexity, seek help, revise their thinking, and develop agency over their own education. Teachers support this process with structure, accountability, encouragement, and wisdom.

We embrace mastery learning. If a student has not yet learned something at the target level, the answer is not failure — it is more time, more practice, better feedback, and renewed effort. We hold high standards while recognizing that students reach mastery through different paths and at different paces. High standards are what make this ambition possible in the first place: a school that expects less can only ask students to do less, while a school that expects more can ask them to attempt things a traditional school would not think to try.

Personalization is never an excuse for low expectations. Most students are capable of substantially more than conventional schooling asks of them. Our middle schoolers regularly engage with high school level work, and our high schoolers should routinely tackle college level material, original research, and authentic intellectual challenges. Young people rise when they are trusted, challenged, and supported.

The Human Work of Teaching, cont'd

Mastery should ultimately be visible in authentic and externally legible ways — portfolios of work, public exhibitions, analytical writing, sustained bodies of original work, and external assessments like AP exams, SAT scores, and Schoolhouse.world certifications. Growth should not exist only inside the subjective impressions of a classroom.

Traditional academic content matters at Khan Lab School, and we do not treat it as optional or old-fashioned. Students should know important historical events and ideas, encounter influential literature — the Western canon alongside global perspectives — and build factual knowledge, cultural literacy, quantitative fluency, and scientific understanding. Critical thinking is not a substitute for knowledge; it is built upon it.

Nor is education a menu of disconnected electives. Students pursue sustained passion projects and authentic work that matters to them, with teachers serving as mentors who help them develop rigor, resilience, and purpose.

This model is deeply rewarding for educators who love working closely with students, who are energized by curiosity, and who see teaching as cultivating human potential rather than performing at the front of a room. It is the right fit for educators who want their craft centered on coaching and feedback, working within shared understanding and external measures of mastery.

At Khan Lab School, we are building a culture where students do the heavy lifting of learning — and teachers make that possible with wisdom, empathy, clarity, and high expectations.





FIVE CORE IDEAS · 03

Everyone's a Student, Everyone's a Teacher

Everyone's a Student, Everyone's a Teacher

This is our mantra, and a great deal of our culture flows from it.

A sixth-grader can teach a third-grader something worth knowing, and a third-grader can teach a sixth-grader something worth knowing in turn. The math teacher can learn from the art teacher about how to give better feedback, and the art teacher can learn from the math teacher about how to plan a lesson that builds toward a big idea. The most insightful person in any given conversation at Khan Lab School may not be the person with the most senior title. A new teacher might be the one who sees something a twenty-year veteran missed.

This asks three things of the adults in the building. The first is **intellectual humility**: the willingness to be wrong out loud, to thank the person who showed you, and to be honest when we simply don't know something yet, since that is often the most useful thing to discover. The second is **generosity**: the instinct to share what you know freely rather than hoarding it, and to ask what others know before reinventing it yourself. The third is a **working interest in learning**, on the simple basis that we

cannot credibly ask students to be lifelong learners if the adults around them have stopped being students themselves.

We treat disagreement in the same spirit. The person who disagrees with you is offering you information about your own thinking. You may change your mind, or they may, or both of you may end up somewhere that neither started — and any of these outcomes is a success. The only real failure is never having the conversation in the first place.

We also believe strong learning communities benefit from diversity of thought. Students and adults should regularly encounter viewpoints that challenge their assumptions and expand their understanding. Our goal is not uniformity of opinion but the ability to think critically, engage thoughtfully, and remain intellectually curious in the presence of disagreement.

People who need to be the expert in the room tend to find Khan Lab School uncomfortable. The adults who thrive here are the ones who feel as energized by being taught as they are by teaching.

Mastery, Not Minutes

Most schools sort students by age and move them forward on a schedule. At Khan Lab School, as much as possible, we organize students by what they have actually learned and move them forward when they are ready for the next step. This is not a small operational difference, even though it can sound like one.

Mastery is not a single moment — it's something students grow toward, one skill at a time. We define mastery precisely. There are four indicators we look for in a student's work to determine whether they have reached mastery: **proficiency** (do they understand the concept accurately?), **independence** (can they apply it without prompting?), **consistency** (can they demonstrate it next week, and the week after?), and **contextuality** (can they apply it in situations both familiar and new?). A student who demonstrates all four is ready to move on. A student who demonstrates two of the four is not behind; they are partway along that path, and we know exactly where to focus with them next.

Mastery does not mean perfection. It means a student has built a strong enough understanding to continue building on it productively. A student can still make mistakes and have demonstrated mastery, and a student can score well on a particular test without having demonstrated mastery, because the test may have measured the wrong thing or measured it at the wrong moment. We look for both possibilities.

This approach is more demanding than the traditional alternative. It is harder for teachers, who must assess more precisely and teach more responsively to each student. It is harder for students, who cannot hide behind a passing "grade" in a subject they have not actually understood. And it is harder for families, who sometimes wish we would simply assign a letter grade and consider the matter settled. We do this work anyway, because the alternative — pretending that students have learned things they have not — does not actually serve them. Friction is a feature of learning, not a bug.

Mastery-based learning is not infinite flexibility. We hold ambitious expectations and clear timelines: many students move faster than they would in a traditional school, but none take three years to finish a year's worth of work. It is also not hands-off. Mastery-based learning requires active support from the teacher and collaboration among students. It is among the most actively coached forms of teaching we know. We also do not put students in front of Khan Academy, or any other online tool, all day and depend on it to do all the teaching.

Teachers who came up in a traditional system often find that mastery-based learning challenges instincts they did not know they had. This is to be expected, and we provide a great deal of support along the way.





FIVE CORE IDEAS · 05

A Lab, Not a Museum

A Lab, Not a Museum

At Khan Lab School, we come out of Khan Academy, and we share its core instincts: try things, measure them honestly, keep what works, and do not preserve the old way simply because it is the old way.

Our schedule, our advisory structure, our progress reporting, our use of AI in the classroom, our approach to electives — all of these are subject to revision when we have a good reason to revise them. Not every year, and not on a whim, but when something is not working we change it, and when a pilot fails we say so and learn from it. The point of running a lab is not to be right the first time. The point is to be less wrong, and faster, than schools that refuse to experiment at all.

We use technology where it earns its place. The right online tools can free up time for the kinds of learning that do not fit on a screen: small-group discussion, lab work, outdoor learning, mentorship, and the conversations that shape a student's thinking over years. Technology supports the human work at Khan Lab School rather than the reverse, and we adopt the tools that help us do that work better.

We also believe that what we are working out at Khan Lab School is worth sharing more broadly. Part of the Lab in our name is the conviction that a strong, mastery-based, character-rich education should not be available only to families who can afford an expensive school, and that lessons we learn here should be useful to schools elsewhere. That is why we created **Khan Schools Network** — to share what we have learned with other schools working toward the same goals.

Sharing what we learn is only possible because we are willing to keep evolving, and this calls for a particular kind of resilience from the adults who work here. People who need everything settled before the school year begins, and unchanged for ten years afterward, will not be happy at Khan Lab School. People who feel a small spark of energy at the words "we are going to try something new in semester two" tend to thrive.

We are disciplined about what we try. Education has no shortage of revolutions. We pilot ideas that have a plausible mechanism, we measure them honestly, and we are willing to pause when necessary. A school is not a technology product, and the cost of being wrong about education is borne by students.

Applied learning at Khan Lab School is integrated, not bolted on. Project work, collaboration, discussion, and applied problem-solving run through the day, from "Stepping Stone" and "Cornerstone" projects to Friday internships to the ongoing work of every classroom. We do not believe learning and application belong in separate parts of the day, because that is not how learning actually works: knowledge and application reinforce each other, and separating them weakens both. A Socratic discussion of a historical text builds the skills of communication and critical thinking at the same time it builds understanding of the text itself, and neither one comes first. At Khan Lab School, the day is full and varied, not compressed, because a discussion that runs long, a project that needs another day, or a question that pulls the class off the lesson plan is often where the real learning happens.

A Lab, Not a Museum, cont'd

Teachers will not be replaced by technology. We use AI thoughtfully, and we expect our students to learn to use AI tools well in turn. But technology is not a complete substitute for a teacher. The relationship between a student and a great teacher remains one of the most valuable things a school can offer, and no software replaces it completely.

That said, we recognize that AI changes how fast a student can move through foundational material. A good AI tutor can teach a concept in math, science, or history clearly and patiently, at whatever level a student needs, as many times as it takes. We want our students to use these tools well, not avoid them, because the part of learning that used to take the most time — acquiring the base of knowledge and skill a student needs before they can do anything interesting with it — can now happen faster. That does not shrink the work ahead of them. It changes what the work is. Students who move through foundational material faster have more time for the

harder, more human parts of an education: original projects, working gracefully with real stakeholders, and the kind of sustained, independent work that used to be reserved for the end of a school career instead of the middle of it.

Being a teacher in an environment that changes asks something specific of us: we have to be able to shift our practices without creating instability for students. Things change at Khan Lab School, but teachers make it feel stable.

It is worth saying that we are not a startup pretending to be a school. We owe our students stability in the places where stability matters most: in their relationships with their teachers, in their understanding of what is expected of them, and in the predictability of their daily environment. We innovate with our practices, not with predictability. Our community should always know what to expect from us day to day.



SECTION 06

Things We Will Say Out Loud

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Things We Will Say Out Loud

On hiring.

We hire for fit with these principles as much as for credentials and experience. A hire is strong when it aligns with our culture, not simply when it comes with a strong résumé. We will at times pass on candidates with stronger paper qualifications in favor of candidates whom we believe will make the school as a whole better.

Program over buildings.

Some independent schools in our area compete on the strength of their facilities — climbing walls, theaters, athletic complexes, the kinds of campuses that photograph beautifully for marketing materials. We are not one of those schools, nor are we trying to become one. Tuition at Khan Lab School supports our teachers, our small class sizes, and the learning experiences that actually move students forward. We would rather invest in a class with an excellent teacher than in a building that impresses visitors.

On renewal.

Every employment agreement at Khan Lab School runs for one academic year. At the end of each year, both the school and the employee ask, honestly, whether the match is still the right one. Most of the time it is, and renewal is a formality. Sometimes it is not, and either we do not renew or the employee decides not to return. When that happens, it is the renewal process working as it is meant to work. We would rather be honest about this than pretend that a one-year agreement carries an implicit promise of lifetime employment.

On feedback.

We give feedback directly and we expect to receive it in the same spirit. The version of feedback about a colleague that we want to hear is the version you would be willing to say to that colleague's face. The version of feedback about the school that we want to hear is the one with specifics. We would rather hear difficult feedback than not hear it at all.

On parents and families.

We work as genuine partners with the families who entrust their children to us, and we are grateful for that trust. We do not always agree with them, however, and when we do not, we say so. Parents are not customers and students are not products. This is a real partnership, with all the candor a real partnership requires.

SECTION 06

Things We Will Say Out Loud, cont'd

On compensation.

We pay competitively for our market. We maintain salary scales for three groups — faculty, administration, and support staff — and any employee can see the scale for their own group by contacting their supervisor or HR, because we believe employees are better off knowing than wondering.

On the work.

Teaching at Khan Lab School is demanding work, and it matters. The best work of a career here might mean a student who couldn't write a coherent paragraph in September presenting original research in May, or a colleague adopting a technique you developed and making it better than you imagined. What keeps people here, year after year, is the chance to do the best work of their careers alongside colleagues who are doing the same.



SECTION 07

What Won't Change

SECTION 07

What Won't Change

Schools drift. Cultures drift. The pull toward "this is how it's always been done" is constant, and we feel it too. What keeps us honest is checking ourselves against these principles regularly, and being willing to say out loud when we've fallen short of them.

We've come a long way since 2014. We have further to go than we've come. The school we are working to build — mastery-based, character-rich, intellectually demanding, deeply human — is rare in any era and genuinely hard to sustain. It requires the right people in every role, which is why we care so much about who we hire and why fit matters more to us than a strong résumé.

MISSION STATEMENT

**Khan Lab School is a community of learners
empowering every student to navigate their own path.**

MOTTO

Everyone's a student. Everyone's a teacher.



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Khan Lab School

Mountain View & Palo Alto, California
khanlabschool.org

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