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ACIS ASSOCIATION of COLORADO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

approach

Love the Head, Leave the Operations

Supporting and evaluating the head of school

ACIS Leadership Conference · Vail, Colorado

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Heads + Teams own today.
Boards own *tomorrow*.

The board governs. The head *leads* the school.

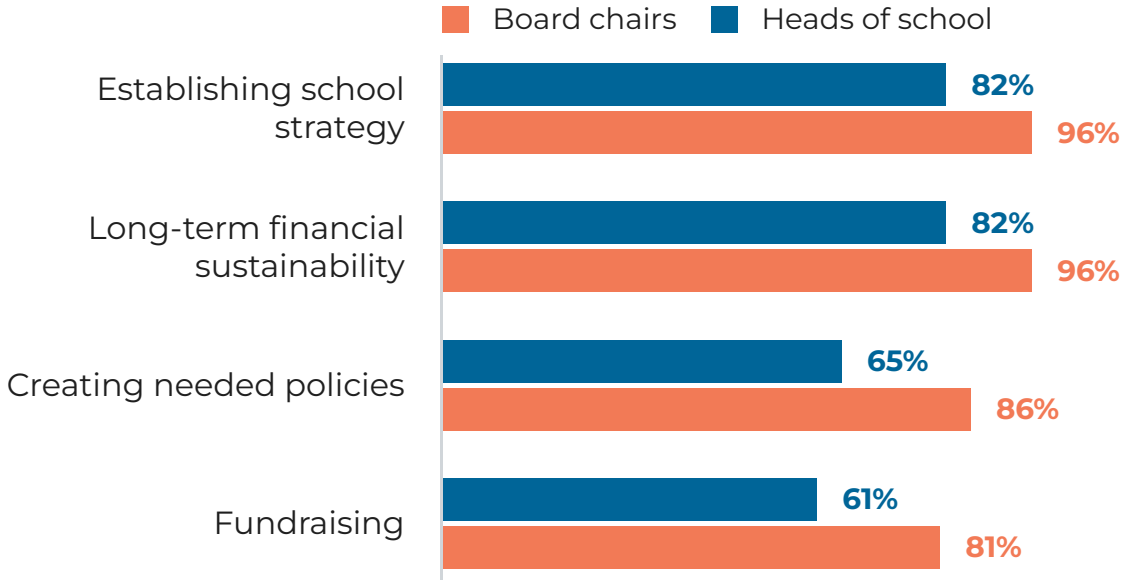
	Board and board chair	Head of school
Focus	Governance, oversight, strategic guidance	Operations, management, strategy execution
Authority	Leads the board, approves major decisions, evaluates the head	Manages staff, implements strategy, reports to the board
Legal duties	Ensures the board fulfills its fiduciary duties	Ensures operational compliance, financial accuracy, regulatory adherence

The full board supports and oversees the head. No individual trustee, even the chair, holds that authority alone.

Sources: Keller Executive Search, "CEO vs. Chairman Roles and Responsibilities"; *NAIS Trustee Handbook;* NAIS, "2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part II"

Heads feel less supported than their chairs think.

Agree the head gets adequate board support in each area



Partnership rated "extremely strong"

49%

of heads

70%

of board chairs

Source: NAIS, "2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part II: Head-Board Relationship" (Rowe & Torres). Surveys of 401 heads and 324 board chairs, winter 2024. Share who somewhat or strongly agree.

PART 1

First, the foundation.

Agree on the job, and run the board well. Everything else depends on it.

Nearly every board evaluates the head. Far fewer set goals or give feedback.

98%

of boards formally evaluate the head of school

68%

of heads say their board sets annual goals for them

56%

of heads say the board gives periodic feedback on progress toward goals. 85% of chairs say it does.

You cannot fairly evaluate a head against goals that were never set.

Sources: NAIS, “2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part I” (2023 data) and “Part II: Head-Board Relationship” (winter 2024 surveys).

Before you write goals, ask five questions.

1. **Whose goals are they?** The school's, the head's, the leadership team's? Where do they overlap?
2. **Who sets them?** The head drafts? The team? The chair and committee refine? The board approves?
3. **Who are they for?** The board, the head, the faculty, the families? What does each one need to see?
4. **How do they connect?** To the strategic plan, the team's goals, the budget, last year's review?
5. **Who tracks them, and how?** Chair check-ins, a midyear review, a dashboard, the self-evaluation?

One school we know: the head sets school goals with the leadership team, then distills them into the three goals the board tracks. Different schools, different answers. Same five questions.

A board that runs itself well *is* support.

Board culture

56% vs. 79%

of heads vs. chairs say trustees share accountability for mistakes. Gaps of 10+ points on 12 of 16 culture questions.

The chair sets the tone: honest talk, conflict handled in the room.

Rogue trustees

96%

of boards can remove a trustee. 47% use a commitment letter. 67% try prospects on a committee first.

What the board does not manage, the head ends up managing.

Board assessment

87%

of boards self-evaluate; 82% do it every year. But only 58% of heads say board learning is a priority; 76% of chairs do.

Do it, tailor it, and use it. Results feed the board's own plan.

Heads cannot fix their boards. Boards can. That is the support a head cannot ask for.

Sources: NAIS, "2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part I" (2023 data: removal, commitment letters, trial service, board self-evaluation) and "Part II" (winter 2024 surveys of 401 heads and 324 chairs: board culture).

When a trustee goes rogue, the chair goes first.

1. **Name it early, privately.** The chair, one on one, the week it happens. Not a reply-all, and not a hallway aside.
2. **Go back to the paper.** Commitment letter, conflict-of-interest statement, bylaws. Signed every year, so nobody is surprised.
3. **A pattern goes to Governance.** The governance committee owns trustee performance and renewal. Terms end. Renewal is not automatic.
4. **Know the removal provision before you need it.** Most bylaws have one. Read yours this month, in calm weather.
5. **The head never manages the trustee.** If the head is doing it, the board has already failed the head.

Sources: NAIS, "2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part I"; *NAIS Board Chair Handbook* (Creeden).

Assess the board (not just the head).

- **Annual board self-assessment,** on the same calendar as the head's review. Written, tailored to your trustee job description.
- **Results go to the governance committee,** then to the full board, with two or three commitments for the year.
- **A board education roadmap** built from the results. Onboarding for new trustees, not a one-time orientation.
- **A culture check with the head.** Ask the head and the chair the same questions about how the board works. Compare the answers.

Same school, different answers

46%

of head-chair pairs disagree on whether the board's own learning is a priority.

39%

disagree on whether trustees share accountability.

If the head is the only one being evaluated, the board is not a partner. It is a judge.

Sources: NAIS, "2023–2024 State of Independent School Governance, Part I" (board self-evaluation best practice) and Part II (head-chair agreement at the same school).

PART 2

Love the head.

What support looks like, and where it slides into operations.

Support shows up in six places.

1. **A real partnership with the chair.** Standing time, a shared agenda, no surprises in either direction.
2. **Clear goals, set together.** Three to five a year, tied to the strategic plan.
3. **Feedback all year.** The spring review confirms what the head already heard.
4. **Investment in growth.** A coach, a peer network, and professional development in the budget.
5. **Public backing.** One voice in the community. Disagreement stays in the boardroom.
6. **A board that runs itself.** Culture, a chair who handles rogue trustees, and a board that assesses itself.

When the partnership struggles, the chair usually fits one of four patterns.

Too close

A friend first. Hard feedback never arrives.

Micromanaging

In the building and in the weeds. Staff hear from the chair directly.

Underfunctioning

Present, but not leading the board. The head ends up managing trustees.

Invisible

Hard to reach. The head leads without a partner.

Agree in advance: how you will disagree, how you will escalate a concern, whom you will call if you get stuck, and how you will repair quickly.

Source: Ann-Marie Meacham, “Why Every Nonprofit Needs Couples Therapy: Inside the Executive Director–Board Chair Relationship,” Blue Avocado.

PART 3

Evaluate the work.

Goals, feedback, and a cycle that runs every year.

*The board undertakes formal strategic planning on a periodic basis, sets annual goals related to the plan, and conducts **annual written evaluations** for the school, head of school, and the board itself.*

NAIS Principles of Good Practice for Boards of Trustees

Schools generally run the head's evaluation through one (or several) structures.

Informal chair conversations

Strength: Fast and personal.

Watch for: Nothing on paper; it leaves with the chair.

Formal chair conversation, documented

Strength: A written record the next chair can use.

Watch for: One person's view.

Head Evaluation and Support Committee

Strength: Several trustees hold goals, feedback and growth together.

Watch for: Drifting into a second board.

Compensation committee

Strength: Ties pay decisions to the review.

Watch for: Evaluation becomes only about money.



Choose tools that measure the job you asked for.

Tool	Best for	Watch for
Head's self-evaluation	The head's own account of progress on goals	It starts the conversation; it is not the review
Full-board survey	Structured trustee input on goals and partnership	Questions about operations trustees can't observe
Chair or committee review	Synthesis, the conversation, and coaching	One voice standing in for the board
360 review	Input from people who work with the head for the head's own professional development	Who picks raters, anonymity, scope. Use sparingly: personal agendas, employment liability
Parent or community survey	Data about the school's health	Reading it as a verdict on the head

NAIS offers a Head of School Assessment Survey (nais.org/surveys).

Thank you.

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