



ANNUAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



38TH ANNUAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE • OCTOBER 15-16, 2026

LOCATION/HOTEL RESERVATIONS

Grand Hyatt Vail
1300 Westhaven Drive, Vail, CO 81657
Vail, CO 81657
(970) 476-1234 or 800-831-3306

Make reservations by September 16, 2026 to assure these rates:
\$209.00 per night, single or double occupancy.

(Same price for Deluxe and Standard rooms. Suites available for additional charge.)

CANCELLATION POLICY: 7 DAYS IN ADVANCE OF ARRIVAL.

Please make your Grand Hyatt Vail Hotel reservation online at:
www.hyatt.com/events/en-US/group-booking/EGEGH/G-ACI1
Identify yourself as an attendee of the Association of Colorado Independent Schools conference.

QUESTIONS?

Visit our website at www.acischools.org
or contact Alan Smiley, Executive Director
(303) 444-2201

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

EARLY REGISTRATION (received BY September 16)

- Member schools \$500 per person
- Non-member schools \$525 per person
- ACIS school staff \$300 per person for attending Friday only
(Not heads or trustees)
- Courtesy Extension (Members Only)

The early registration fee will prevail after 9/16 for member schools that register eight or more participants.

REGISTRATION (received after September 16)

- Member schools \$550 per person
- Non-member schools \$575 per person
- ACIS school staff \$375 per person for attending Friday only
(Not heads or trustees)

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

- **REGISTER** now at www.acischools.org
- **PAYMENT BY MAILING YOUR CHECK** to:
ACIS, 4000 S. Wadsworth Blvd., Ste. 230,
Littleton, CO 80123
- We also accept **PAYMENT BY CREDIT CARD:**
<https://link.clover.com/urlshortener/JLWxqz>
- \$50 discount for the spouses/partners of conference registrants
- Dinner and Thursday Keynote only—\$150.00

NO REFUNDS FOR CONFERENCE
CANCELLATIONS AFTER SEPTEMBER 16, 2026!

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ACIS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE SCHEDULE 2026

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2026

TIME	TRACK/SPEAKER	LOCATION
3:00 – 5:00 pm	New Trustee Orientation: Anne-Marie Balzano	Gore D
3:00 – 5:00 pm	Heads' Roundtable: Amol Tripathi <i>For Heads of School Only</i>	Cascade EF
3:30 – 5:00 pm	Circle of Chairs Discussion <i>For Current and/or Rising Board Chairs Only</i>	Gore AB & C
5:30 – 6:00 pm	Registration	Gore Foyer
5:45 – 6:30 pm	Reception	Gore Pavilion
6:30 – 7:45 pm	Dinner & Dessert	Cascade ABCD
7:15 – 7:45 pm	EVENING KEYNOTE: JIM BEST The Work Behind the Work: Why the Board-Head Partnership Matters More Than Ever	Cascade ABCD

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2026

TIME	TRACK/SPEAKER	LOCATION
7:15-8:15 am	Registration and Book Sale	Cascade Foyer
7:30-8:15 am	Breakfast Buffet	Cascade ABCD
8:30-10:00 am	KEYNOTE: AMOL TRIPATHI Designing the Anti-Fragile School: Thriving Amid Volatility	Cascade ABCD
10:00 – 10:30 am	Break, Visit Sponsors	
10:30-11:45 am	Concurrent Sessions (Morning)	
	① Markers of Financial and Organizational Sustainability for ACIS Ari Betof	Cascade E
	② From Evidence to Enrollment Messaging: Turning What You Know Into What Families Need to Hear Dana Nelson-Isaacs	Cascade F
	③ A Strategic Blueprint for Auxiliary Revenue Growth Nat Saltonstall	Gore A
	④ School Marketing the Right Way: Your 60-Minute Transformation Guide Brendan Schneider	Gore B
	⑤ The New Work of Headship: From Managing the Board to Leading the Partnership Jim Best	Gore C
	⑥ From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads Megan Mann	Gore D
11:45 am-12:45 pm	Lunch Buffet	
12:45-1:30 pm	Panel of Long-Tenured Teachers: Why We Stuck With Teaching and How School Leaders Can Support Others	Cascade ABCD
1:45-3:00 pm	Concurrent Sessions (Afternoon)	
	① Leadership Insights for Heads and Trustees – Perceived Value and Affordability Ari Betof	Cascade E
	② Is It the Market, the Message, or the Model? Diagnosing the Real Enrollment Challenge Dana Nelson-Isaacs	Cascade F
	③ A Strategic Blueprint for Auxiliary Revenue Growth Nat Saltonstall	Gore A
	④ Cut Through the Noise: How AI Can Supercharge Your School's Marketing & Enrollment Brendan Schneider	Gore B
	⑤ The New Work of Headship: From Managing the Board to Leading the Partnership Jim Best	Gore C
	⑥ Love the Head, Leave the Operations: Supporting and Evaluating the Head of School Megan Mann	Gore D

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PRESENTATION DESCRIPTIONS

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2026

Heads' Roundtable | 3:00-5:00 pm

Crucial Conversations: Leading Through the Talks You've Been Avoiding

Amol Tripathi

This will be an opportunity for current ACIS Heads of School to gather for collegial conversation and collaboration. Topics will be communicated in advance of the gathering and based on timely interests and areas of concern. *Only current ACIS Heads of School may participate.*

New Trustee Orientation | 3:00-5:00 pm

Anne-Marie Balzano

This workshop will explore strategies for effective school trusteeship. Participants will review standards of good practice for boards, clarify roles and responsibilities, and share ideas for working in partnership with administrators to provide strategic leadership for the school. Case study discussions will foster creative engagement, explore application of good governance principles, and address common board challenges.

Circle of Chairs | 3:30-5:00 pm

Experienced board chairs from ACIS will lead this roundtable conversation about the critical partnership between school heads and board chairs. Based roughly on school size, discussions will identify common and current challenges as well as proven strategies for effective board leadership. *Only current and rising board chairs may participate.*

Keynote | 7:15 pm

The Work Behind the Work: Why the Board-Head Partnership Matters More Than Ever

Jim Best

Much of a Head of School's success is determined not by what happens in public, but by what happens behind the scenes—in conversations, relationships, moments of alignment, and the trust built over time. Among those relationships, none may be more important than the partnership between the Head and the Board.

As the demands of school leadership continue to grow, the nature of the headship is changing. Expectations are higher, challenges are more complex, and the need for strong, healthy governance has never been greater. Yet few aspects of the role have a greater influence on a Head's effectiveness—or receive less intentional preparation—than the Board-Head relationship. Heads and Trustees will leave with fresh perspective, practical ideas, and renewed confidence for the work that often matters most—"the work behind the work."

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2026

Keynote | 8:30-10:00 am

Designing the Anti-Fragile School: Thriving Amid Volatility

Amol Tripathi

With independent schools facing demographic shifts, financial pressure, and an uncertain road ahead, resilience (i.e. merely surviving disruption) is no longer enough. This keynote introduces antifragility: the capacity to grow stronger because of volatility rather than in spite of it. Drawing on how fast-scaling businesses make decisions under deep uncertainty, Amol challenges "straight-line" planning and shares practical lenses for heads, trustees, and senior leaders to apply across finance, operations, and academic programming.

Morning Presentations | 10:30-11:45 am

① Markers of Financial and Organizational Sustainability for ACIS

Ari Betof

Cultivating financial and organizational sustainability in independent schools can feel like tap dancing on marbles. What separates schools that are struggling for viability from those moving toward stability and ultimately toward long-term financial and organizational sustainability? Join Ari Betof as we unpack core concepts, key indicators, and common pitfalls. Ari will cross-pollinate what has worked, and what hasn't, for independent schools across the country. The session will include opportunities for live Q&A as well as questions submitted anonymously.

② From Evidence to Enrollment Messaging:

Turning What You Know Into What Families Need to Hear

Dana Nelson-Isaacs

Independent schools collect useful information all the time: inquiry questions, tour conversations, application data, parent feedback, exit interviews, survey comments, and market insights. Too often, that evidence stays scattered rather than shaping the way a school talks about itself. This session will help leaders identify the patterns in what families are asking, saying, and choosing, and translate those patterns into clearer website language, admission talking points, event design, and follow-up communication. Participants will leave with a practical framework they can use immediately to make their messaging more specific, grounded, and responsive.

③ A Strategic Blueprint for Auxiliary Revenue Growth

Nat Saltonstall (session repeats in afternoon)

Independent schools are increasingly leveraging their campuses year-round to boost non-tuition revenue. From summer programs and rentals to strategic partnerships, schools can unlock new income streams without compromising mission or overextending resources. This session explores practical strategies to maximize underutilized assets, assess operational readiness, and design sustainable, mission-aligned initiatives. Attendees will gain tools to evaluate opportunities, mitigate risks, and develop a long-term plan for financial growth.

PRESENTATION DESCRIPTIONS

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2026

Morning Presentations *(continued)* | 10:30-11:45 am

④ **School Marketing the Right Way:
Your 60-Minute Transformation Guide**
Brendan Schneider

Take part in this focused, high-impact session that distills the core principles of Brendan Schneider's book, *School Marketing the Right Way*, into actionable steps for immediate implementation. Brendan wrote this book to help independent school marketers cut through the noise and focus on what truly moves the needle—offering a clear, strategic approach grounded in years of hands-on experience. Learn how to revolutionize your school's marketing approach through interactive exercises and real-world examples, from developing targeted personas to leveraging AI tools. Perfect for busy school marketers who want to quickly maximize their marketing effectiveness.

⑤ **The New Work of Headship: From Managing the Board
to Leading the Partnership**
Jim Best (session repeats in afternoon)

Exceptional schools are built on exceptional leadership partnerships. Among the most important—and often least intentional—is the partnership between the Head of School and the Board. As the work of headship continues to evolve, leading this relationship has become an increasingly important dimension of a head's leadership. In this interactive workshop, we'll explore practical ways to cultivate trust, strengthen partnership, clarify expectations, and create the conditions for exceptional governance. Through conversation, reflection, and real-world examples, participants will gain a fresh perspective on how intentional leadership can elevate one of the school's most important relationships.

⑥ **From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and
Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads**
Megan Mann

We're a couple of months into the new school year, which is just long enough to see what this one has in store. In this fast-paced, interactive session, Megan (with the local school attorneys you know and love) leads trustees, heads and their teams through the trends, hot topics, and headaches already shaping independent schools this fall, plus what to watch for in the months ahead. Expect real cases, candid discussion, and practical strategies drawn from work with schools nationwide on governance, leadership, legal education, and crisis management. We'll draw on lessons from last year and look hard at what 2026–27 is bringing.

Afternoon Presentations | 1:45-3:00 pm

① **Leadership Insights for Heads and Trustees — Perceived
Value and Affordability**
Ari Betof

What do families actually value in an independent school education—and why do the qualities they say they prize most sometimes diverge from the choices their actions reveal? How can behavioral economics help heads and trustees understand, and strategically respond to, mounting tuition pricing pressures? EMA's 2025 Special Report, *An Independent School Education: Family Perceptions of Value & Affordability*, offers the first large-scale analysis of how families

across the socioeconomic spectrum perceive value and affordability in independent school education. In this session, participants will take a deep dive into what parents prioritize when choosing an independent school, the gap between stated and revealed preferences, and the governance and leadership implications. Participants will also engage in discussion of effective practices independent schools are using to maximize perceived value and strengthen long-term enrollment health.

② **Is It the Market, the Message, or the Model? Diagnosing
the Real Enrollment Challenge**
Dana Nelson-Isaacs

When enrollment softens, schools often move quickly toward familiar solutions: more marketing, more outreach, more events, more financial aid, or a tighter admission process. But those responses only work when they match the actual problem. This session will help participants look across market conditions, inquiry and application patterns, yield, retention, affordability signals, and family feedback to distinguish between symptoms and root causes. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, the session will help leaders sharpen the questions they ask, the evidence they examine, and the conversations they need to have before making strategic enrollment decisions.

③ **A Strategic Blueprint for Auxiliary Revenue Growth**
Nat Saltonstall (See description under morning session.)

④ **Cut Through the Noise: How AI Can Supercharge Your
School's Marketing & Enrollment**
Brendan Schneider

School marketers are juggling more than ever—tight budgets, endless tasks, and increasing competition. How can you stand out without burning out? The answer: AI-powered marketing. In this fast-paced session, you'll learn how AI can streamline your efforts, boost engagement, and increase inquiries—without losing the personal touch. Discover how to create high-converting content in minutes, automate repetitive tasks to free up valuable time, and leverage AI-driven strategies to attract more families. If you're ready to work smarter, not harder, don't miss this session!

⑤ **The New Work of Headship: From Managing the Board
to Leading the Partnership**
Jim Best (See description under morning session.)

⑥ **Love the Head, Leave the Operations: Supporting and
Evaluating the Head of School**
Megan Mann

Here's the puzzle at the heart of board work: the board has exactly one employee, and that employee is often the only person who can really assess how the job is going. So how do trustees support and evaluate a head without wading into operations they shouldn't touch? In this candid, interactive session, Megan Mann and Alan Smiley bring together heads and trustees to examine what's working, what isn't, and how to build systems that turn good intentions into real support. Bring your questions. This is a safe space to trade strategies and compare notes.

SPEAKER BIOS: KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



JIM BEST

Jim Best, Co-Founder of The Leader Network, brings over 30 years of experience leading and advising organizations across both nonprofit and for-profit sectors—helping schools and organizations strengthen leadership, governance, and strategy, particularly at the intersection of board and head partnership.

A former Head of School and senior leader in the U.S. and abroad, Jim is widely recognized for his work guiding boards and leadership teams through moments of complexity, growth, and transition. He co-founded both The Leader Network and Global Online Academy, and is a co-founder of the Klingenstein Center's Institute on Board Governance. He also serves as faculty in the Klingenstein Center's Heads Fellows Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he works with Heads of School and Executive Directors on the real work of leadership, strategy, and the board-head partnership.



AMOL TRIPATHI

Amol Tripathi advises executives and leadership teams on organizational transformation and strategic growth, with particular expertise in helping institutions make sound decisions amid uncertainty. During his decade as Managing Director at Hines, he led landmark real estate developments, including Northern Virginia's tallest office tower, and he has worked across education, finance, government, and management consulting. Having recently completed his tenure as a Board Trustee and Investment Committee Chair at The Primary Day School in Bethesda, MD, he brings firsthand governance experience to his work with independent schools. A graduate of Harvard University and the Wharton School, Amol is known for translating the way fast-scaling businesses think into practical frameworks that school leaders can act on immediately.

SPEAKER BIOS



DR. ANNE-MARIE BALZANO

Anne-Marie Balzano is Mission and Data's Governance and Strategic Planning Practice Lead and NAIS' Senior Strategist for Leadership Alignment and Governance. A former head of school, associate professor, teacher, and a current

trustee of The Buckley School, she brings more than thirty years of experience in education to her work with independent schools nationwide. Anne-Marie partners with boards and heads of school to strengthen governance, strategic planning, leadership alignment, and long-term sustainability through board development, mission-focused planning, and research. She previously served as chief editor of *The Board Chair Handbook*, hosted the NAIS governance podcast *The Trustee Table*, and led the development of governance resources used by schools across the country. A regular faculty presenter for NAIS and instructor in the Klingenstein Center's leadership programs, Anne-Marie is passionate about helping school leaders and trustees govern with clarity, purpose, and impact.



ARI BETOF, EdD, MBA

Ari Betof, EdD, MBA is co-founder and partner at Mission & Data and a leading expert on independent school financial sustainability and organizational stewardship. A sought-after keynote speaker and advisor, Ari has worked with over 100 independent schools and membership associations across the country and around the world as a strategy consultant. He was the lead author of Enrollment Management Association's 2025 flagship report, *An Independent School Education: Family Perceptions of Value and Affordability* as well as co-creator of the 2020 webinar *Independent Schools on the Brink* hosted by 33 membership associations and attended by nearly 2,000 trustees, heads of school, and leadership team members. Ari is the co-author of a new book on financial and organizational sustainability of independent schools that is scheduled to be released in early 2027. He works at the intersection of theory and practice, drawing on his extensive leadership experience in roles including as a trustee, head of school, chief advancement officer, director of enrollment management, director of strategic planning, and faculty member.

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SPEAKER BIOS



DANA NELSON-ISAACS

Dana Nelson-Isaacs brings more than 25 years of experience helping schools thrive, partnering with admission teams, heads, boards, and faculty to strengthen enrollment strategy, communications, and community engagement.

Known for her thoughtful insight and candid, collaborative style, she works across all levels of school leadership to solve complex challenges with clarity and heart. Dana's professional journey spans a wide range of institutions, including grades K-12, boarding and day, single-gender and all-gender, and she held key roles in enrollment and marketing before launching her consulting practice in 2013. Today, she is a trusted expert in market research, enrollment feasibility, and strategic enrollment management.



MEGAN MANN

Megan Mann founded Approach to partner with independent school leadership teams and boards on continuous growth. A big believer that winning teams practice and are intentional about examining their plays and plotting their

development, Megan helps schools facilitate strategic learning: examining trends, strengthening dynamics, preparing for crises, and building capacity for what's ahead. She prides herself on being part of school teams across the country and internationally. Before founding Approach, Megan was General Counsel and Vice President of Legal Education at the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). Beyond her 18 years in the legal, nonprofit, and education sectors, she's an independent school alum, parent, and trustee, and proud dog mom to two fabulously odd rescue dogs.



NAT SALTONSTALL

Nat Saltonstall is a nationally recognized authority in independent school summer and auxiliary program management. Over his 35+ years in independent schools, Nat has designed, directed, and consulted on high-

performing programs that generate meaningful impact for schools and families alike. As the Founder and Executive Director of SPARC, the Summer Programs and Auxiliary Revenue Collaborative, he leads the premier national network supporting independent school leaders through professional development, benchmarking data, and best practices. Since launching SPARC in 2016, Nat has grown it from a single conference into a thriving, year-round membership community. Previously, Nat served for two decades as Director of Summer Programs at Beaver Country Day School in Chestnut Hill, MA, where he scaled enrollment to 1,400 campers and annual revenues to over \$4 million. As a strategic advisor and frequent national presenter, Nat has helped countless schools build innovative, mission-driven auxiliary programs that drive engagement, growth, and financial sustainability.



BRENDAN SCHNEIDER

Brendan Schneider is the founder of SchneiderB Media, a digital marketing agency that helps K-12 tuition-charging schools grow enrollment. He's the author of *School Marketing The Right Way* and the creator of The MarCom Society and

SchoolMarketingCRM. Brendan speaks nationally on AI in school marketing, inbound marketing, SEO, and digital advertising. He has presented at AISAP, E3n, NAIS, FCIS, TAIS, and SAIS.

Names and bios for the Panel of Long-Tenured Teachers on Friday afternoon will be provided at the conference.