



# ANNUAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



37TH ANNUAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE • OCTOBER 9-10, 2025

## 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 12, 2025 to assure these rates:**

\$199.00 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:  
<https://www.hyatt.com/en-US/group-booking/EGEGH/G-VXXA>

Identify yourself as an attendee of the Association of Colorado Independent Schools conference.

## QUESTIONS?

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

## CONFERENCE REGISTRATION

### EARLY REGISTRATION (received BY September 12)

- Member schools \$475 per person
- Non-member schools \$500 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 9/12 for member schools that register eight or more participants.

### REGISTRATION (received after September 12)

- 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](http://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 Keynote only—\$150.00

NO REFUNDS FOR CONFERENCE  
CANCELLATIONS AFTER SEPTEMBER 12, 2025!

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## ACIS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE SCHEDULE 2025

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2025

TIME	TRACK/SPEAKER	LOCATION
3:00 – 5:00 pm	New Trustee Orientation: Monique Davis and Anne-Marie Balzano	Gore D
3:00 – 5:00 pm	Heads' Roundtable: Nishant Mehta <i>For Heads of School Only</i>	Zermatt Ballroom
3:30 – 5:00 pm	Circle of Chairs Discussion <i>For Current and/or Rising Board Chairs Only</i>	Gore A & Gore B
5:30 – 6:00 pm	Registration	
5:45 – 6:30 pm	Reception	Gore Pavilion
6:30 – 7:45 pm	Dinner & Dessert	Cascade DEF
7:15 – 7:45 pm	<b>EVENING KEYNOTE: JEFF LEAHY</b> The Evolution of Boards and Headship Over the Past 20 Years	Cascade DEF

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2025

TIME	TRACK/SPEAKER	LOCATION
7:15-8:15 am	Registration and Book Sale	Cascade Foyer
7:30-8:15 am	Breakfast Buffet	Cascade ABCD & Foyer
8:30-10:00 am	<b>KEYNOTE: NISHANT MEHTA</b> Living Strategy & Inclusive Momentum: Building Muscles that Matter	Cascade ABCD
10:00 – 10:30 am	Break, Visit Sponsors	
10:30-11:45 am	<b>Concurrent Sessions (Morning)</b>	
	① Three Phases of Character Education: Me Work. We Work. The Work. Dr. Amy Johnston	Cascade E
	② From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads Megan Mann	Gore A
	③ The Future of AI in Schools and Implications for School Leaders Cindy Blackburn	Gore B
	④ When the Unthinkable Happens: Navigating Crisis with Confidence and Compassion Laura Love and Jeremy Story	Gore C
	⑤ Beyond Fundraising: Building a Resilient Culture of Philanthropy Polly Breit	Gore D
	⑥ Designing & Implementing a Sustainable Mission-Driven Compensation System Cliff Kling	Cascade F
11:45 am-12:45 pm	Lunch Buffet	Cascade ABCD
12:45-1:30 pm	School-Based, School Staff Affinity or Head-led Breakout Discussion Groups, Visit Sponsors	
1:45-3:00 pm	<b>Concurrent Sessions (Afternoon)</b>	
	① Three Phases of Character Education: Me Work. We Work. The Work. Dr. Amy Johnston	Cascade E
	② From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads Megan Mann	Gore A
	③ The Future of AI in schools and Implications for School Leaders Cindy Blackburn	Gore B
	④ Helping Families Find Your School: Reaching Parents Across Online Platforms Kathleen Deal and Jon Woods	Gore C
	⑤ Beyond Fundraising: Building a Resilient Culture of Philanthropy Polly Breit	Gore D
	⑥ Governance Compendium: Practical Topics for Boards and Heads Cliff Kling	Cascade F

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## PRESENTATION DESCRIPTIONS

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2025

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

#### **Collegial Conversation and Collaboration**

**Nishant Mehta**

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**

**Monique Davis and 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**

An experienced board chair 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 Evolution of Boards and Headship Over the Past 20 Years** **Jeff Leahy**

Jeff Leahy has been the Head of School at Colorado Rocky Mountain School in Carbondale, CO for the last 20 years. He is the longest tenured current Head of School in ACIS. During that period, he led the school and collaborated with boards through a pandemic, several economic crisis, social and political shifts, and changing educational and wellbeing needs of students. In a conversation with ACIS Executive Director and former Head of School, Alan Smiley, we will explore how the roles, responsibilities, and relationship of a head of school and independent school boards have changed over the years, current trends in the industry, and what these shifts mean for schools in the future.

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2025

**Keynote | 8:30-10:00 am**

#### **Living Strategy & Inclusive Momentum: Building Muscles that Matter**

**Nishant Mehta**

The most resilient schools of the next decade will treat strategy and inclusion not as projects but as core muscles — strengthened through deliberate reps, disciplined subtraction, and shared decision-making. In this keynote, Nishant Mehta challenges school leaders to replace static 5-year roadmaps with a living practice that (1) centers belonging — ensuring every strategic choice widens, rather than narrows, the circle; (2) deploys strategic subtraction — identifying initiatives to sunset so resources flow to high-impact experiments; and (3) builds the team's decision-making muscle through 90-day strategy sprints and simple "stop/continue/experiment" rituals that push judgment down to those closest to the work. Nishant offers practical tools ("MehtaModels") for measuring mission impact over activity counts and a playbook for trustees and heads to keep strategy — and inclusion — alive long after the launch retreat.

**Morning Presentations | 10:30-11:45 am**

#### **① Three Phases of Character Education:**

**Me Work. We Work. The Work.**

**Dr. Amy Johnston**

Many schools have tried character education and far too many have failed and have not understood why. Often, schools jump into "the work" of character education, (activities for students, recognition programs, character classes, etc.) before spending time in the mirror and doing the "me work" and before building a strong, collegial adult culture, the "we work." Schools that have effective character education have spent time building authentic relationships and creating an organic initiative that works.

Character education is not quick or easy. It is a shift in how you interact with others and how you expect people to treat one another. It begins with authentic, personal reflection, continues with vulnerable, challenging adult conversations, and is successful when trust and collective vision support the entire process.

Join Dr. Amy Johnston as she walks you through the three phases of an effective character education initiative.

#### **② From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads**

**Megan Mann**

This session combines interactive discussions, case studies, and presentations to examine key trends and challenges facing independent schools as we reflect on one school year and dive into another. Drawing on industry research and real-world experiences, Megan will share insights from her work with independent schools nationwide on governance, leadership development, legal education, and risk and crisis management. From enrollment agreement pitfalls to leadership successes, this session provides a platform for exploring critical issues, sharing strategies, and fostering community learning to equip schools for the road ahead.

#### **③ The Future of AI in Schools and Implications for School Leaders**

**Cindy Blackburn**

AI is already reshaping schools, but where does strategy come in? This session is for school leaders ready to move from reaction to strategy. Cindy Blackburn, Director of Learning and Engagement at Toddle, will begin with a look at the Colorado AI Act and trends in the industry and what they signal about the future of AI governance in schools. From there, we'll explore the rise of AI agents and what it means to keep humans meaningfully in the loop.

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## PRESENTATION DESCRIPTIONS

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2025

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

Then, we'll dive into small-group discussions around three key pillars of AI readiness:

- Policy (What guidance do your teams need?)
- Budgeting (What investments should you start planning for?)
- Risk (What are you not thinking about yet?)

Come ready to reflect, connect, and leave with next steps for your leadership journey.

#### ④ **When the Unthinkable Happens: Navigating Crisis with Confidence and Compassion** *Laura Love and Jeremy Story*

Your school community is your greatest asset during a crisis, and your school community looks to you for leadership, clarity and reassurance. This session focuses on how to communicate with transparency, empathy and integrity when unexpected challenges arise. We'll share practical strategies for supporting your staff, maintaining trust with families, and staying grounded in your school's values — even when emotions are running high, and not all the answers are clear.

#### ⑤ **Beyond Fundraising: Building a Resilient Culture of Philanthropy** *Polly Breit*

In today's ever-evolving educational and philanthropic landscape, a thriving culture of philanthropy is no longer a luxury — it's a necessity. This interactive session is designed for school leaders, board members, and development leaders ready to deepen community engagement, broaden donor participation, and strengthen long-term sustainability through an integrated, school-wide approach to establishing a strong culture of philanthropy.

We'll explore current data and trends in independent school philanthropy and examine two contrasting school case studies. Finally, we will unpack what it means to foster a "culture of philanthropy" at every stage of families' engagement with the school — from admissions to alumni experiences. Attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of their school's philanthropic strengths and opportunities — plus concrete action steps tailored to their community.

This session offers a roadmap for embedding philanthropy into the fabric of school life.

#### ⑥ **Designing & Implementing a Sustainable Mission-Driven Compensation System** *Cliff Kling*

Faculty and staff compensation is in sharp focus as the world of work evolves in dramatic ways post-pandemic. How can schools attract and retain quality teachers with record numbers of teachers leaving the profession and colleges reporting declines in education majors? How can schools compete for staff in a changing labor market? This session will explore how to create a faculty and staff compensation system that is consistent, effective, and mission-driven. Topics include: types of salary systems, evaluation, professional growth, benefits, and implementation of a new system.

#### Afternoon Presentations | 1:45-3:00 pm

#### ① **Three Phases of Character Education: Me Work. We Work. The Work.** *Dr. Amy Johnston*

*See description under morning session.*

#### ② **From the Classroom to Courtroom: Hot Topics and Governance Trends for Trustees & Heads** *Megan Mann*

*See description under morning session.*

#### ③ **The Future of AI in Schools and Implications for School Leaders** *Cindy Blackburn*

*See description under morning session.*

#### ④ **Helping Families Find Your School: Reaching Parents Across Online Platforms** *Kathleen Deal and Jon Woods*

The way families search for schools and information has changed. Parents today don't just use Google — they're also turning to social media, online forums and even tools like AI assistants to make decisions. In this session, we'll talk about how your school can show up where parents are actually looking. You'll learn simple strategies for sharing the right messages on different platforms, tracking what's working and making sure your school is easy to find no matter where the search starts.

#### ⑤ **Beyond Fundraising: Building a Resilient Culture of Philanthropy** *Polly Breit*

*See description under morning session.*

#### ⑥ **Governance Compendium: Practical Topics for Boards and Heads** *Cliff Kling*

This session will cover a number of important governance topics with a focus on the board-head partnership and their workload. We will explore what healthy board-head relationships look like and how to foster them. The session will examine shared decision making and explore how a strong board-head partnership can have maximum impact for the school's success. We will examine how boards and heads measure and evaluate success. The session will cover best practices for head evaluation. How schools measure and report on key performance indicators will also be discussed. Last, we will cover how boards approach determining the head's compensation. The timeline and process for contract renewals will also be reviewed.



## SPEAKER BIOS: KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



### JEFF LEAHY

Jeff Leahy has spent over 36 years in independent boarding schools. He just completed his 20th year serving as head of school of the Colorado Rocky Mountain School (a founding member of ACIS). Prior to working in independent schools, Jeff coached and played football in Finland and the Netherlands. After he returned to the United States he accepted a coaching position at Trinity College (CT) and then went on to join the Middlesex School (Concord, MA) and then The Hill School (Pottstown, PA) before moving to Colorado in 2000.



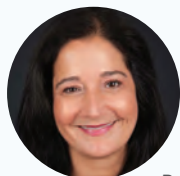
### NISHANT MEHTA

After seven impactful years as head of The Children's School in midtown Atlanta, Nishant founded MehtaCognition in spring 2020 as a leadership and management consultancy to better serve educational and non-profit leaders

and boards on their journey of innovation, inclusion, and strategic transformation. Over a career spanning two decades, Nishant has worked with schools and other organizations on issues of leadership, culture, strategy and change management, and equity and justice. He is recognized for his passionate leadership and vision in improving educational access and centering attention and intention on breaking down silos in our schools. He is a sought-after writer, presenter, and mentor for on advancing cultures of inclusion, learning, and leadership in organizations.

Nishant has served on many national, regional, and local boards, including the NAIS, NBOA, CSEE, the Asheville School, Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Advisory Board, and the Children's Museum of Atlanta Advisory Board. In 2016, Nishant began work with Sesame Workshop, the makers of the show Sesame Street, as a script advisor. Five years ago, he helped Sesame Workshop launch a pilot curriculum in elementary schools in Toda City, Japan. Nishant shares his thoughts on leadership in inclusive communities at <https://still-day-one.ghost.io>.

## SPEAKER BIOS



### DR. ANNE-MARIE BALZANO

Anne-Marie Balzano is Mission and Data's senior governance strategist. In her role, she designs learning opportunities for heads of school and boards and leads Mission and Data's Board Chair Support Program. A former teacher, head of school, associate professor, and most recently, Director of Leadership and Governance at the NAIS, she possesses a unique and multi-leveled perspective of the educational landscape and the complex demands of supporting leadership and governance development across multiple contexts. She is a trusted advisor to schools across the country, facilitating board retreats and educating boards on effective governance practices and trends, supporting resiliency in heads of school, and building a positive board culture. Independent school trustees and heads know Anne-Marie as the chief editor of The Board Chair Handbook and the host of NAIS's governance podcast, The Trustee Table.



### CINDY BLACKBURN

Cindy Blackburn is a global education leader, curriculum designer, and AI-in-learning expert dedicated to transforming education through innovative, student-centered approaches. As the Director of Learning and Development at Toddle, she designs professional learning experiences that empower educators to implement competency-based education and leverage AI for deeper learning.

Cindy is passionate about harnessing AI to enhance teaching and learning, ensuring that assessment moves beyond ranking to become a powerful, equity-driven tool for growth and student agency. She is committed to helping educators build learning environments where every student's potential is recognized, nurtured, and celebrated.



### POLLY BREIT

Polly is an Executive Vice President at CCS Fundraising and has successfully led our work in the Mountain West. Polly believes in the transformative power of philanthropy and has worked with organizations of all sizes to help them reach the most ambitious fundraising goals in their histories. Polly has effectively conducted feasibility and planning studies, developed major gifts programs, managed teams through change, built systems, and led her clients in the planning and execution of major capital and comprehensive campaigns. Polly believes trust is at the core of transformational fundraising and applies that same lens to her client partnerships.

Polly is active on the Board of Trustees at Denver Academy and chairs their governance committee. She has served two terms on the Board at KIPP Colorado Schools and was co-chair of their development committee. Previously, she was the Managing Director of Growth, Strategy, and Development at Teach For America Colorado where she led the team in raising over \$35 million.



### KATHLEEN DEAL

Kathleen Deal is an Associate Vice President at GFM|CenterTable, a leading marketing communications agency. She brings extensive experience in crafting strategic, data-driven campaigns that help schools build authentic connections with their audiences. Kathleen's expertise lies in translating complex messages into compelling digital content across platforms — from social media and websites to email and influencer marketing. Her thoughtful, audience-first approach makes her a trusted advisor for independent schools seeking to strengthen their brand and engage prospective families.

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## SPEAKER BIOS



### MONIQUE DAVIS

Monique Davis is a nationally respected consultant experienced in supporting organizations to lead with purpose, clarity, and impact. Known for her collaborative style and strategic mindset, Monique partners with nonprofits, for-profits, and educational institutions to strengthen leadership, and boards, and build cultures that drive meaningful, sustainable change.

Monique's work is rooted in the belief that engaged communities are essential to organizational success. She excels at helping teams align around mission, navigate complex challenges, and chart bold, actionable paths forward — including through thoughtful and results-driven strategic planning.

As the founder of a successful branding firm and president of a national consultancy, Monique brings deep expertise in leadership coaching, organizational psychology, and design thinking.



### AMY JOHNSON

Dr. Amy Johnston spent 33 years in the field of education and earned Master's Degrees in Educational Administration and Counseling and an Ed.D. in Character Education and Democratic School Governance from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She taught high school, served as a middle school counselor, and spent 17 years in administration. After she retired from public education, she began working at the University of Missouri in the Center for Citizenship and Character.

She spent a year with Dr. Marvin Berkowitz in his Leadership Academy in Character Education, and the knowledge gained there helped transform her school which was recognized as a National School of Character by [character.org](http://character.org).

She has shared the FHMS Character Education Journey and the importance of a healthy adult culture and teaching students social and emotional skills as an invited speaker at many prestigious conferences. She currently does consulting work, teaches, and works on program development in the area of Servant Leadership at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.



### CLIFF KLING

Cliff Kling, J.D. is Mission & Data's Senior Executive Compensation and Leadership Strategist. Cliff brings a unique background and skill set to his work having practiced public accounting with KPMG as a CPA, practiced law, served 13 years as Chief Financial Officer and General Counsel of an independent school, and served 11 years as President of two independent schools, including the fifth largest NAIS school, Gulliver Prep in Miami, FL with an enrollment of 2,230 students. Cliff has also served on numerous boards, including on their search and compensation committees.



### LAURA LOVE

Laura Love is a Founding Partner of [GFM|CenterTable](http://GFMCenterTable) and brings more than 30 years of experience in strategic communications and marketing. A longtime advocate for youth mental health and community well-being, she has been a parent at three ACIS schools and proudly served on the board. She brings a trauma-informed lens to crisis planning and response, ensuring messaging supports not only institutional trust but also the emotional needs of students, families, faculty and staff. In addition to her communications work, Laura recently earned her master's degree in social work from the University of Denver. She is a trained Court Appointed Special Advocate and has served on numerous nonprofit boards.



### MEGAN MANN

Megan Mann launched [Approach](http://Approach) in 2024 to aid independent school leadership in the journey towards continuous improvement. Megan's focus on both administrative and governance leadership levels, faculty professional development, and thought partnership makes her a valuable addition to the school team. Before founding Approach, Megan spent over five years as General Counsel and Vice President of Legal Education and Support at the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). With over 18 years of experience working in the legal, nonprofit, and education sectors, Megan has collaborated with diverse leadership teams to minimize risks and foster growth. She is also an independent school alum, parent, trustee, and the proud dog-mom to two fabulously odd rescue dogs.



### JEREMY STORY

Jeremy Story is a Partner at [GFM|CenterTable](http://GFMCenterTable) where he leads the agency's Crisis & Issues Management practice. With a background in journalism and more than two decades of experience guiding schools and other organizations through high-stakes, high-pressure crisis situations, Jeremy helps independent schools prepare for and navigate complex challenges. Whether managing sensitive internal matters or responding to public scrutiny, he works closely with school leaders to develop values-based messaging that protects reputations, maintains trust and supports the well-being of the entire school community.



### JON WOODS

Jon Woods is a Founding Partner at [GFM|CenterTable](http://GFMCenterTable), a Denver-based marketing communications agency that has worked with numerous school clients, including members of the ACIS. With decades of experience helping brands build meaningful connections with their audiences, Jon specializes in developing digital and social media marketing strategies that drive engagement and trust. His deep understanding of the digital landscape — from content creation and social media strategy to reputation management and influencer engagement — makes him a valuable partner for independent schools looking to elevate their visibility, attract families and stand out in a competitive enrollment market.