

THE Yield

Plus

The EMA Award Winners

NAIS' Debra Wilson

Supporting Academic
Pluralism

Key Takeaways from
The Ride to
Independent
Schools

..and More!



Growing STRONG

Trends and Insights That Can Elevate
Your Enrollment Efforts

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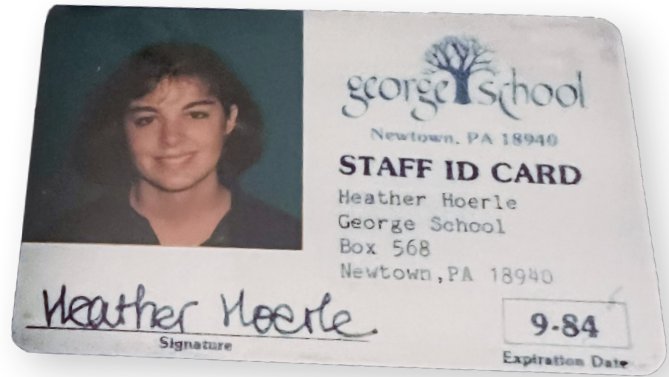
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Dear Colleagues,

As the cooler temperatures of fall roll in, I am excited that the “back to school” season is upon us. I was one of those kids who couldn’t wait to return to school each year—I loved packing my book bag, meeting new teachers, visiting the school library, and reveling in the new learning that was about to happen. Perhaps I loved school so much because I come from a family of educators. My aunts and mother were teachers and school administrators. Even as a small child, I felt the palpable excitement in my grandparents’ home as my relatives spoke about preparing for the fulsome year of learning ahead.

In 2024, everything feels different. This year, I’m wistful as it marks my last official year serving the independent school community. After going “back to school” for over 60 years, it’s hard to reconcile that it won’t continue. During a recent cleaning, I found a 40-year-old faculty ID from my early teaching days at George School. My first real job after college, George School was where I worked in admissions, taught art history, served as a student advisor, and lived with 9th-grade boarding girls. Those early experiences led to a longer career in administration, where I found deeper satisfaction in the complex work of admissions and, ultimately, associations.

Now, several decades on, it’s time to pass the baton to a new leader at EMA. I’m proud that this organization and our profession have grown with the changing demands of the times. In the last decade at EMA, we’ve built a professional community dedicated to innovation and growth. Even better, we are all bound together in service to students and families seeking transformational education—what an incredible responsibility each of us holds in helping young people on their journey, even as we make our own.



This issue of *The Yield* examines how enrollment work is being elevated (also the theme of the 2024 conference.) Please enjoy our featured article with several of your peers, learning how they elevate enrollment strategies and strengthen their communities (“Way to Grow,” page 36). *The Yield* also connected with NAIS President Debra Wilson to discuss her insights on the evolving learning landscape (“Debra Wilson,” page 46). As we face the political headwinds from now until November, please study the *Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools*, authored by Deerfield Academy (IL) Head of School, Dr. John Austin (“Framing the Issues,” page 42). This new framework offers a guide for supporting academic pluralism in independent schools—a timely and much-needed tool at this moment in time.

I can’t wait to see all 1,500+ of you at my final Annual Conference in Boston! This is the largest conference in this organization’s storied 64-year run. We have plenty to discuss and celebrate, including the largest gathering of independent school enrollment leaders in history!

I wish you a year ahead of success, continued growth, and learning,

Heather Hoerle



HEATHER HOERLE
Executive Director and CEO
Enrollment Management Association



Ransom Everglades School in Coconut Grove, Florida since 2002, guiding families through admissions and financial aid with empathy and a personal touch. She previously worked as an English teacher, advisor, and athletic coach, earning induction into the school’s Athletic Hall of Fame.

Amy’s numerous roles within EMA include serving on the Board of Trustees as a member of the Executive Committee and chairing the Member Services Committee. She is a faculty member of the Admission Training Institute (ATI) and has served on the Admission Leadership Council (ALC) and the Strategic Planning Design Team. Beyond her professional endeavors, she enjoys savoring the vibrant offerings of her native Miami, Florida, alongside her husband, Eric, and their two daughters, Abigail and Ava. They frequently attend volleyball tournaments to support their daughters and cherish time spent with their extended family.

How does this award impact you and your future work?

Amy Sayfie Zichella: I am truly humbled and extremely appreciative. This recognition inspires me to continue pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the field of enrollment management. I am so proud to receive this award for both myself and for Ransom Everglades School because ultimately, this honor is not just a personal achievement but a milestone for our entire community. It reinforces our mission and propels us forward with renewed energy and purpose.

Each year, EMA recognizes outstanding enrollment professionals for their leadership, commitment, and contributions to the field. Nominated by their peers, these dedicated enrollment professionals drive progress in the industry and set the standard for excellence. EMA is proud to spotlight this year’s five outstanding recipients. Without further ado, the 2024 EMA Awards go to...

Interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity.



AMY SAYFIE ZICHELLA
The William B. Bretnall Award
The Bretnall Award is named for distinguished educator and first association program director, William Bretnall and is given each year to a leader and educator who has made significant contributions to the field of admissions.

Amy has been the Director of Admission and Enrollment Management at her alma mater,

Of all your achievements in enrollment management, which one are you most proud of?

AZ: Creating a sustainable enrollment model with a high yield and a robust volume of applications, and effectively communicating our school’s mission and core values to all stakeholders. I take great pride in fostering a positive work environment in the Admission Office and delivering excellent customer service to families. However, my greatest pride comes from being part of a team that makes life-changing decisions for children’s educational journeys. I am immensely proud of how we have shaped generations of students who not only thrive in our school but also give back to their communities in meaningful ways because of the enriching experiences they had at Ransom Everglades School.

What’s the best career advice you’ve received?

AZ: A quote by Maya Angelou hangs in my office: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” I strive to live by this message every day, especially in my career in enrollment management. I aim for every family that walks into my office to feel valued and respected. Leading with empathy and kindness is paramount in all my admission practices and team leadership because how you make others feel is ultimately the most important thing.

And what advice would you give to others?


Stay actively engaged in the profession. Attend conferences and make the most of everything the Enrollment Management Association has to offer. The connections I’ve made through this incredible association have greatly enriched my career. We support and encourage each other, share ideas, and network to assist one another in our career pursuits. Put yourself out there—this is a special field, and if you are lucky enough to have a long career in it, you will find it immensely fulfilling in so many ways.

What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities for independent schools today?

AZ: There are numerous challenges, such as financial sustainability, access and affordability, enrollment competition, declining birth rates, evolving educational needs, and the shifting landscape of college admissions. However, there are also significant opportunities, including fostering global connections and cultural exchanges, offering personalized education, implementing sustainability initiatives, building strong communities, providing thought leadership, and reimagining college counseling.


What actions do leaders need to take now to ensure future success?

AZ: Developing strategic financial plans that incorporate diversified revenue streams and generous financial aid programs to enhance access and affordability is key. Additionally, fostering diversity and inclusion is crucial, as well as implementing effective enrollment strategies and



“My greatest pride comes from being part of a team that makes life-changing decisions for children’s educational journeys. I am immensely proud of how we have shaped generations of students who not only thrive in our school but also give back to their communities.”

AMY SAYFIE ZICHELLA



robust retention programs to keep families engaged. Most importantly, leaders need to invest in the right people, ensuring that administrators, faculty, and staff are well-suited for their roles within the school community.

The importance of enrollment management is more critical now than ever. Leaders must help prospective parents understand the value of an independent school education and why it is essential for their child’s development. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on opportunities, independent schools and enrollment leaders can position themselves for sustained success and growth in the future.



BILL LEAHY

The Everett E. Gourley Award

The Gourley Award, named for former director of admission and assistant headmaster of the Asheville School, Everett Gourley, is given each year to the educator whose interest in students and concern for colleagues is an inspiration to those who serve in admission.

Bill is a seasoned independent school professional with over three decades of experience in enrollment management leadership. Currently, he works as a consultant with The Search & Consulting Group at CS&A, where he leverages his extensive experience to recruit and coach top educational leaders for independent schools worldwide, as well as helping schools review and enhance their enrollment practices and strategies. Previously, he served as Dean of Enrollment at Phillips Exeter Academy; Director of Admissions at Phillips Academy; Dean of Admission at The Hotchkiss School; Director of Financial Aid at St. Paul's School; Director of Enrollment at Avenues: The World School; and Assistant Director of Admissions at Boston University. Today, Bill is also enjoying his new role as a grandfather to his grandson.

How does this award impact you and your future work?

Bill Leahy: I feel this award is more about the incredible people with whom I have worked over the years than it is about me. Each of us is at our best when we draw on the diverse perspectives of others. I've been surrounded by colleagues who bring

their intellect, honesty, talents, and curiosity to every discussion. Just like our classrooms, our best outcomes come when we are pushed to think and act collaboratively.

Of all your achievements in enrollment management, which one are you most proud of?

BL: My greatest pride is having played a small role in helping schools think about educational access to allow for a broad representation of students attending our schools. An excellent education comes when our classrooms are filled with students with a range of backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. Every voice matters and when students feel empowered and safe to be authentic in every moment, remarkable things happen.

What's the best career advice you've received, and what advice would you give to others?

BL: Be vulnerable and actively curious. When we are vulnerable with what we don't know, passionate about what we think we know, and open to the gift of feedback, we become highly effective. I hope that everyone can find that one person in their life who will speak truth to them and then support them as they work hard to evolve and grow.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for independent schools and your profession today? What steps should leaders take to ensure future success?

BL: Financial sustainability, educational access, and mission authenticity all come to mind. For

"An excellent education comes when our classrooms are filled with students with a range of backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. Every voice matters and when students feel empowered and safe to be authentic in every moment, remarkable things happen."

BILL LEAHY

Accept predictability.

“It is not that testing is the driving factor in our school’s student selection process, but it is part of the overall mix that allows our team to properly assess students and to better support them when they arrive on our campus.”

-Lawrence Sampleton, Associate Head of School for Enrollment Management and Financial Aid, St. Stephen’s Episcopal School (TX)



www.enrollment.org/ssat

enrollment leaders to be successful, they need to be empowered to influence conversations around all three. We must ensure our school leaders understand and are committed to the work of enrollment management. This is why I've made the move to be a search and enrollment management consultant as I want to help enrollment leaders and heads of schools with all aspects of their enrollment strategies.



JAMES EBERHART

The Rising Star Award

Developed by the Enrollment Management Leadership Council (EMLC) and a sub-committee of EMA's Board of Trustees, the Rising Star Award honors educators with ten or fewer years of experience who have distinguished themselves or their schools in enrollment management.

James has been the Director of Financial Aid and Associate Director of Admission at Chadwick School in Palos Verdes Peninsula, California since July 2021. He previously worked at Baldwin School, Miss Hall's School, St. George's School, Hyde School, and with the Peace Corps in Bulgaria. James started his career in Outdoor Education, transitioned to teaching math, and then moved into admission.

He holds a B.A. in Physics and Medieval English Literature from Wheaton College (MA), an M.A. in Private School Leadership from Columbia University's Klingenstein Center, a CAEP from AISAP, and participated in the Future Leaders Institute at the EMA Annual Conference in

Las Vegas, Nevada.

In his ninth year in enrollment management, James has focused on financial aid, reviving the FA3 group for Southern California administrators and serving on Clarity's Methodology Review Board. He mentors EMA pre-conference institute attendees, is on the AISAP Educational Advisory Board, and regularly presents at conferences and webinars. Outside of work, he enjoys wilderness adventures, baking, biking, and woodworking.

How does this award impact you and your future work?

James Eberhart: This is an incredible honor, and to have my name on the minds of those who make the nominations and selections means that I am heading in the right direction! In terms of my work moving forward, I think this will just cause me to double-down and keep going and continue to learn what I can and teach when I'm able.

Of all of your achievements in enrollment management, which one are you most proud of?

JE: Each time a family enrolls and one of the applicants I worked with becomes a leader or a changemaker in my community, I feel a pang of achievement. In addition, being selected as a Rising Star is an achievement that I'm incredibly proud of.

What's the best career advice you've received, and what advice would you give to others?

"I like to think of the job as both an enrollment manager for my school and a little bit of an educational consultant for the families in the pipeline."

JAMES EBERHART

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“Lead with integrity... [and]invest in the people around [you]. Then, take on scary projects, even if it means failing. When things get tough, you’ll have a community of experts to lean on.”

MARGARET STOLTE

JE: The best advice I have received is to remember that while the task is always to enroll the school with mission-aligned students, the goal is to make sure each student is given the best chance of success—even if that means they end up somewhere else. I like to think of the job as both an enrollment manager for my school and a little bit of an educational consultant for the families in the pipeline. A strong network with “competitor” schools makes my job easier and helps families find more success and a better fit.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for independent schools and your profession today? What steps should leaders take to ensure future success?

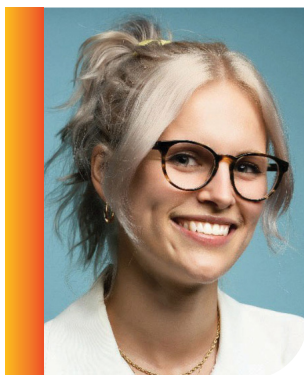
JE: I think that one of the biggest challenges continues to be the wide variety of opportunities that are available to families with charters, homeschooling, and other public options increasing each year. Future success in our industry means looking 20 years out (rather than two) regarding what skills will be necessary in the world, making sure that we don’t price ourselves out of the running for families, and finding ways to more deeply connect the academic and character parts of our teaching!

began her career at Barnard College in the Admissions Office, where she managed the student tour guide program and athletics recruitment for four years.

In 2021, Margaret transitioned to the non-profit sector with A Better Chance, an education access organization placing families of color in the nation’s top independent schools for over 60 years. At A Better Chance, she spearheaded West Coast school placement, achieving a 33% increase in the state of California through strategic, data-driven methods and relationship building. Margaret then gained experience in finance and technology at the D. E. Shaw group, leading access programming for historically underrepresented students and professionals within the industry. In 2023, she re-joined A Better Chance in an inaugural role, overseeing national recruitment and admissions efforts. Margaret thrives in collaborative environments and is passionate about empowering families with information to make the best decision for them.

How does this award impact you and your future work?

Margaret Stolte: I am honored. This award affirms my commitment to expanding opportunities for underrepresented students in highly selective spaces and strengthens my resolve to drive impactful change. Moving forward, I feel inspired to innovate and produce results within the field of access and enrollment, building coalitions and facilitating processes where students and families feel welcomed.



MARGARET STOLTE
The Rising Star Award

Margaret is an enrollment and nonprofit professional motivated by facilitating pathways for underrepresented students in highly selective education and industry. She

Of all your achievements in enrollment management, which one are you most proud of?

MS: This year, we reversed a 4-year application decline, achieving a 25% increase. I'm proud of the rigorous analysis it took to get to this point, but I'm proudest of our teamwork. Working with exceptional colleagues and leveraging unique perspectives is the ultimate reward. I come from a sports family, so results are a close second. I do love winning.

What's the best career advice you've received, and what advice would you give to others?

MS: Lead with integrity. I learned this growing up in a small town in Southern Illinois where my parents ran a small business. I'd advise others (especially those starting out) to invest in the people around them. Then, take on scary projects, even if it means failing. When things get tough, you'll have a community of experts to lean on.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for independent schools and your profession today? What steps should leaders take to ensure future success?

MS: Independent schools face challenges in affordability and accessibility; I believe this can be turned into an opportunity to enhance inclusion, belonging, and innovation. Through rigorous analysis, investment in community partners working toward educational access, and uplifting diverse perspectives within school communities, leaders

can navigate these challenges and seize opportunities for future success.

RAY CROSS

The Changemaker Award

The Changemaker Award is given to a distinguished educator who reached above and beyond to contribute to the enrollment management field in the admissions arena.

Ray Cross is the Director of Community, Equity, and Belonging at St. Andrew's School in Rhode Island. Previously, he spent over a decade as a Director of Admission/Enrollment Management. Since joining St. Andrew's full-time in 2023, Ray has also served as the chair of the culture and belonging working group on the Enrollment Management Association's Enrollment Management Leadership Council, where he has integrated DEI content into key EMA institutes.

Ray is dedicated to fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging self-exploration. He is the Student Conference Coordinator for the Association of Independent Schools in New England, overseeing the Middle School DEI Conference and the High School Students of Color Conference. His professional contributions include serving on the Erdmann Council and previously on the board of the Small Boarding Schools Association. Ray values family, integrity, empathy, and prides himself on maintaining a sunny disposition.

How does this award impact you and your future work?



● **“Having the opportunity to help shape the student body, influence school culture, and impact the lives of those that choose to join a community that informed who I am today is something I will never take for granted.”**
● **RAY CROSS**

Ray Cross: My goal as a human is and will always be to leave things better than I find them. This isn't a self-serving endeavor, but instead an act of gratitude and appreciation for opportunities I am granted and experiences I am fortunate enough to have. Being acknowledged for those efforts is never the goal, but it is evidence that my personal commitments and intentions are impactful.

Of all your achievements in enrollment management, which one are you most proud of?


RC: Returning to my alma mater, St. Andrew's School (RI), in 2018 to serve as the Director of Enrollment Management and Financial Aid was special for me. To return to a community that served me well and launched me in many ways was and is surreal. Having the opportunity to help shape the student body, influence school culture, and impact the lives of those that choose to join a community that informed who I am today, is something I will never take for granted.

What's the best career advice you've received, and what advice would you give to others?

RC: The best advice I have ever received has been to identify what role I want to play within a school community then take time to understand what it takes to do that work well. Understanding where you want to go is essential in understanding both where you are and how you will need to hold yourself accountable to growing professionally.

Without direction one can flounder a bit and get stuck taking promotions for the sake of career advancement instead of making an impact or striving for personal fulfillment.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for independent schools and your profession today? What steps should leaders take to ensure future success?

RC: The biggest challenge has been finding ways to retain the integrity of what makes independent schools unique from other educational options while adjusting to meet emerging needs. To take it a step further, doing the aforementioned while also continuing to justify rising costs is a tale as old as time. Being entrepreneurial and open to an adjusted approach will help schools continue to navigate an increasingly competitive and volatile market. 



ON OUR PODCAST

Listen to even more thoughts and insights from Bud Patel and other Heads on EMA's new Head of School Podcast co-hosted by Anne-Marie Kee, Fran Ryan, and Suzanne Walker Buck.

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Fresh Starts & Final Chapters

Insights and reflections from a first-time Head of School and a retiring seasoned leader

BY ANN CLIFFORD

Lisa Shambaugh, Head of School, The Storm King School (NY)





ask any Head of School about their career journey, and you'll discover distinctly different

experiences, decisions, and pivot points propelling them from their first day working in an independent school to the final bell before retirement. *The Yield* spoke to two Heads of School from opposite ends of the career spectrum—a new Head of School stepping into the role for the first time and a longtime school leader wrapping up a distinguished independent school career—about their career milestones and the lessons they've learned along the way.

A New Head of School Looks Forward to Growth

LISA SHAMBAUGH
Head of School at The Storm King School in
Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY

Lisa Shambaugh describes her career as a series of leaps into the unknown. Early decisions included teaching English in Japan and accepting her first admissions job at Barnard College after a conversation at a job fair. "Through the years, I have been pretty fearless in jumping into opportunities that come my way," Shambaugh says. "Whenever I have overcome any fears or self-doubt, it has led me to really beautiful experiences."

After working in higher ed and international education, a friend recommended Shambaugh for the Director of Admission position at Crystal Springs Uplands School in Hillsborough, California. Following her curiosity and desire for growth, Shambaugh says she made the move to independent schools and never

looked back as she progressed through admissions and enrollment leadership roles at three schools. "I fell in love with independent schools—and admissions and enrollment," she says. "The work is so comprehensive and touches every part of the school. I really loved the challenge of it."

Shambaugh's most recent role, Assistant Head of School for Enrollment and Strategic Projects at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Potomac, Maryland, inspired her to explore a headship role. "I came to St. Andrew's seeking growth. It was a great opportunity for me to be at a smaller school looking to grow its enrollment," she explains. "As I continued to look for professional growth and opportunities to deepen and develop my leadership abilities, Robert Kosasky, my head of school and a great mentor, encouraged me to consider a headship role."

Becoming a Head of School wasn't initially on Shambaugh's radar. In her experience, most Heads of School followed the traditional path, moving from academic roles into division leadership and then headship roles. As she explored whether a headship was right for her, Shambaugh took another leap. "I decided to apply for the NAIS Aspiring Heads Fellowship program even though I didn't know if I was an aspiring head," she says. "Being accepted into the program was such an honor, and it was an amazing experience. At the beginning, they told us to start thinking of ourselves as a school head—and that mindset shift is what led me to where I am today."

Looking at her career through a Head

of School lens gave Shambaugh new insights into how her admissions and enrollment responsibilities were good preparation for becoming a Head of School. As part of the program, she also had the chance to shadow Elinor Scully, then Head of School at The Langley School in McLean, Virginia. “Being able to spend a day with a woman Head of School and see how she managed whatever came up was a pivotal experience,” Shambaugh says. “It helped me to see how a headship might work for me. I walked away, saying, ‘I think I can do this.’”

After completing the Aspiring Heads program, Shambaugh set about building her skill set and experiences so that she could confidently step into a headship role. The preparation included attending every board and finance committee meeting and participating in a range of initiatives and committees that weren’t necessarily closely aligned with her admissions role. “Having the opportunity to be in those rooms

and understand the strategic thinking was so valuable,” she says. “Another focus was continuing to develop my leadership skills. I took advantage of an opportunity available to the leadership group at St. Andrew’s to work with an executive coach. That helped me learn more about what it means to be a leader, different leadership styles, and who I am as a leader.”

When the time came to formally pursue a Head of School position, Shambaugh felt uniquely prepared to take on all-school leadership. “As an enrollment leader, you have to know and be able to speak to every facet of an institution, including academic programs, the finance and business aspects, the culture and community,” she says. “You’re also well-versed in building relationships with all the different constituencies—students, families, faculty, staff, and board members.”

Throughout the process, she focused

on helping selection committee members understand all that an enrollment leader role encompasses and how the different experiences apply to the headship role. With the search consultant paving the way, Shambaugh emphasized her deep knowledge of school finances and the range of initiatives she had been involved in, from fundraising and building processes to school vision development and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

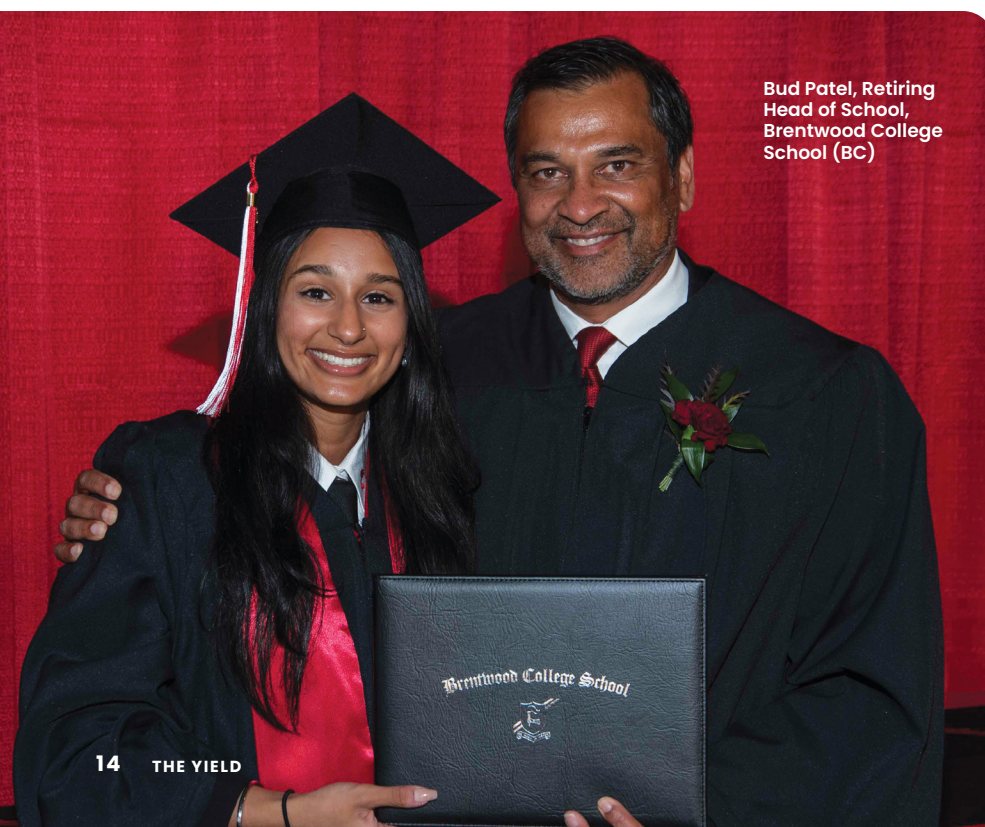
Now, stepping into her first Head of School role this fall at The Storm King School in Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY, Shambaugh is glad she took the leap. As she takes on the new challenge, she’s excited about what the future holds for her career—and the career development of other enrollment professionals. “In recent years, we’re seeing more enrollment leaders become Heads of School,” she says. “That helps other schools see what can be accomplished when you bring someone in with the specific and unique set of skills that enrollment leaders bring. I think the doors will be even more open in the future.”

A Retiring Head of School Reflects on a Serendipitous Career Journey

BUD PATEL

Retiring Head of School at Brentwood College School in Mill Bay, British Columbia, Canada

Looking back on a successful 31-year career, Bud Patel says many of his career milestones happened by chance—including his first job in education. “Initially, when I graduated from university, I wanted to be a businessperson like my father or an environmental engineer,” Patel



Bud Patel, Retiring Head of School, Brentwood College School (BC)

explains. “Then, my former school was going on a rugby tour and asked me to go because they needed staff. I took a holiday from work and went along. I just loved it. I found my purpose. It didn’t feel like work. It was an uplifting, joyous experience.”

It was just the beginning. Patel started teaching history, geography, and economics. He coached a variety of sports. He was a houseparent at a boarding school. He received his master’s degree in curriculum studies. “I was very fortunate to have people throughout my career who believed in me and put me in positions of leading—sometimes without me even knowing it,” Patel says. “Each time, I gained experience and enjoyed it more and more.”

He recalls an early career moment in his first year as Head of Student Life, which included playing “bad cop” to mete out consequences when students misbehaved. He had to suspend a student who happened to be the son of the school’s board chairman.

“I went to the headmaster and explained what had happened,” Patel remembers. “I asked if he wanted to phone the board chairman. And he said no. He trusted me to do it and sort of pushed me into the deep end. He wanted me to learn—and I did. The conversation itself wasn’t difficult. My anticipation of it was more of a challenge.”

Patel continued to take on the challenges and opportunities that came his way. At age 34, he became the Head of Senior School and Deputy Head of St. George’s School

in Vancouver, British Columbia. In 2012, he accepted the Head of School position at Brentwood College School in Mill Bay, a role he remained in until retiring in 2024.

“Moving from school to school opened my eyes to different visions and ways of doing things,” says Patel. “Sometimes, as leaders, we can get set in our ways instead of exploring other ways schools and leaders operate, adopting a different philosophy, and making decisions. It’s not about a right or a wrong way. It’s just different.”


Patel believes the most important thing an aspiring Head of School can do is to get fully engaged in their current school community. “Go to the soccer game. Go to the music performance. Visit classrooms. And just be present on a day-to-day basis in the community,” he advises. “Volunteer for things. Be curious about how things operate, not to pad your resume but to learn. Even if it’s outside the parameters of your job title, it helps you understand how the school operates and what it values.” He also points out how well-suited enrollment leaders are for headship roles. With their insight into the external market and a deep understanding of the school’s philosophy and goals, Patel sees a skill set that’s uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between the pedagogical,

programmatic side and the business side of independent schools.

Despite admitting to sometimes experiencing imposter syndrome

himself, Patel is passionate about nurturing and supporting aspiring leaders. While he acknowledges that much can be learned by observing great leaders, he believes that remaining true to yourself and developing your own authentic style is crucial. “To me, leadership is about serving a community,” he explains. “It’s about never losing sight of the fact that you’re serving others. That means being okay with making mistakes, accepting ownership of those mistakes, and being able

to be vulnerable and laugh at yourself. Leaders don’t have to be perfect. If you demonstrate that to your community, they will have the courage to try things and take risks.”

Reflecting on his career, Patel is happy he took the time to savor the moments and milestones along his journey. “Leading a school is an amazing job,” he says. “That doesn’t mean it’s all sunshine and roses. But even the toughest times are moments you appreciate because they galvanize you and let you link arm-in-arm with your team and get through it together. I tell young leaders that being a Head of School is tough—and super joyful.” 

● **“To me, leadership is about serving a community... That means being okay with making mistakes, accepting ownership of those mistakes, and being able to be vulnerable and laugh at yourself.”**
● **BUD PATEL**



A Virtual Reality

Education leaders share their perspectives on the evolving role of online learning and its benefits for students and caregivers

A CONVERSATION LED BY PRAVEEN MURUGANANDAN,

Executive Director, Admissions and Enrolment Management, Holy Trinity School

E

ven with the COVID-19 pandemic in our rearview, online schools are here to stay and provide a viable alternative to traditional in-person learning. To delve into this transformational shift, *The Yield* hosted a roundtable discussion with enrollment leaders and heads of online schools. Moderated by

Praveen Muruganandan of Holy Trinity School (ON), this conversation sheds light on the unique aspects and shared values that online learning provides. From the crucial role of family support to the ways virtual classrooms foster student connections and community, this group explores the future of education and the innovative practices that online schools are implementing to enhance student learning and development.

What do you notice to be the similarities and differences between your online school and a brick-and-mortar campus?

Helen Pereira-Raso, Holy Trinity School: One thing that is consistent across all independent schools, whether virtual or in-person, is the exceptional quality of teaching. Our teachers are dedicated to providing a holistic education, which includes not only the curriculum but also mentorship, assemblies, and other aspects

that enrich a child’s experience. These elements are integrated into our virtual communities as well.

What I’ve noticed as different from traditional brick-and-mortar schools is our instructional design. The pacing of learning in an online environment feels different. In a physical campus, you might run into someone in the hallway or know where they are after school because of your role as a coach. These everyday interactions are taken for granted in physical



LOUISA CHILDS

Head of Dwight Global Online School



KIMIA HABIBI,

Director of Admissions and Financial Aid, Stanford Online High School



HELEN PEREIRA-RASO

Head of School, Holy Trinity School



CHRISTOPHER WILSON

Head of School, Sora Schools



MAGGIE WOLLNER

Head of School, AEON School

spaces but need to be intentionally designed for online environments.

Moreover, the diversity of assessments in online learning must be considered carefully. Simply relying on tests and exams may not engage online learners effectively. Schools need to be creative and thoughtful about their evaluative methods to keep students engaged in an online setting.

Christopher Wilson, Sora Schools:

Students' interactions, their desire for friendship and connection, and the importance of synchronous, intentional community are all very similar to what I observed in traditional settings. In some ways, the virtual space can even enhance these aspects because it becomes the primary way students connect. So, those moments of connection become even more significant in a virtual environment compared to traditional settings.

Maggie Wollner, AEON School: One notable difference is the ability of online schools to offer more personalized and flexible learning experiences for students. In a physical campus with fixed rooms and rotating block schedules, personalizing learning can be challenging. It's difficult to adjust how much time students spend on each subject, or to arrange meetings with teachers. Additionally, students with significant extracurricular commitments often find online schooling appealing because it allows for more flexible schedules that deviate from traditional school hours.

In in-person schools, younger students' choices are typically guided by parents, while older students take

more control. How does this dynamic compare in online schools?

Kimia Habibi, Stanford Online High School:

Both parents and students can drive the decision to switch to online schooling, with some variation based on the student's age. Sometimes families need a change in structure due to factors like frequent moves or specific family circumstances, where the decision is often influenced by the parents' needs. However, we also receive applications where students discover our school themselves, present it to their parents, and advocate for it. In these cases, the parents support the decision because they see how the school could meet the child's needs. The change can be initiated by either the student, the parents, or a combination of both, depending on the situation.

Louisa Childs, Dwight Global Online School:

Our experience is that parents are always important partners throughout a student's educational journey. Online students do stand out as passionate and independent learners who often have made their own choice to learn online to gain more flexibility to pursue a passion outside of school or to pursue an academic program that is not otherwise accessible. Online students tend to be ready to demonstrate agency in their own learning from an early age.

How do you assess students? What does the data say about student progress and success in an online setting?

Pereira-Raso: My vision for assessment in online schools is similar to

that of traditional brick-and-mortar campuses. Assessments should be flexible, reflect learners' strengths, and also challenge them. We aim to assess and design around competencies that are transferable beyond disciplines. One advantage of online schools is the ability to access a diverse range of experts and resources, which enriches projects and collaboration opportunities. COVID-19 has also accelerated the use of virtual guest speakers, though we are still adapting our assessment and evaluation practices to fully leverage these new opportunities.

Ultimately, our goal is to provide data that is timely and reflective of students' competencies, incorporating complex and expert-driven assessments which might be more challenging in a face-to-face setting.

Childs: As a school chosen to pilot the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program online, we were pleased to see our first testing cohort perform above world averages and in line with Dwight's bricks-and-mortar campuses around the globe. Online learning is making this prestigious program available to students who could not otherwise benefit due to pre-professional commitments, remote geographical locations, or illness—and the data shows that these students are progressing and succeeding.

Wollner: This question is crucial because we hear from families about whether online schools can deliver the same academic excellence as brick-and-mortar campuses. At AEON, we have five years of data comparing our online and brick-and-mortar



“One thing that is consistent across all independent schools, whether virtual or in-person, is the exceptional quality of teaching.”

Helen Pereira-Raso,
Holy Trinity School



campuses. We use a multifaceted approach to assessments, including classroom data, standardized assessments like ISAs and SSATs, and internal benchmarks in math and language. Our data shows that online students perform as well or better in these assessments. This data reassures families about academic outcomes, demonstrating that the rigor of our online program is on par with or exceeds that of traditional campuses. Families are more concerned about the overall school experience for their child. Our data supports that online students achieve strong academic results, and we also focus on supporting their social and emotional development.

We recently participated in the Challenge Success studies and found that our online campus had high scores in areas like having trusted adults to speak with. This reflects our intentional efforts to build strong relationships in an online setting, despite the lack of organic in-person interactions.

There’s a significant difference between pandemic-era online learning and intentionally designed online programs. How are you addressing these challenges and helping families reimagine education?

Wollner: There are two main hurdles. First, many parents haven’t experienced online education themselves, so they lack a mental model of what it looks like and may have concerns about mental health, social isolation, or rigor. Overcoming these concerns requires effective communication, reporting, and visibility to shift percep-

tions. Second, parents often equate online learning with the rapid shifts made during the pandemic, which were not designed for long-term online education. Our programs are intentionally designed for online delivery, and this distinction is important for families to understand. We need to highlight how our intentionally built online schools differ from the emergency remote learning experiences many had during the pandemic.

Childs: We’ve seen a high level of interest in our online offerings, which is less about convincing parents to switch from brick-and-mortar schools and more about presenting them with a range of options. For many parents, this choice is needed. The key is that students who thrive in online settings are those who are motivated and want to be there. Our students, who come from diverse backgrounds including traveling families and those with health issues, find strong connections and friendships through our online community, even if they meet in person only occasionally.

What is the value proposition of an online school?

Habibi: Online schools can vary significantly in terms of structure, size, and curriculum delivery. Most of the schools represented here are more structured, but many families still assume that online learning is less structured. The pandemic has made people more familiar with online learning, but I’ve spent a lot of time explaining how online classes work through video conferencing. Now, families need to consider how much

structure and rigor are appropriate for their students. Online schools offer varying levels of flexibility depending on the model. One major benefit is the ability to stay in their home context and community while connecting with a global network. This allows students to contribute their experiences actively within their community, making online education a compelling option.

Childs: If I had to summarize the value proposition in a phrase, I'd say it's about delivering a highly personalized form of education without the constraints of traditional time and space boundaries. It's about bringing the world to your student online.

Wilson: The virtual environment allows students to take their education with them and integrate other activities into their learning. For example, if a family travels to France for a sabbatical, they can continue their education and use the local environment as part of their learning experience. This flexibility enhances the educational experience and benefits the entire community. I often talk about how, traditionally, school is seen as a place. What we're striving to do is make school an experience, which represents a shift in how we view education.


How important is family fit in an online setting when selecting students?

Pereira-Raso: The family needs to support their child in a way that allows for agency and flexibility. It's not about monitoring every moment of the day but understanding that learning will look and feel different. The family's role is to help their child adapt

to this new way of learning. Family fit is just as important in online schools as it is in brick-and-mortar schools. It's about being a support structure for the learner on their journey.

Wollner: Aligning expectations about the school experience is crucial. For younger learners, the role of the parent in their education is significant. With online learning, you won't have children in back-to-back Zoom classes for extended periods, so it's important to have a plan in place. There should be a dedicated adult in the household supporting the child's learning. Open conversations and parent education are key. Parents are often on a learning curve themselves and need support to adapt. This partnership is closer and more interactive than in traditional schools. Considering both the student's and the parent's fit for the school is essential.

How can we work together to support enrollment and retention efforts across all independent schools?

Wilson: We're all in the business of attracting students to our schools, but we're also part of a broader movement to redefine what school can be. Virtual education is an option that can benefit many families, and it's important to raise awareness of this. We should share information and explore options with our brick-and-mortar colleagues to provide families with more choices. This collaborative approach can help address various needs, whether for temporary or permanent relocations, and enrich the educational opportunities available to families. 



"It's about delivering a highly personalized form of education without the constraints of traditional time and space boundaries. It's about bringing the world to your student online."

LOUISA CHILDS,
Dwight Global Online School



Want to learn more about online schooling or have a student interested in the online school experience? Contact publications@enrollment.org to connect with an online school expert.

Accept simple.

"I have been through college admissions with an older child, and the level of stress on my fifth grader was substantially higher than on a high school Junior..."

-Parent, *The Ride to Independent Schools, 2023-2024*

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A Closer Look

Seven key takeaways from the 2023–2024 edition of *The Ride to Independent Schools*



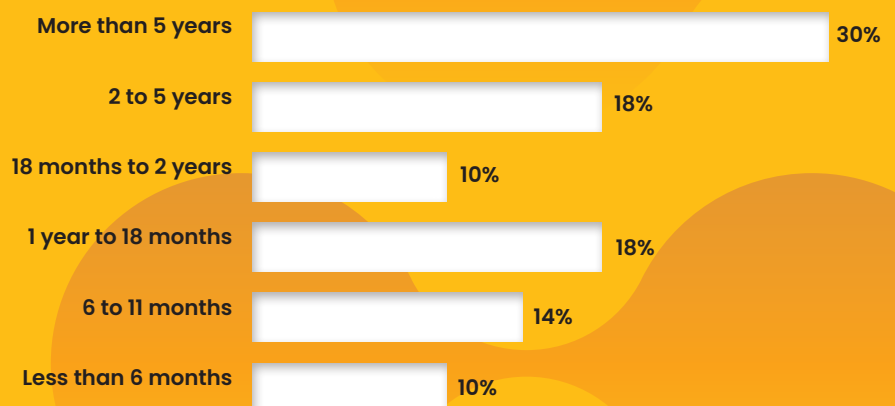
The Ride to Independent Schools (The Ride) provides an in-depth look into the experiences, motivations, and decision-making processes of over 3,000 families navigating the journey of independent school enrollment. The 2023-2024 edition is EMA's fourth iteration of the report, with previous studies conducted in 2014, 2017, and 2020. The report begins with an overview of the parent/caregiver survey respondents and their student applicants. Important insights can be found just within these data. Thirteen

subsequent sections offer analysis, each considering a critical aspect of the inquiry to enrollment journey. As families weigh their options in a competitive educational landscape, this report highlights the pivotal role of academic programs, affordability, authentic engagement, and the influence of enrollment management teams. It also addresses the stress involved in the application process, the importance of marketing and outreach, and the persistence of applicants' focus on their top choice school. Here, we highlight seven key takeaways from *The Ride*.

A Long and Winding Road

Most families have considered the possibility of an independent school for longer than a single admission cycle, with the average window being 18 months to two years. This figure varied widely, with 10% considering it for less than six months and 30% for more than five years. Enrollment management offices should consider these data as a call to action, looking beyond the current admission cycle and planning long-term engagement for families who have expressed interest years before a potential application.

Length of Time Family Considered an Independent School



Top Factors Considered During the Independent School Search*



* Respondents were asked to select up to three factors.

Motivation for Considering Independent Schools

Families consider independent schools for various reasons, driven by both head and heart. When parents/caregivers were asked to choose their top three factors about the independent school where their student applicant is enrolling, “access to high-quality academic programs”

was identified as the top factor by a wide margin. Findings about the role of academics raise a point of caution. According to senior enrollment professionals in the 2023 *State of the Industry Report (SOTI)*, “access to high-quality academic programs” was not listed as one of the top factors that schools are promoting in their marketing. The top five marketing focal points from SOTI are highlighted in orange.

Although we do not know what causes this perception gap, it is possible that enrollment leaders are trying to differentiate their schools within a peer group that they perceive as all offering high-quality academic programs. The potential of enrollment leaders not being academics-forward enough in their messaging risks leaving families to make their own assumptions about a school's programming.

It's My Life: Locus of Control in Decision Making

The decision-making process in choosing an independent school heavily involves the student applicant. Eighty percent of survey respondents shared that the student applicant had influence “to a great extent” or “to a very great extent” in where to apply. This figure rose slightly to 82% having a similar influence on where to enroll. Student agency was even more prevalent among

upper school applicants, boarding school applicants, and families applying for financial aid. Understanding the locus of control within individual families helps schools tailor their engagement strategies. Enrollment offices must recognize the critical role of student preferences and ensure that their communications and interactions resonate with both the students and their families.



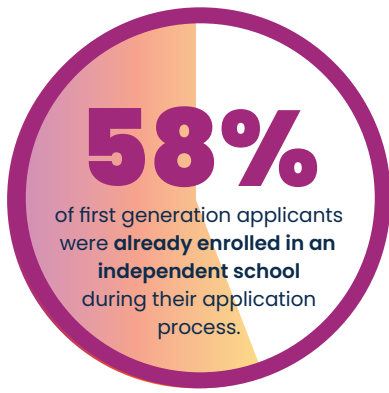
80%

of parents/caregivers said their student applicants had influence “to a great extent” or “to a very great extent” in **where to apply**



82%

of parent/caregivers said their student applicants had influence “to a great extent” or “to a very great extent” in **where to enroll**

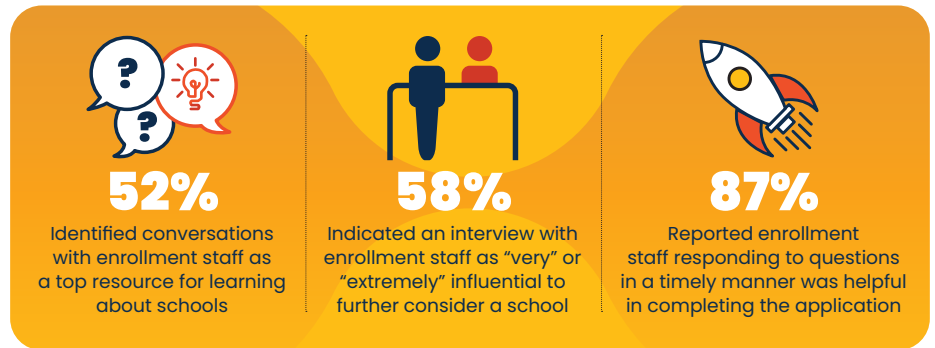


Checking Assumptions about “First-Generation Applicants”

Enrollment professionals need to be mindful of their biases and engage with each unique family in front of them rather than assuming an understanding of their needs. A deeper dive into “first-generation families” illustrates this point. Thirty-two percent of the applicants represented in *The Ride* had neither a parent nor a grandparent attend an independent school (one definition of first-generation applicants). It would be a mistake to assume that these families were universally unfamiliar with independent schools. More than half of first-generation applicants by this definition were already enrolled in an independent school during their application process. Almost four of five student applicants (78%) in this cohort had at least one sibling who had been enrolled in an independent school. It is also true that a crucial cohort of first-generation applicants and their families are unfamiliar with independent schools. Enrollment offices and the broader school community should put forth great effort to discern the needs of each family, including differences among first-generation applicant families.

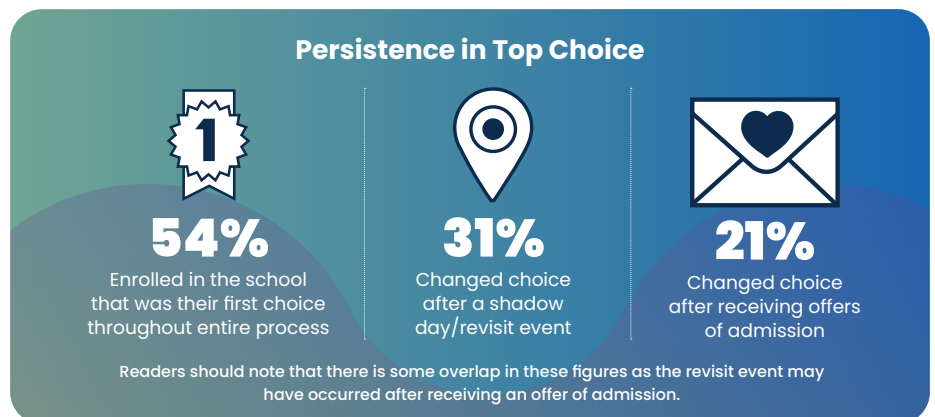
Role of Enrollment Management Teams

Enrollment management is a team sport. It takes the collective effort of the entire school community to attract, admit, yield, enroll, and re-enroll a student each year from first inquiry to graduation. Enrollment management professionals are on the front lines for many of these efforts. Analysis of *The Ride* survey data indicates that enrollment office staff are pivotal in helping families navigate the admission process. It is critical that schools provide adequate organizational capacity—in staffing headcount, funding, professional development, and technical resources—to both enroll mission-aligned students and produce the net tuition revenue necessary to drive a school’s resource engine.

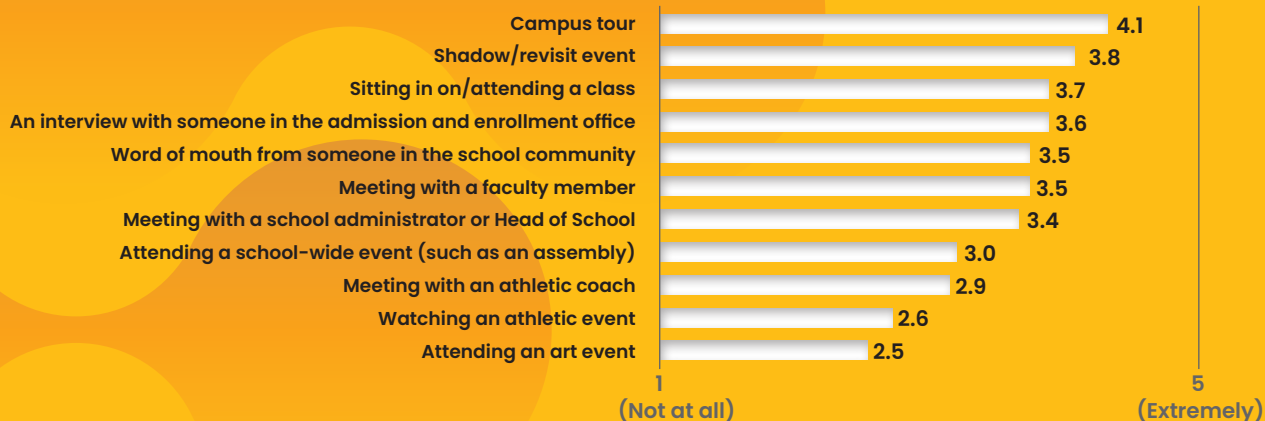


It is Good to Start in the Lead...

It is hard to change the minds of student applicants and their parents/ caregivers. About half of incoming students enroll at their top choice school. Just under one-third of respondents changed their first choice after a shadow day/revisit event, while over one-fifth did so after receiving admission offers. Some changes may be due to a “bad” shadow day/revisit event, but others might reflect that another school exceeded expectations. Identifying a poor fit during a revisit can help reduce future attrition and ensure better alignment before enrollment.



Level of Influence of Factors on the Decision to Further Consider a School



ARI BETOF, EDD, MBA

Co-Founder & Partner at Mission & Data



SARAH ENTERLINE ROCH, PHD

Institutional Research Consultant at Mission & Data and Director of Institutional Research at St. Mark's School (MA)



RACHEL GORSKY

Institutional Research Consultant at Mission & Data and Director of Institutional Research and Data Analytics at Gilman School (MD)

The survey design, analysis, report, and interactive dashboard for the 2023-2024 edition of The Ride was a collaboration between the Enrollment Management Association and Mission & Data. Since 2021, Mission & Data has been EMA's strategic partner leveraging data and analysis in support of EMA's members. Learn more about Ari, Sarah, and Rachel at missionanddata.com

...But Every Step of the Journey Matters

Authentic engagement moves the needle. Of families enrolling in independent schools, almost two of three survey respondents (64%) found open houses/events on campus “most helpful” compared to other offerings. Almost all (99%) of these families went on at least one campus tour and almost two of three families (57%) attended at least one shadow/revisit event. Authenticity should not be an excuse for a lack of planning. The school community should be well-trained and thoughtfully prepared while remaining true to its organizational identity. Time spent on campus directly informs how families experience the day-to-day life of a school. This is a crucial point for enrollment leaders, especially given the value that families place on the academic program. Although information about academics can, and should, be shared with prospective families throughout the admission process, there is nothing comparable to being on campus and seeing the faculty and students “in action” during a shadow or revisit experience. The 18% of enrollment leaders who reported in the 2023 SOTI eliminating or never hosting revisit or post-acceptance events should take careful heed of these findings.

Bringing it All Together

The Ride is one of EMA's two flagship reports, with the other being the *State of the Independent School Enrollment Industry Report (SOTI)*. By comparing the findings with previous editions of *The Ride*, and by combining *The Ride* data with that found in the 2023 SOTI, EMA provides members with a multi-layered perspective, offering insights for enrollment professionals.



EMA'S ENROLLMENT SPECTRUM PODCAST 2023-2024

[SEASON 3.EPISODE 5]

Host Christina Dotchin is joined by Ari Betof and Sarah Enterline Roch to discuss the 2023-2024 edition of *The Ride to Independent Schools*.



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The Standard Application Online

Unlocking Actionable Insights from the 2023–2024 Standard Application Online (SAO)

BY ARI BETOF AND KELSEY VROOMAN,
Co-Founders and Partners, Mission & Data



The Standard Application Online (SAO) is the most widely used common application among independent schools.

Each of the past three years, EMA and Mission & Data have collaborated to produce a trend analysis of SAO applications as of April 30. Our mid-cycle update offers the earliest available analysis of in-process application and enrollment trends across a large cohort of day and boarding schools. With the benefit of additional time, we also create a more complete view of the enrollment cycle for the application period between September 1 and June 30. Comparisons in this article to prior years examine the same September to June time period.

This analysis is intended to help schools locate their unique enrollment picture within a broader market landscape for the year that is concluding and provide actionable insights informing planning for the year ahead.



ARI BETOF, EDD, MBA

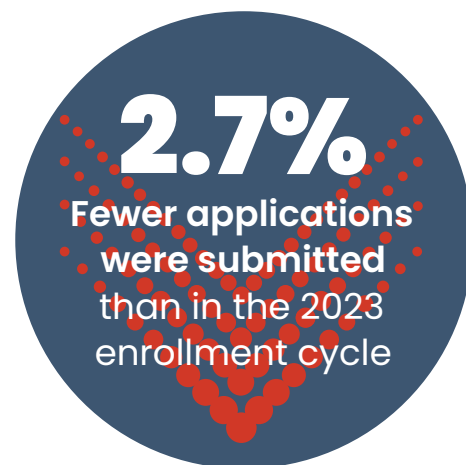
Co-Founder & Partner at Mission & Data



KELSEY VROOMAN

Learn more about Ari and Kelsey at missionanddata.com

Mission & Data has served as EMA's strategic data partner since 2021, helping EMA maximize member benefits through flagship reports like the State of the Independent School Enrollment Industry Report and The Ride to Independent Schools, flash surveys, webinars, facilitating the EMA Data Advisory Group, and more. Ari Betof is also the co-host of EMA's Impossible Questions Podcast.



2024 SAO Application Volume

The 2024 enrollment cycle was the second highest of the past seven years and only eclipsed by last year's high water mark, despite a modest 2.7% decline in total SAO application volume.

High school applications showed a noteworthy bifurcation with declines in application volume in 9th and 10th grades (-4.4% and -5.6% respectively) and an increase in 11th

grade (+4.3%), 12th grade (1.3%), and post-graduates (5.3%) compared to 2023.

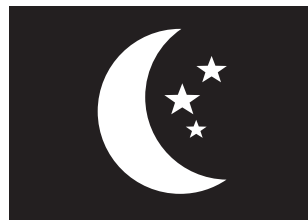
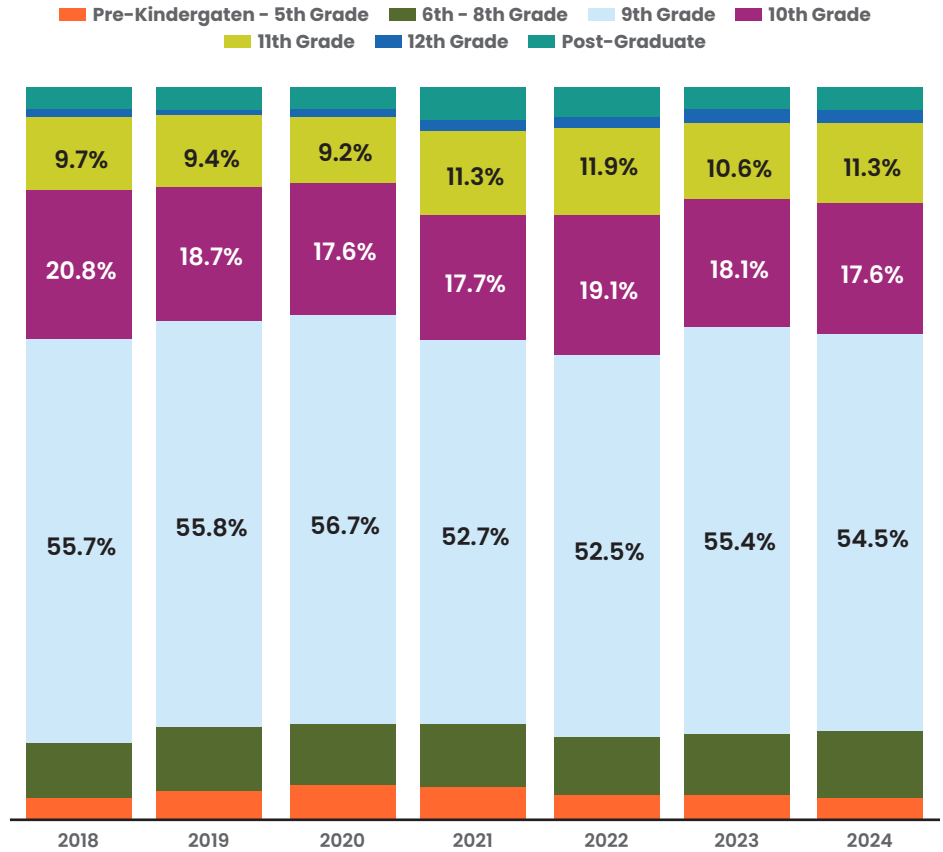
Applications for 9th grade continue to be more than half of total SAO volume, with applications for 9th, 10th, and 11th grades representing 83.4% of the total pool.

IN 2024
27.5%
 More 12th grade and post-graduate applicants compared to 2020

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, 11th grade applications represented a higher portion of the pool with a jump from 9.2% in 2020 to 11.3% of total volume in 2021. This increase has persisted with the 11th grade application volume in 2024 remaining at a rate approximately 2% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

There was also an explosion of post-graduate applications in 2021 and 2022. This figure fell in 2023 but shows signs of stabilizing in 2024. In contrast, applications for 12th grade have grown each year since 2018. Applications for 12th grade and post-graduates, when considered together, have remained well above pre-pandemic levels with 27.5% more 12th grade and post-graduate applicants in 2024 compared to 2020.

2024 APPLICATION VOLUME BY GRADE

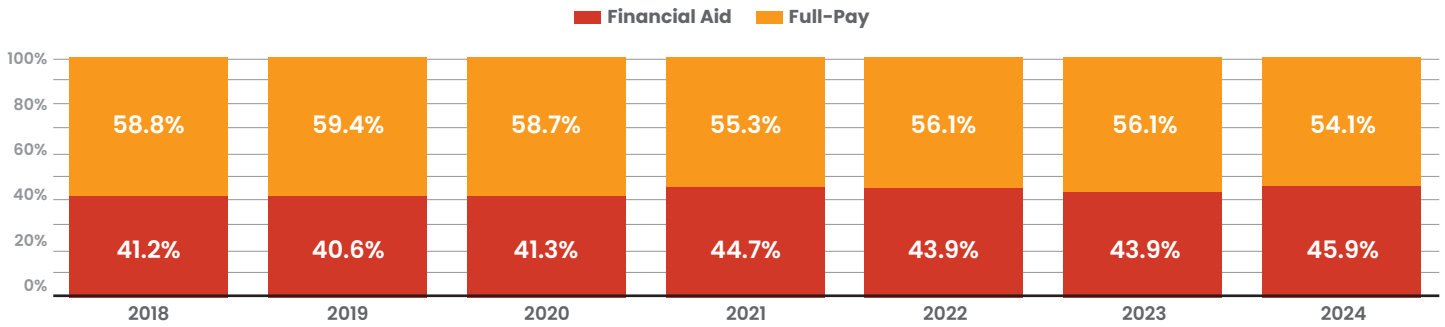


-2.2%
 Decline in Boarding applications from 2023



-4.6%
 Decline in Day applications from 2023

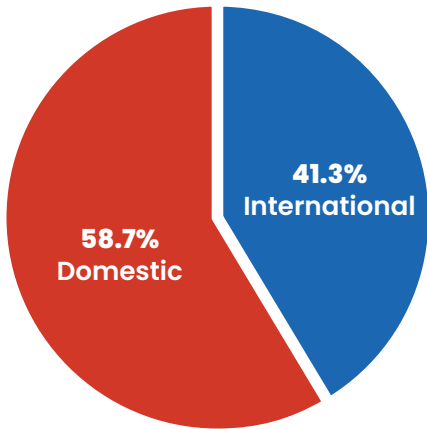
Boarding applications declined... Boarding applications declined -2.2% from 2023, while day applications saw a greater decline of -4.6%. Despite a step backwards, boarding applications remain strong. This enrollment cycle is the second highest boarding figure of the past seven years. Day applications in 2024 were the lowest volume since 2018.



Financial Aid The need for financial aid continues to grow. Although not consistent in every year, a clear trend over the past seven years shows applicants also applying for financial aid representing a greater portion of the total pool. This percent increase in the pool may seem small, but it is the

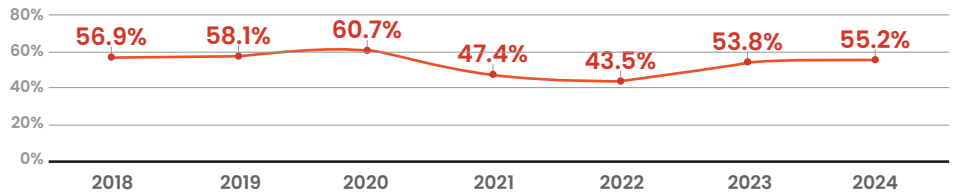
manifestation of an eye-catching growth in application volume. Since 2018, there has been a 35.2% increase in the number of SAO enrollment applications associated with a financial aid application. During the same period, the pool of full-pay applications increased by a more modest 11.5%.

35.2%
 Increase in financial aid applications since 2018 vs. 11.5% increase in full-pay applications



Domestic and International Applications SAO domestic applications (applications to schools within the country of residence) decreased 2.8% year-over-year while international applications (applications to schools outside of the country of residence) declined 2.7%. Domestic applications have continued to show volatility over the past four cycles. International application volume remains high, despite the decline from 2023, and is the second highest figure since 2018. The overwhelming majority of domestic applications are from the United States applying to U.S. schools.

Percent of International Applications Submitted from China

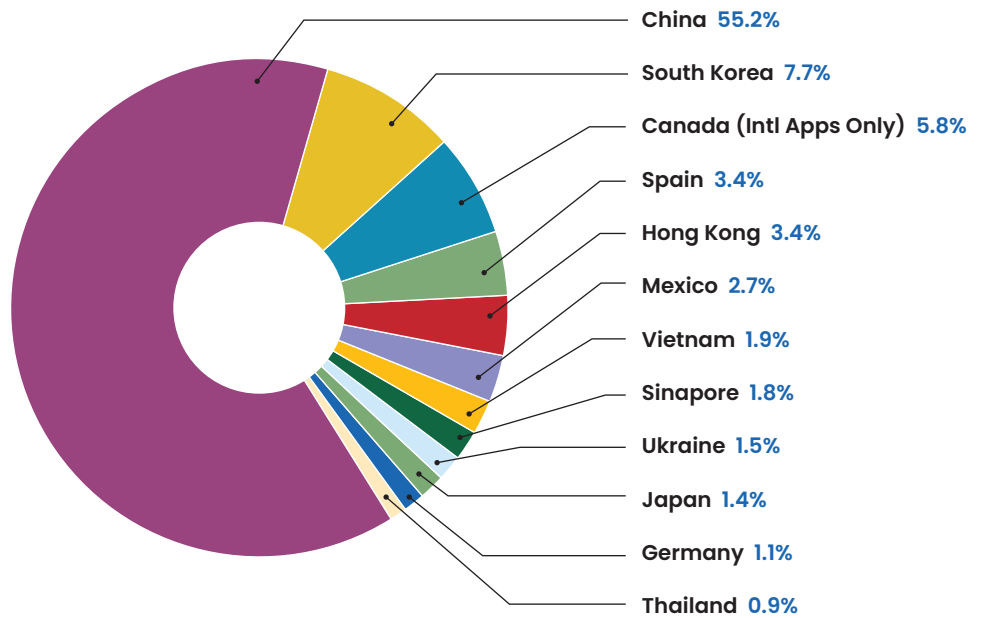


Geographic diversity has been a widespread, persistent discussion for almost two decades among boarding schools and day schools with homestay programs. Mainland China continues to far outpace other countries when considering applicants

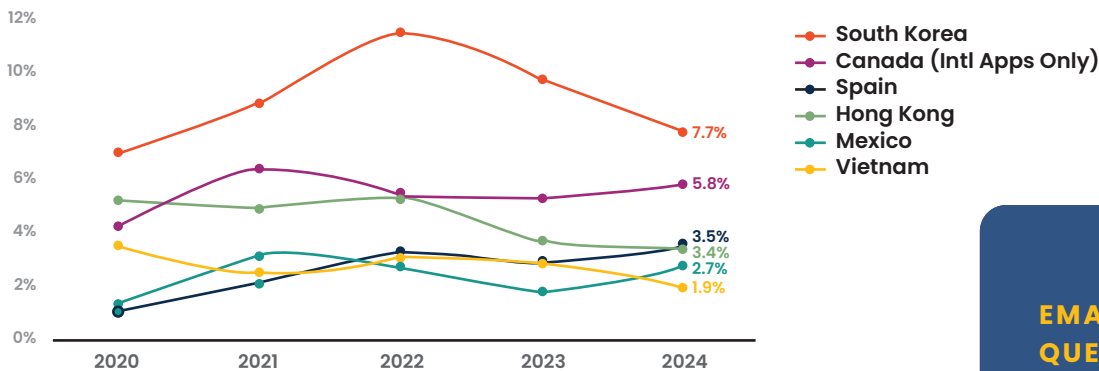
applying to EMA member schools outside of their home country. After a large decline in 2021 and an additional drop in 2022, applications from China have continued to rise for a second year and in 2024 represented 55.2% of the international pool.

Countries From Which the Most International Applications Originated in 2024

In contrast to the rebound from mainland China, applications from South Korea showed continued softness falling from 11.4% of the international pool in 2022 to 9.7% in 2023 and further to 7.7% in 2024. Canada, the next highest country by international volume, grew in total applications and retained its percentage of the pool during the same period.



Percent of International Applications Submitted from...



Spain, Hong Kong, Mexico, and Vietnam round out the next four positions. Both Spain (+17.5%) and Mexico (+47.4%) gained in application volume in 2024, driving their growth as a fraction of the international application pool compared to 2023. Application volume declined for South Korea (-22.7%), Hong Kong (-11.0%), and Vietnam (-36.8%). Vietnam fell from representing 2.9% of the pool in 2023 to 1.9% of the pool in 2024.

Revisiting a refrain from last year—the independent school enrollment landscape continues to be dynamic. Savvy leaders can mitigate the impact of headwinds and capitalize on changing market conditions by harnessing actionable insights. This mission-driven, data-informed strategic leadership has tangible benefits for independent schools and the students they serve. We look forward to beginning a new enrollment cycle of supporting EMA members at EMA's Annual Conference in Boston. [Y](#)

Note: The April reports and this article include only SAO applications. Trends related to schools changing application platforms or using multiple or separate application channels could impact results across years.



EMA'S IMPOSSIBLE QUESTIONS PODCAST

How do enrollment offices offer concierge admission at scale? How do you drive strategic change from inside your school? Listen to EMA's Impossible Questions podcast series, hosted by Ari Betof and Christian Donovan, to gain insight about some of the most difficult questions you may face in the year ahead. Facing an impossible question? Reach out to our co-hosts and your question may appear in an upcoming episode.

Shifting from 'Fit' to 'Match'

Rethinking admissions language for a more inclusive future

BY ROHAN M. ARJUN



In the ever-evolving landscape of education and admissions, language plays a pivotal role. The words we choose to describe the admission process shape our perceptions, values, and ultimately, the outcomes we seek. For years, the term “fit” has been deeply entrenched in discussions surrounding finding the right school community for a broadly diverse pool of students. However, it is time for enrollment professionals to make a paradigm shift, reevaluating the language they use and replacing “fit” with “match” to better serve students, families, and educational institutions alike.

The Evolution of “Fit”

As we delve into the merits of adopting “match” as our guiding term, it’s essential to acknowledge that “fit” served an important purpose in its time starting in higher education in the late 20th century, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. It emerged as a response to the notion that attending a “top-tier” school, based solely on name recognition, rankings, and perceived reputation, was the only path to success. “Fit” encouraged families to look beyond these traditional markers of prestige and consider other factors when

choosing a school for their children. It highlighted the idea that the right school should align with a student’s unique needs, interests, and values to best ensure student achievement.

The Problem with “Fit”

While the intention behind promoting “fit” was progressive, the term has since become antiquated and has the potential to perpetuate biases and misconceptions in the admissions process. Let us explore the issues associated with the term “fit” and why it’s time for a change:

1 Subjectivity and Bias: Assessing an applicant’s “fit” is inherently subjective and can introduce bias into the admissions process based on the strength either of the applicant and/or their school. Admissions officers and interviewers may unknowingly bring their own implicit biases into the evaluation, leading to inconsistent judgments.

2 Cultural Bias: The concept of “fit” may unintentionally favor applicants who share similar cultural backgrounds, experiences, or values with those making the admission decisions or with the majority culture of the school. This can disadvantage students from diverse backgrounds and perpetuate a lack of diversity in educational institutions.

3 Stereotyping: “Fit” can encourage stereotyping, where applicants are evaluated based on preconceived notions

of an ideal candidate. This can lead to overlooking the potential of students who do not conform to these stereotypes.

4 Lack of Inclusivity: A rigid focus on “fit” can maintain the school’s status quo. It may discourage the inclusion of individuals with unique perspectives and backgrounds, depriving schools of the richness that diversity brings.

5 Discrimination: In some cases, “fit” has been used to mask discriminatory practices. Decision-makers might exclude applicants based on factors like race, gender, age, or disability, all under the pretext of not being a “good fit.” The result is the school does not stretch or grow.

Given these shortcomings, it is evident that “fit” is no longer the ideal framework for admission decisions that advance and enhance our institutions.

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Embracing “Match”

The term “match” represents a paradigm shift that can address many of the issues associated with “fit.” Here’s why enrollment professionals should consider making the switch in language and mindset:

1 Objectivity: “Match” criteria are more objective than “fit.” They allow admissions professionals to focus on measurable qualifications and experiences that align with specific programming. This shift reduces the risk of subjective judgments.

2 Inclusivity: “Match” emphasizes qualifications and skills, reducing the potential for implicit bias that often accompanies assessments of perceived “fit.” It actively promotes

- “One of the most compelling reasons to embrace “match” is that it implies a two-way street, much like the interaction between schools and families during the admission process.”

diversity and inclusion by looking beyond surface-level characteristics while at the same time honoring the personal narratives of applicants.

3 Fairness: A “match” approach ensures that all applicants are evaluated based on the same set of criteria especially in the current market. This leads to a fairer and more transparent admissions process, reducing the potential for discrimination or favoritism.

4 Alignment with Goals: By focusing on how well an applicant’s qualifications and aspirations match the specific program, admissions professionals can better align their decisions with the institution’s goals. This is a more reliable way to ensure the school can serve the student well.

5 Efficiency: A “match” approach streamlines the admissions process by reducing subjective deliberations during Admissions Committee, which can be inefficient and at times inappropriate. Instead this shift directs attention to relevant qualifications and experiences. This makes it easier for admissions professionals to make efficient and effective decisions.

6 Better Outcomes: Admitting individuals who are a strong “match” for the school and who the school is a strong match for will lead to better academic, social, extracurricular, and emotional performance, contributing to overall success. “Fit” is an admission tool. “Match” is an enrollment tool that aids retention.

In essence, shifting from “fit” to “match” in admissions decisions can lead to a fairer, more objective, and more efficient process. It better aligns with the goals and values of institutions, while simultaneously promoting diversity and inclusivity.

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The Two-Way Street of “Match”

One of the most compelling reasons to embrace “match” is that it implies a two-way street, much like the interaction between schools and families during the admission process. Families often approach school selection with the mindset that they are interviewing schools just as much as schools are interviewing them especially in the

“Shifting our language from “fit” to “match” offers a host of benefits, from increased objectivity and inclusivity to fairer, more efficient processes.”



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current market. This perspective is crucial to finding the right educational home for a student.

When we use the term “match,” we encourage families to approach the process from the perspective of finding the best school for their student, where they will thrive and leave as the best version of themselves. This approach shifts the focus away from the idea that students need to fit into a predefined box and assimilate into an existing school culture. Instead, it acknowledges that students are not empty vessels, but are unique individuals with a wealth of experiences, perspectives, and identities to contribute. At its essence, “match” increases yield and retention.

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Creating Space for Individuals

The shift from “fit” to “match” signals a commitment to creating space for students to bring their authentic selves to the school community. It recognizes that students are not finished products, and schools should not be either. Students should have the opportunity to shape their educational experience through their individuality and unique qualities. They should be encouraged to put to use the incredible attributes that make them stand out, attributes that we believe will enhance our school communities.

Using “match” as the guiding principle in admissions reflects a mutual commitment. Families seek schools where their students can flourish and find a sense of belonging, and schools seek students who are mission-ap-

propriate, students they can fully support, and students who can show up authentically in the community each day. In this way, students can do their best, bring their best, and be stretched to become their best selves before they leave our communities to go into the world and to lead lives of consequence.

In the world of enrollment and admissions, words matter. They shape our values, perceptions, and, ultimately, the experiences of students and families. While “fit” once served a valuable purpose in encouraging families to look beyond superficial markers of prestige, it’s time to acknowledge its shortcomings and embrace a new paradigm: “match.”

Shifting our language from “fit” to “match” offers a host of benefits, from increased objectivity and inclusivity to fairer, more efficient processes. It aligns with the two-way nature of the admissions process, encouraging families and schools to seek mutually beneficial partnerships. Most importantly, it creates space for the uniqueness of each student, allowing them to thrive and contribute fully to their school communities.

As enrollment professionals, it is our responsibility to lead this linguistic shift and redefine the way we talk about the admission process. By doing so, we can ensure that the right students find the right schools, where they can learn, grow, and shape the future as their true, authentic selves. In this way, we will truly prepare them to live lives of consequence and make a lasting impact on the world. **Y**

This score report is our second update in the last five years. It was important, post-COVID, to determine what additional information would be useful on the SSAT score report, given the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which showed significant declines in reading and math scores among fourth and eighth graders since the onset of the pandemic.

What specific changes and updates have been made to the score report?

There are two significant changes to the SSAT score report. First, more subtopics are now provided for the quantitative and reading sections. Previously, the SSAT score report grouped quantitative scores into just two subtopics: Number Concepts/Operations and Algebra/Geometry/Other. In the new iteration, there are now five subtopics: Algebra, Geometry and Measurement,

Data Analysis, Numbers and Operations, and Reasoning. Similarly, the reading score report was previously divided into two subtopics: Reading Main Idea/Content and Reading Higher Order/Interpretation. The updated report expands this to five subtopics: Identifying Text Details and Structure, Comprehending Language Use, Determining Main Idea, Interpreting and Inferring Meaning, and Understanding.

Can you explain how the new reporting will provide enhanced data and insights compared to the



Updated SSAT Score Reporting

The SSAT's updated score reporting was released in August 2024



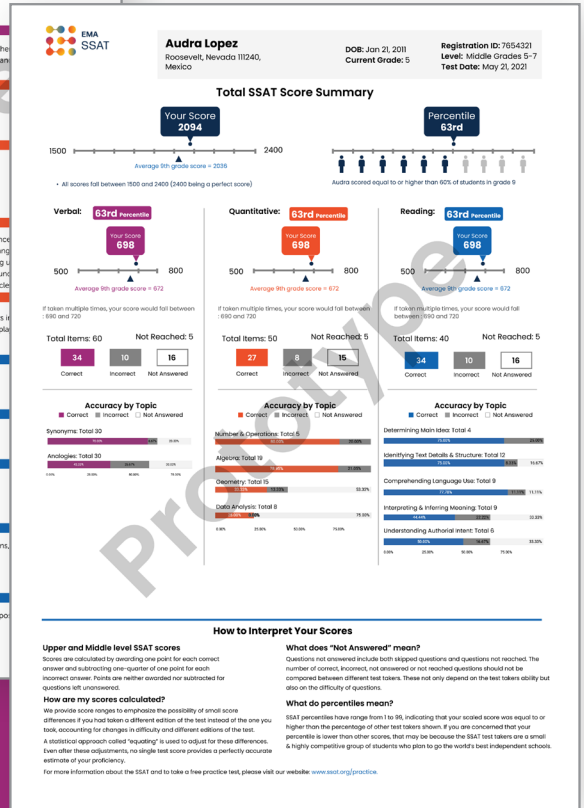
Admissions file readers will now gain even more insight into students' strengths, weaknesses, and academic readiness with the release of the updated SSAT score report. EMA's psychometrics and product technology teams worked collaboratively to create a report that EMA hopes will provide valuable information to enrollment professionals. Dr. Keith Wright, EMA's Vice President of Psychometrics and Assessments, walks us through the report's updates.

What motivated the decision to update the SSAT score reporting?

EMA has always been an organization seeking to add value to the admission process. It is our goal to continually improve and enhance our assessment products to meet the needs of schools, students, and families. At EMA, we are committed to being part of the transformational journeys that begin within the admission process. We recognize the power of our enrollment leaders to make decisions that change the lives and trajectories of the young people admitted to our institutions.

previous SSAT score reports?

The score report now includes a second page that provides a more detailed interpretive analysis of how a student performed in these more granular subtopics. For instance, if a student shows some weakness in geometry, the score report may suggest strategies to improve the student's skills, such as "deepening understanding of geometric concepts by practicing problems involving angles in polygons and angles created by parallel and intersecting lines." This additional information offers families a more practical educational assessment of the child's potential weaknesses, beyond just receiving a score for admissions.




The updated SSAT score report will help admission file readers gain even more knowledge about the candidate's skills and academic readiness.

How do you envision admission officers utilizing the more detailed skill assessments during the admission process?

Admissions professionals can use the additional information to facilitate a deeper discussion in committee meetings or with the prospective student. For example, if a quantitative score is not as high as expected, the report might reveal that the student struggles with geometry questions due to a lack of exposure to geometry, as described in their academic records. This information could help address concerns about whether the student is ready for the math curriculum at the institution. The goal is to provide more context behind the number, not just focus on the score itself.

What was the ultimate goal for updating the score report?

When assessing educational outcomes, it's important that score reports provide more than just a number. Enrollment leaders must ask, "What is the meaning behind the number?" It is also crucial to ensure the number is neither overinterpreted nor under interpreted. Balancing these factors are even more complex when adhering to the rules of measurement theory (i.e., psychometrics). The goal of updating the report was, post-COVID, to determine what additional information would be useful on the SSAT score report, given the results from the NAEP regarding learning losses in reading and math in fourth and eighth-grade students. 



DR. KEITH WRIGHT
Dr. Wright is the Vice President of Psychometrics & Assessments at EMA. He has an extensive background in statistical research and academic administration and technical expertise in computer science. At EMA, he is responsible for overseeing the design and operation of assessment scoring, quality assurance, trend analysis, and research related to the measurement of cognitive and non-cognitive domains.

Accept access.

“The Student Prospect List is an excellent investment because it focuses on families already interested in independent schools rather than random Google leads. This targeted approach delivers successful enrollments for us.”

-Katherine Giszack, Director of Admission, Oak Hill Academy (VA)



Way to Grow

Elevating enrollment takes deep dives, exciting ideas, and continued commitment to represent your school's mission and values

BY RACHEL CLARKE



Trying to figure out the perfect equation to increase your school's enrollment? Even the best test prep can't give you a solution that works for all. There are, however, many answers to the challenges facing today's independent schools, whether they are financial, demographic, relational, post-pandemic, or the age-old issue: pure competition. We spoke to several enrollment professionals to learn how they're not only rising to these challenges but embracing them to make their communities even stronger.

Interviews have been edited for clarity and brevity



JASON HERSOM
Director of Enrollment Management
The Field School,
Washington, D.C.
 Grades served: **6 to 12**
 Enrollment Staff Members: **2**
 Enrollment: **365**

How do you work to elevate enrollment with such a small staff?

Jason Hersom: We're an office of two people, and we're tasked with a pretty huge role, which is enrolling anywhere from 85 to 90 new students every year. The work that our school has done has made it so we don't feel like the onus of enrollment is solely on our shoulders.

It's important to have shared goals throughout the school community. We talk about enrollment as if it's everyone's job. Everyone's job is enrollment. This school is walking the walk. It's truly become a larger effort that goes beyond just the admissions committee.

The work that has been done has allowed us to actually develop a more selective process with a tighter student profile. That then sets us up for less of the "fill the seat mentality" and a more mission-aligned mentality. That has been critical for the health of

the school as well.

In terms of that "mission-aligned mentality," how does your admissions work reflect the culture of the school?

JH: We have designed an admission process that I feel deeply reflects the experience our students have everyday in our classrooms. Finding ways to express that to families isn't easy, but it is important. We've removed several barriers to getting folks onto campus and into classrooms that I think have really boosted our application numbers.

For our 50th anniversary, we launched an updated set of six core values and a new mission statement. My colleague and I then crafted five questions around those core values for students to respond to in their application. It's been really fun to see the diversity of approach students take to these, and helps us truly look at mission alignment.

Telling parents, "This is our mission," illustrates the culture of the school. There's no big surprise when they've gone through this process. We are developing a set of students who are their authentic selves.

There's a question in our application where we ask, "who's the most creative



● **"Everyone's job is enrollment."**
 ● **JASON HERSHOM**
 ● The Field School (DC)

or interesting person you know? What makes them that way?" We have "resilient" and "reflective" as two of our core values, so we make sure we have applicants reflect on a time they were forced to face resilience.

So, it's very, very concrete things. It's not some magical spell. It's truly incorporated by getting those pieces into the first impact that your families have with the school. Washington, D.C., like New York, is a crowded market. People really value the intentionality of our process.

So, how do you stand out in that crowded market?

JH: We are not a school that manages thousands of applications for a small number of spots, but we continue to see a rise in applications. I think it's because the word in our market is that we do something a little bit different, and it's worth the look.

We serve a really diverse population, but we're not a specialty school. We put the brand of the school, the culture, and the ethos into every piece of the application process. We've added some really beautiful questions in the interview process. We meet with the kid, we meet with the parent, and we actually talk about everything from the day-to-day world of the kid to, "What is important to you? What do you really care about?"

What other questions on your application best reflect the Field School?

JH: These were all developed as a team. We sat down and workshopped

them at a two-day retreat about admissions with the head and the whole senior leadership group. That was special because, again, I'm not asking questions for me. I'm asking questions for the leadership of the school.

We ask parents, "Who do you want your child to be at the end of this experience?" It's not, "Where do you want your kid to go to college?" This has led to a talking point that we're able to share later on in Washington, D.C., in a very high-powered area with very high-powered parents. When I say, "I'm a private school admission director." People say, "Oh, you must deal with the worst, most entitled, pushy parents." Then I explain that the beauty of the school that I work for is it doesn't really attract those folks. People want their kids to come to this school because of our mission, and because they want their children, at the end of this experience, to be problem solvers, to be good thinkers, and most importantly, good people.

That again, is the culture of our school. We are able to say we're sending kids to Ivy League colleges, as well as international schools and small Mid-Atlantic and West Coast institutions. But that's not what we hang our hat on. We hang our hat on the fact that they're going to college feeling prepared and successful. I'm so lucky. I've worked at very different independent schools and all of them have always felt mission-aligned to myself and to my core values, or I wouldn't take the job. It's easy to do when you've got everybody bought into what we're aiming for.



ANDREA MERCER
Director of Enrolment, and
AJLA BILAJBEGOVIC
Director
of Advancement
Montcrest School,
Toronto, ON

Grades served: Junior
Kindergarten to 8
Enrollment Team: 2
Enrollment: 335

You described your approach to education and enrollment as relationship-based. How would you define that?

Andrea Mercer: It's very important to us that we lead with the relationship piece. Our school as a whole embraces a relationship-based approach to education. Our faculty and staff have done significant professional learning around this. A few years ago, we participated in regular seminars and read a book called *The Third Path*, which demonstrates that strong interpersonal relationships are the foundation for student success and well-being. This approach applies to

the entire educational ecosystem—whether student to teacher, teacher to parent, leader to teacher, parent to parent, etc. Building relationships doesn't just mean, "I know your name, and I know some things about you." Teachers go above and beyond to really know their kids as learners and as people, to know what's going on in their lives outside of school. Because of our size and intentional approach, we are able to be successful in "walking the Third Path."

How are you able to integrate this relationship-forward process as families move through the enrollment process, especially during and post-pandemic?

AM: We start our process with what we call our admissions chats. They aren't parent interviews, so the interaction feels more relaxed and organic, and we are able to really identify what a family is looking for out of their school experience. There's an ease of conversation that happens during these chats, which are still done online. That was something that came out of the pandemic. We kept the online chats because parents liked the fact that they were flexible. We've had parents hop on those chats in medical scrubs or while they're in their car. It's what works for their lives. They don't have to physically come into the school to have that initial conversation and to get a feel for our program and approach. It's also about how we conduct those calls—how we speak to our families. Actually, it's about how we listen to them. It's about listening to what they're looking for and why they're looking at your school. Because if you

just come on and start downloading information, that's not personal; that's not establishing a relationship.

Ajla Bilajbegovic: The connection, established early on in the admissions process, gives families the first experience of Montcrest as a relationship-based community. It happens right away because of the way in which we structure our initial conversation and then continues when they come for tours and other events. We keep that energy alive. When completing virtual assessments for our international applicants, our approach is centered on gaining a thorough understanding of the child on the other side of the screen. We begin each session with engaging activities and games, and depending on the age, we encourage the child's family to be present alongside them. This approach provides us with extensive insights and aligns with our pedagogical approach.

We prioritize listening to assist families in determining whether our school will enable their child to thrive. Admissions decisions are informed by whether or not we feel we can meet a child's needs, as well as meet a family's expectations for their school experience. And that's because we know what kind of school we are. We support families through the entire arc of their Montcrest experience, so that their child is the best version of themselves they can be by the time they leave Montcrest.

So you're still using methods and learnings you picked up during the pandemic?



● **"It's about listening to what they're looking for and why they're looking at your school. Because if you just come on and start downloading information, that's not personal; that's not establishing a relationship."**

● **ANDREA MERCER**
● Montcrest School (ON)

● **"We have to get to know the whole child in order to decide how we can best support and challenge them."**

● **AJLA BILAJBEGOVIC**
● Montcrest School (ON)

AM: For some aspects of the process, like the admissions chats, yes, we are still using the methods we adopted during the pandemic. Other methods have evolved. During the pandemic, we initially held virtual open houses. While these were effective at showing the campus and engaging with students, they did not necessarily reflect leading with relationship. We realized that we needed to give prospective families more specific access to the people of Montcrest. We developed a virtual “Meet The” series: Meet the Students, Meet the Parents, and Meet the Teachers. Some of those have now evolved into in-person events.

We’ve also applied that personal approach to our assessment process. We recognize that if a student comes for a “visit day” and joins an existing class, that’s not necessarily giving them the most accurate experience of what it feels like to come to our school. We’ve developed specific activity days for applicants to all our grades. It’s labor-intensive, but it works thanks to wonderful support from our teachers and Student Success team. The activity days are designed with both assessment and yield in mind. It’s as much about understanding the child as a learner as it is giving kids an opportunity to feel what it could be like to attend Montcrest.

AB: We have to get to know the whole child in order to decide how we can best support and challenge them. Our admissions process is focused not only on understanding how we can support a student academically but also how we can support their social-

emotional well-being, their interests outside of school, and who they hope to be as a person. Admissions is not an exact science; you cannot get it right 100% of the time. But we get it right a lot of the time. And it’s really nice to work in a place where that happens because you know that you’re doing the best for not only your school, but also the children in your school. That’s the goal.



YVONNE TRYSYNTHIA
Director of Engagement
NIST International School,
Bangkok, Thailand
Grades served: PreK to 12
Enrollment Team: 19
Enrollment: 1,800

How does “word of mouth” help elevate your enrollment?

“Word of mouth” is a powerful tool in our enrollment strategy because it shares the authentic voices of our community—current students, alumni, and parents—who convey their positive experiences. When someone they trust endorses our institution, it builds credibility and resonates more deeply than traditional marketing methods.

We receive around 1,500 inquiries a year, and data shows that 90% of

them know about NIST because of word of mouth. This includes referrals from other parents, friends living in Bangkok, relocation agencies, their organizations or workplaces, or their current schools. Only 10% find us through internet research or events. Realizing this, we have implemented strategies to leverage word of mouth to elevate our enrollment—not just to increase numbers (as we only have around 300 spaces for new students each year, despite the high number of inquiries and applications), but to share our philosophy and purpose and to enroll mission-aligned families.

As an international school, many families coming to Bangkok ask their colleagues about schooling options. We ensure that our parents are aware of our value propositions, and we communicate through emails, social media, and our morning coffee sessions with the leadership team. Many parents also seek advice in Facebook groups, so we have identified active parents in those groups to share positive aspects of our school when someone inquires about schooling options in Bangkok. We often have informal meetings with these parents to keep them updated on current events, so they can respond accurately to questions and share positive perspectives if any negative comments arise. Starting this year, we have elevated our social media efforts to encourage parents to share posts, allowing their friends to see what’s going on at school.

How do you create a narrative that appeals to prospective families?

Data is really important to us. We

analyze the demographics of our current families and those we wish to attract. We survey them to identify the key factors influencing their school choice. We categorize parents and discuss with each group why they chose our school, their values, and what resonates with them. For example, many parents work in non-governmental organizations and the United Nations. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) resonate with many of them and knowing that we intentionally integrate the SDGs into our curriculum is a significant factor for them. We keep them well informed about this so they can share it with their colleagues who are looking for a school.

Being in the heart of Bangkok's business and embassy district, we use this value proposition to discuss with companies and embassy families how convenient it is to attend our school compared to traveling through Bangkok's traffic. We create different narratives for different groups, depending on their interests, to ensure our message resonates with them. This empowers them to share what the school is doing. We also often match prospective families with current families who share similar interests.

How do you leverage social platforms to reach families in an effective way?

Like many schools, we post on various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. We also relaunched our website last year, incorporating testimonials from all stakeholders. We now focus more on videos, as we know prospective


students prefer reels and video posts.

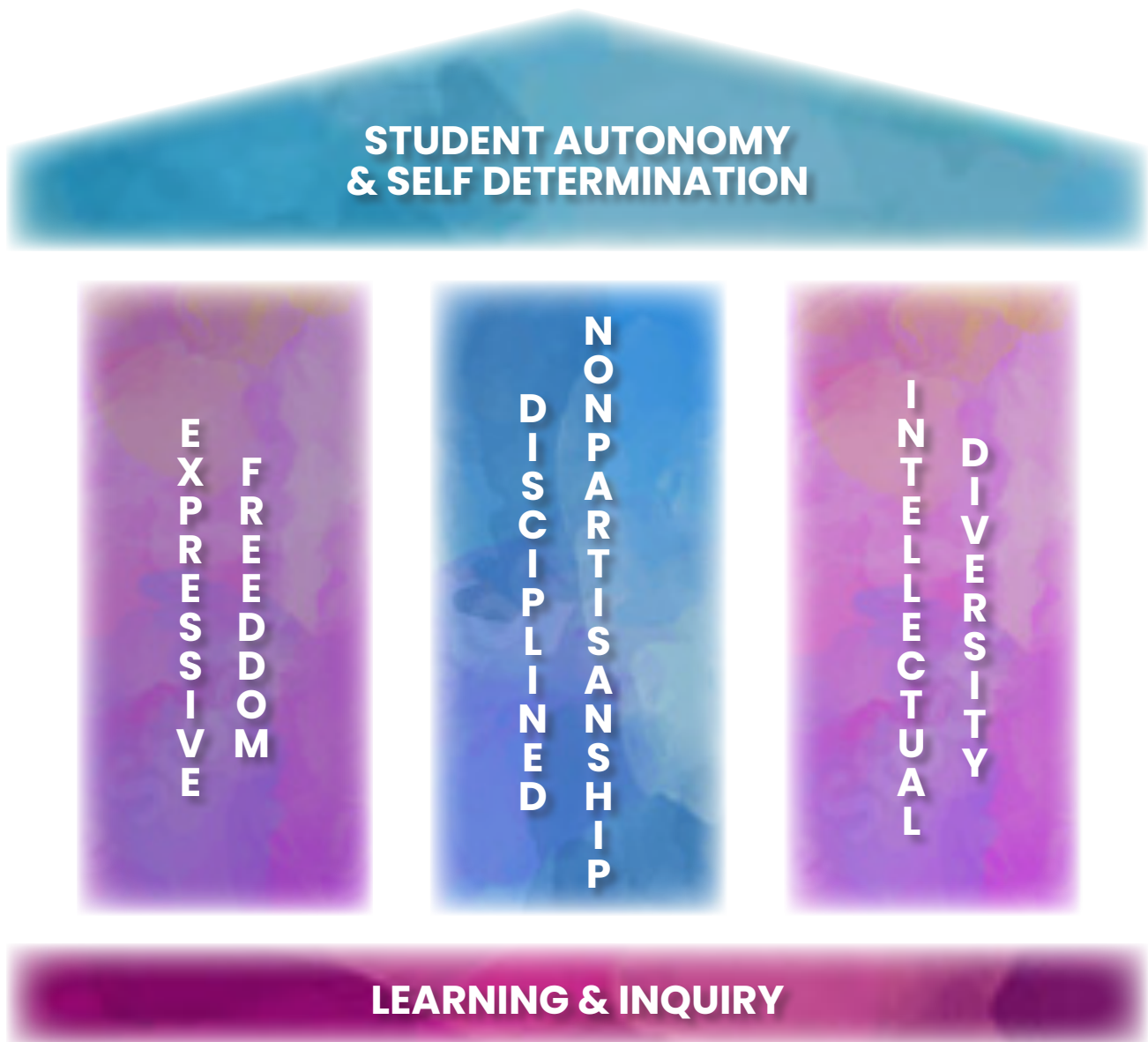
We target different social media groups, not only expat groups in Bangkok or general women's groups but also groups for various languages and countries. We have parents in these groups, and we ask them to promote the school by sharing their experiences. This also applies to organizational groups, such as embassies, NGOs, and companies. We encourage parents to continue sharing their positive experiences, and if prospective parents have specific questions that they can't answer, they inform our admissions team to reach out to them. It's been a great collaboration between the school and the parents, and we are grateful to have this supportive parent community.



● **“‘Word of mouth’ is a powerful tool in our enrollment strategy because it shares the authentic voices of our community...”**
● **YVONNE TRYSYNTHIA,**
● NIST International School
● (Thailand)

How has the parents' involvement and authenticity impacted the way the school is perceived online?

I am so proud of the parent community who tirelessly commented in different social media groups to promote the school, actively answering questions from the wider community. These are the parents who often meet with us informally and regularly to get updates from us. Their posts give it that authentic flavor that you wouldn't get if the response or comments come from a staff member. 



Framing the Issues

How independent schools can support academic pluralism with guidance from *Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools*

We live in an increasingly polarized world, where conflict over opposing views is common. This has led to tensions within independent schools, manifesting in various forms such as litigation over admissions, curriculum disputes, and challenges related to student behavior. There is a growing loss of public trust in educators' abilities to handle sensitive topics, compounded by aggressive actions from parent groups and lawmakers. The negative effects of this type of

climate on the health and well-being of children are clear, with anxiety, depression, and social isolation on the rise. Fear of ridicule and ostracization is leading to self-censorship, as many children are afraid to voice their own thoughts, beliefs, and convictions.

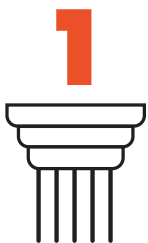
Heads of school are dealing with the near-impossible task of overcoming or resolving these tensions. They face pressure to take a public stance on issues that have little to do with their true purpose—to help their

schools be places of learning with an environment conducive to open and courageous inquiry. This raises a fundamental question: What is the role of schools in societal and political matters?

To provide guidance on this important issue, Deerfield Academy's Head of School, Dr. John Austin, convened a group of esteemed independent school leaders from eight schools, with funding from an Edward E. Ford Foundation grant, to develop *Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools*.

The Three Pillars

Grounded in historical documents from the 20th century that advocate for academic freedom and integrity, the Framework is structured around three pillars. Its overarching goal is to cultivate independent thinkers and leaders equipped to engage thoughtfully with the complexities of a pluralistic society and determine their own political and civil beliefs.



PILLAR ONE: A Commitment to Expressive Freedom

This pillar focuses on fostering an environment where students can engage

with diverse viewpoints, including those that may be challenging or upsetting. It seeks to encourage a wide range of speech among students, without fear of negative consequences, by teaching them to engage conscientiously, courageously, and in a climate of mutual respect.



PILLAR TWO: A Commitment to Disciplined Nonpartisanship

This pillar emphasizes the importance of neutrality among school leaders and faculty

when it comes to expressing personal beliefs in the classroom, with the goal of creating a space where students can explore various perspectives without bias from authority figures. It also eliminates the need for schools to feel compelled to make a statement on every issue, freeing educators to focus on their students rather than political or societal commentary.



PILLAR THREE: A Commitment to Intellectual Diversity

This pillar examines how the inclusion of a broad spectrum of ideas and debates within

curricula encourages critical thinking and engagement with competing arguments, ultimately fostering independent thought and personal conclusions.



Beginning the Conversation

The independent school world is remarkably diverse, both from school to school as well as within each school, and because of this, the Framework is not a set of rules; it's a device meant to initiate,



“We recognize that different schools in the United States have a wide range of missions, and we wanted to offer some broad principles that leaders of schools could use to think about how they position their institutions during this moment of social and political turmoil, polarization, and conflict. We wanted to offer some principles for faculty to think about their own responsibilities as teachers in the classroom and as designers of curriculum. And we really wanted to think about how you create a culture of expressive freedom on campus.”

DR. JOHN AUSTIN
Head of School, Deerfield Academy (IL) and Author, *Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools*

encourage, and guide conversation. Through open discourse, each school can determine where it wants to stand regarding these issues in a way that reflects its values and mission, as well as respects the diversity within the school community. Each school may adopt all, some, or none of it, and any of these choices is a positive outcome.



“The goal is conversation. If a school, the leadership, the faculty reads this, if they promulgate it through the parent or alumni body, and they adopt its principles, its tenets, full scale, great. If they adapt it to their needs, great. If they say in the end, no, not for us, they still had the conversation.”

JOHN GULLA
Executive Director, Edward E. Ford Foundation (NY)



What is the Role of the Framework in Admissions?

If your school does decide to adopt all or some of the

Framework, you will play a crucial role in shaping a student body that will thrive in this environment, and there are many ways the Framework can be applied to admissions.



Admission Criteria

Review your admission criteria to ensure that they are aligned with

finding students who will do well in an environment that fosters independent thinking.

- **Emphasize critical thinking:**

Develop tools that evaluate a student’s ability to engage with diverse perspectives and demonstrate critical thinking skills.

- **Value intellectual curiosity:**

Place greater emphasis on essays or interviews that showcase a student’s intellectual

curiosity and willingness to explore different viewpoints.

- **Look beyond academics:**

Consider extracurricular activities that demonstrate a student’s engagement with diverse ideas and ability to navigate pluralistic environments.



Transparency

As you do with the other principles that help shape your school’s core values, ensure your

admissions materials and interactions with prospective families convey your positions on the three pillars.

- **Communicate clearly:**

Articulate admissions criteria and priorities to prospective families, emphasizing the school’s commitment to academic pluralism.

- **Offer detailed evaluation explanations:**

Provide transparent explanations of how applications are evaluated, highlighting the importance of traits that align with the Framework’s goals.



Education

Take an active role in educating prospective families about the school’s commitment to academic pluralism

and its implications for the student experience to ensure you attract families that are in agreement with these tenets.

- **Update admissions materials:**


Develop informational materials that explain the Framework's importance to the school mission, or distribute the document with admissions materials.

- **Hold events:** Host information sessions or webinars focused on the school's approach to fostering independent thinking.

- **Discuss the Framework:** Incorporate discussions about academic pluralism into interviews, campus tours, and open houses, gauging families' alignment with these principles.



Taking the First Step

By implementing these strategies, the admission process becomes a crucial first step in cultivating a student body that values diverse perspectives. As schools adapt their admission practices to align with this Framework, admission leaders help create an educational environment that fosters independent thinkers, promotes civil discourse and a culture of respect, and prepares students to engage thoughtfully in a diverse society. 



- "If a school commits the time and the energy to suss out a process to engage the people they need to engage in their communities, to come up with the school's take on expressive freedom, disciplined nonpartisanship, and intellectual diversity—however they choose to do it—then you're in a position with families and admissions to say, 'Here's where we are. This is the commitment we've made as a school, as a community, to prioritize student growth, development, and learning.'"


- **LEE LEVISON**
Retired Head of School, Collegiate School (NY) and Project Director, *Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework*

- "The Framework complements EMA's Character Skills Snapshot (CSS) by supporting environments that cultivate students' intellectual engagement, open-mindedness, and social awareness—all key skills measured by CSS. All three of these skills are crucial for promoting civil discourse and a culture of respect."

- **DR. KEITH WRIGHT**
VP, Psychometrics & Assessments, Enrollment Management Association (NJ)



LEARN MORE



You can read the Framework, letters from the authors, and frequently asked questions, or download the executive summary on the Edward E. Ford Foundation website at: eeford.org/a-framework-for-schools

Debra Wilson

The NAIS president on elevating enrollment, student wellness, and why independent schools matter

BY RACHEL CLARKE



Debra Wilson knows the importance of a private school education. As the president of NAIS, she works to help member schools flourish, evolve, and grow. The latter has become particularly challenging, thanks to dropping fertility rates, ever-changing demographics, and financial challenges for families and institutions alike.

Independent schools continue to be, as Wilson says, “an amazing gift” to the students they serve. To continue to offer this gift, however, it’s important for school leaders to stay aware of shifts in the culture, education landscape, and local markets, and be ready to respond while still staying true to their schools’ mission, vision, and values.

Here, the Williams School (CT) alumna offers her ideas on what the new learning landscape looks like and how we can traverse it thoughtfully with mission-driven purpose.

How did you end up going to an independent school?

I’m the third of four kids, and my parents were both the first in their families to go to college. We were not a family with long traditions of being in independent schools. Yet, when it came time for us to go to junior high, my parents were a little bit worried about the quality of the public school near us, so they started looking at independent schools. Williams School was close and it had a great reputation locally, so they sent us there.

How did going to Williams make a difference for you?

My parents had just separated the year that I started at Williams, and the

school and the people there provided me a different kind of support, more of a safety net than I might have had in a larger public-school environment.

I was basically an only child for that window of time, because my sister was starting college, and my brother had gone to boarding school. My dad had to be at work really early, so he would bring me to school at about 6:45 a.m. with the idea that I could get my homework done. That's also the time when Steven Danenberg, the then-head of school, was arriving. Over the years, he and I had regular early-morning conversations about school, horses, and hobbies. It was those kinds of interactions that made a difference for me at that critical moment in my life. And I guess you could say I've been spending a lot of time with heads of school since I was 13!

How did those early experiences give you insight into the role and help you become, as some people call you, the “Head Whisperer”?

Being a head of school wasn't an easy job then, and it's not an easy job now. I started to be able to tell what kind of day Mr. Danenberg was having by the music he played over the speakers in the hallway. The range was broad, including Diana Ross and Pachelbel's Canon.

Looking back, I suspect Mr. Danenberg probably used conversations like those he had with me as a way to understand what the student experience really looked like. And there's no one better for telling you how it is than kids, right? I love it when I visit independent schools and

students take me around, particularly seniors who have already been accepted into college. They're very unedited...they'll tell me all kinds of crazy stuff!

And I don't know about the “Head Whisperer” thing [laughs], but when I work with heads or anybody in leadership in our schools, the context matters. I say, “Tell me about your school—how big it is, where you're located. What's your history with this employee? This student? These parents?” I love to talk through issues, but I'm not living that moment. I don't know the personalities that you're managing and the challenges you're dealing with at any given point in time.” I think understanding the specific school context helps me be a good sounding board for heads.

How did you end up at NAIS?

After graduating from law school in the late 1990s, I was working at the Department of Justice in tax litigation and I came to a point where I thought, I *can* do this, but do I really *want* to do this? Is this how I want to spend my life, and is this what my purpose is? I thought a lot about what makes a difference, and what really matters to me.

Around that time, NAIS was looking for an associate director of regulatory affairs and they'd never hired a lawyer to be in-house before. I love regulatory work! It's so much fun, because you can often find concrete answers to many of the questions that come up. Plus, I was drawn to come back to the world of independent schools, which had made a real difference in my life.



- “I love it when I visit
- independent schools
- and students take me
- around, particularly
- seniors who have
- already been accepted
- into college. They're very
- unedited...they'll tell me
- all kinds of crazy stuff!”

I was with NAIS for 19 years, eventually serving as general counsel for much of that time. I then moved to the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), where I was the president for four years before coming back to NAIS

Speaking of making a difference, you've often mentioned the importance of wellness.

Yes, although it might be helpful to share how I think about wellness when we use that term. For me, it's about how we live fulfilling lives of purpose and at least reasonable balance and health. Lisa Damour noted in an interview about her new book that being well or healthy is not about being happy, necessarily, but about being able to manage what life throws at you within a normal range. I think that is an important insight. In my mind, the explosion of technology and the different ways people live and work today, as well as the pace of change, create complexities that will require much different skills from our current students in order for them to live healthy lives.

It's important for schools to know what wellness means in their school communities, because so many aspects affect the climate of the school. We must also think about both the day to day and the long-term, because the only constant here is change. This is true because, of course, kids change as they grow and go through different developmental stages, but also, the external stressors they face change. And our job is to help them build strategies for later life.



“That’s why we have private education: schools are meeting different needs and charting specific courses on any given day, and that’s a good thing.”

In an elementary school, you're starting to build the building blocks of well-being in basic ways. These might include talking about nutrition, ensuring that classrooms have quiet corners where kids can go to take a break, and normalizing conversations about how to manage stress or social interactions. Then as kids get older, schools can help them determine their own definitions of wellness and encourage them to think about their purpose, within school and beyond.

Nobody really talked about wellness when I was in school. I was very much an introvert as a student. And if you're an introvert, school can be pretty exhausting. In fact, as a student, I used to love test days when much of class



time was on a specific task. They were also tiring days, but less so for me than regular schools days. It took a while for me to understand where I got my energy from, and when I would need to build in time to recharge my batteries. Our schools can, and do, help kids get to know themselves and understand that there is not one “normal” human experience.

What do you think are some of the enrollment challenges facing schools today and how can leaders think differently about addressing them?

Going into this academic year, you can see the results of some massive shifts underway. For example, people are moving to all different places. I’ve

talked to an independent school in South Florida where, as of last year, roughly 40% of their families had moved down from the greater New York City area in the last few years. This creates a huge culture shift within the community.

Attrition numbers are pretty much back to where they were pre-pandemic, and that’s a good sign that we are in at least a moment of stability. I was just reviewing this year’s *NAIS Trendbook* the other day, and the enrollment pickup numbers in New England and the Mid-Atlantic looked higher than I thought they would be. I think some of that is related to residual movement that started during the pandemic, when public school

Debra cuts the ribbon at the new NAIS headquarters in Washington D.C. surrounded by her team, board members, and friends.

“You can feel when a school is really embracing its unique mission and its DNA, and it can show up in any number of ways throughout the school, in the hallways and in the classrooms...maybe it’s a joyful, curious, challenging, or mindful energy you feel.”



parents were looking for new options for their kids who were struggling, but some of that is also about meeting this current challenging moment with students who are still struggling with the aftereffects of that time.

Although the fertility rate in the U.S. stayed steady between 2021 and 2022, it’s been on a downward trajectory since 2007, and some independent schools are already starting to feel the effects of that in their admission pools. So, we really have to be planning seriously for those realities.

It depends a bit where you are, whether you’re on the upside or downside of some of these demographic trends. Everybody, though, is looking at and talking about cost, particularly in parts of the country where independent school tuitions have crested over \$40,000 or \$50,000. That’s serious money, especially when the economy feels like it’s in flux and we’re going into an election year that feels unsettled generally. Some families might be holding on to their money a little bit tighter, looking at long-term commitments and saying, “I don’t know if we’re going to be able to afford this.”

I’m hearing more conversations happening in the independent school community about mergers or at least about combining backend operations and creating different kinds of partnerships between schools. There are things we can do to gain efficiency, and that’s going to become more important as demographic shifts come into play.

The other questions that we are watching carefully in enrollment include: Does the demographic makeup of our schools reflect the current profile within the United States where students of color are now the majority in our country? Are we as an industry keeping up with these trends? What does that mean for belonging in our schools?

We’re also seeing a drop off in the number of applicants coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, more families with higher incomes are requesting more financial aid, year over year. We’re keeping an eye on these demographic and socioeconomic trends from a variety of lenses and exploring how we can ensure that we’re meeting the public purpose of private education in that access and affordability vector.

What effect has the pandemic had on students and schools?

The COVID-era government funding that bolstered learning and support initiatives in public schools is coming to an end at the same time that kids are still very much recovering from pandemic losses in many ways. Independent schools may start to see more kids who have different kinds of needs, be they academic or social-emotional, or even those who just struggle with transition. So, schools are thinking about how to staff differently and how to train and support teachers to meet the moment.


We’ll need to look at our overall structure of how we’re serving kids in this very different moment, too. We have the ability to be nimbler on

that front than our public-school counterparts, and that can be a real strength. My suspicion is that the different kinds of needs we are seeing with kids, combined with the advances in artificial intelligence, may lead to very different ways of delivering some aspects of education.

What does success in an independent school look like to you?

It goes back to a school's mission, vision, and values. If you find that your definition of success is not aligning with those things, you have to revisit one or the others. Those have to go hand in hand.

Because of the variation in mission, vision, and values, you see different definitions of success across the independent school sector. Some fundamentals are the same, of course, but when you dig in, most schools have something that is different than the other schools in that market. That's why we have private education: schools are meeting different needs and charting specific courses on any given day, and that's a good thing.

I love going into schools and seeing how that plays out. You can feel when a school is really embracing its unique mission and its DNA, and it can show up in any number of ways throughout the school, in the hallways and in the classrooms... maybe it's a joyful, curious, challenging, or mindful energy you feel. Living those aspirations provides an amazing gift for students—a place that's looking at them as a whole child and giving space for them to breathe, develop, and grow. 

Some of Debra's Favorite Things



WHAT I'M READING: I love the Daniel Silva books. They're Israeli spy novels. I'm also reading *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* and Jonathan Haidt's *Anxious Generation*.

WHAT I'M COOKING: I love cooking Thai food or any kind of pasta. I think most cultures have a dumpling of some kind and I'm down for any dumpling. My daughter just had a birthday, so I made her our family's favorite chocolate cake, which is ridiculously decadent. You should really only make it twice a year, but it is delicious.



WHAT I'M WATCHING: We started watching *Stranger Things* again as a family and we are rewatching *The Diplomat*. I like rewatching shows and movies. It's very calming because I know what's going to happen next.

MY FAVORITE BOOK ABOUT A SCHOOL IS: I have a borderline Harry Potter problem. I can quote a lot from the books and movies. There's also a great book that a lifelong friend and I read many times in later elementary school called *The Secret Language*, and it's about a girl who goes to a boarding school, maybe in England. She's very sad when she gets there, but she makes a friend with whom she shares a secret language they made up together.



Field Trips

The EMA team brings our research, offerings, and training to life through school visits, events, and conferences. From California to Dubai, we love to connecting with members—and having fun along the way!



Above, from left: Jim Daughdrill, EMA's National Director of Membership & Business Development; Taylor Docking, Director of Enrollment Management, Indian Springs School (AL); and Allison Davis, EMA's Assistant Director of Membership & Business Development at the 2024 Small Boarding Schools Conference, hosted by Indian Springs School.



EMA dinner with member schools at the EARCOS Leadership Conference in Bangkok, Thailand.





Above: Frankie Brown, Assistant Head of School for Enrollment Management & Financial Aid, Sidwell Friends School (DC) at the EMLC Spring Seminar at Sidwell Friends School.



This past June, the Enrollment Management Leadership Council (EMLC) met at The Joy School in Houston, TX, for their annual retreat to discuss current issues and to develop professional resources for EMA members.



Above, from left: EMA's Jim Daughdrill; Mabel Tie, Assistant Director of Placement, Oliver Scholars (NY); Diego Chavez, Assistant Director of Placement, Oliver Scholars (NY); Kitsana Salyphone, EMA's Director of Membership & Business Development; Ivan Tatis, Admission Outreach Officer, Columbia Grammar & Prep (NY); and Gabe Rotman, External Affairs Associate and Assistant Director of Financial Aid, Riverdale Country School (NY).

EMA's Allison Davis and Dr. Darcie L. TeVault, Virginia Association of Independent Schools (VAIS) Director of Professional Learning at the VAIS Advancement Institute hosted by Stuart Hall School (VA).



Mary O'Connor, EMA's Associate Director of Global Membership & Business and David Milner, Director of Marketing & International Relations, Sedbergh School (UK) during a school visit.



Mark McKee, Head of School and President, Viewpoint School (CA) at the EMLC Seminar at Viewpoint School.

Accept community.

“The Character Skills Snapshot has become an indispensable tool in our admission process, helping us identify students who not only possess academic excellence but also demonstrate the emotional intelligence necessary for fostering a collaborative and inclusive learning environment.”

-Amy Sayfie Zichella, Director of Admission and Enrollment Management,
Ransom Everglades School (FL)



Conference Call

With EMA's Annual Conference being held this year in Boston, we reached out to four of our Boston-based members to share their passion for independent schooling, EMA, and, of course, Beantown (Go, Sox!).



ANGELA BROWN
Assistant Head for Admission and Strategic Initiatives, Dana Hall School

I love working at Dana Hall because...

It is inspiring to be a part of an organization in which every decision made is for the unwavering support of girls and young women. What's even more inspiring is that we have always been dedicated to providing the vigorous education that every girl deserves. Dana Hall was audacious in 1881 when it was founded, and that remains true today: our program is academically ambitious, rich with opportunity, and fiercely empowering.

My can't-miss-it destination to visit while in Boston is...

The Boston Public Garden is my

favorite place to visit. It's the first public botanical garden in the United States, and it's absolutely breathtaking. Just steps away in the Boston Common, you'll find the stunning Robert Gould Shaw and Massachusetts 54th Regiment Memorial, a life-size bronze monument which commemorates one of the first Black fighting units to serve in the American Civil War.

My favorite part of being an EMA member is...

What I appreciate most is its commitment to simplify the application process for prospective families. The SAO is critical to Dana Hall's enrollment success. Accepting the SAO allows me to play a part in reducing the level of stress families feel when navigating the independent school admission process.



JONI FISHMAN
Middle School Dean of Students, The Rashi School

I love working at The Rashi School because...

As an educator, there's nothing more exciting than to see the development of students as learners and future leaders. Working at the Rashi School over the last 25 plus years has convinced me of the necessity to foster community, respect, and innovative learning for students, families, and faculty. The school helps students, from Pre-K through eighth grade, gain the tools required to face the complexities of today's society in finding their voices and their ability to act to create a more inclusive world.



My can't-miss-it destination to visit while in Boston is (can be a favorite restaurant, bar, museum, park, etc)...

Faneuil Hall Marketplace is a central location to experience Boston's food, shopping, and history. From there, it's a short walk to other incredible destinations such as the New England Aquarium, the Boston Tea Party, and the North End.

My favorite part of being an EMA member is...

Knowing there is a plethora of qualified people available at a moment's notice to provide to member schools the most up-to-date resources to help students navigate a next-school process while providing strategies to recruit new students. Being a member means being part of an inclusive community in which individual voices are heard in ways to enable coming together as a collective whole.



NASTARAN HAKIMI
Assistant Head of School for Enrollment Management and Institutional Advancement, Boston University Academy

I love working at BUA because...

First and foremost, I love the students. They're a fantastic mix of brilliance, curiosity, kindness, and wit, and I so appreciate working at a school with such academically-minded students who care deeply about supporting each other and their community.

The connection between BUA and Boston University is also unique and unmatched, making my work here exciting and rewarding. There are very few, if any, other schools with the same model, which provides all the resources of a major research university within a four-year high school experience. We stress to families that we are not an early-college, and our students confirm that they experience all the benefits of a traditional high school community while simultaneously accessing all the perks of a University, which is a combination that they wouldn't have access to elsewhere.

My can't-miss-it destination to visit while in Boston is...

Don't sleep on Back Bay—grab a coffee and pastry at one of the many bakeries in the city (Thinking Cup, Tatte, Burdick's, to name a few) and walk over to the Boston Commons for a lovely stroll, some stellar people watching, or a ride on the swan boats.

My favorite part of being an EMA member is...

My favorite part is being part of a much larger community of people who enjoy nerding out about admissions stuff with me! On a serious note, I've been able to make connections with so many folks that I wouldn't have met otherwise and to learn from and alongside some very hardworking and accomplished colleagues outside of my Boston network—it's humbling!



DON MCMILLAN
CEO, McMillan Education


I love working at McMillan Education because...

I get to leverage the 25 years I worked at EMA schools to help find the right school fit for each kid I work with as an educational consultant. My wife, Sarah, and I, along with our team, work with kids from across the country and around the world, matching Pre-K through PG students to Boston-area schools, as well as boarding schools across the U.S. We created a website to help schools and students: McMillan Education Boarding School Guide (owlboardingschools.com).

My can't-miss-it destinations to visit while in Boston...

Trident Booksellers and Café on Newbury St—good coffee and amazing omelets. And, of course, Fenway Park—with its iconic "Green Monstah." The best hot dog dive bar is Bukowski Tavern, located dangerously close to this year's conference.

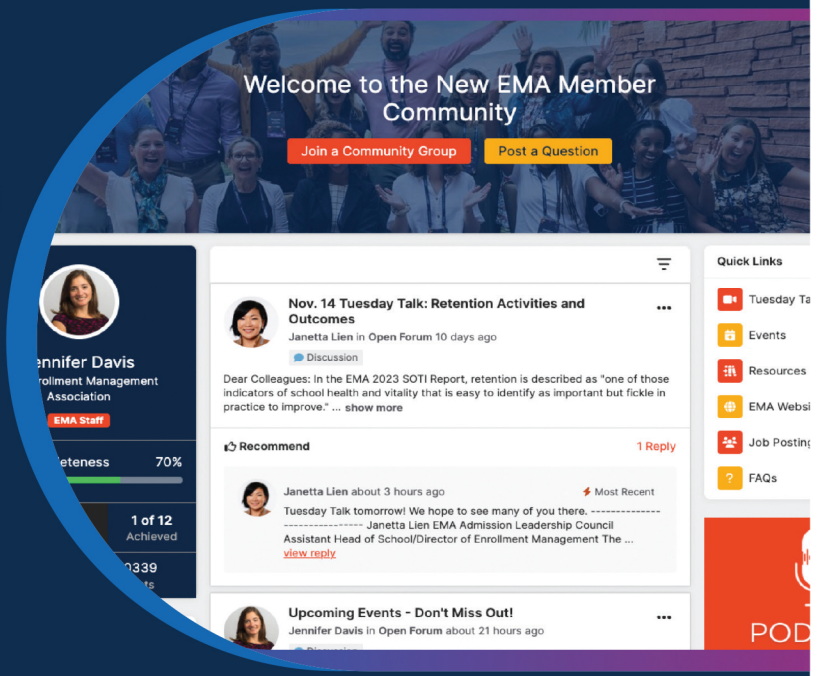
My favorite part of being an EMA member...

...trading best practices between sessions during the conference—whether in the lobby, at breakfast, in an Uber, or at the bar! I always pick up some great info to share with our parents eager to find the school that best serves their kids! 



EMA's Online Member Community

The Future of Collaboration



You can rely on EMA's extensive member benefits to enhance your enrollment strategy and expand your network. We've upgraded our Online Member Community to make it easier than ever to engage with colleagues and share expertise.

EMA's Online Community is just one of the many next-generation tools available exclusively to EMA members like you. Connect with enrollment leaders globally and access cutting edge resources. Visit the EMA Online Member Community today:



- What's Possible?**
- Learn new skills
 - Expand your network
 - Get your questions answered
 - Find inspiration
 - Identify powerful partners
 - Share your expertise
 - Access member exclusive content

For more information on EMA's Online Member Community, contact EMA's Membership & Business Development Team at members@enrollment.org or visit enrollment.org.



“Having the opportunity to help shape the student body, influence school culture, and impact the lives of those that choose to join a community that informed who I am today is something I will never take for granted.”

RAY CROSS
St. Andrew's School (RI)
— *“Award Season”*, pg. 4



“It’s about listening to what they’re looking for and why they’re looking at your school. Because if you just come on and start downloading information, that’s not personal; that’s not establishing a relationship.”

ANDREA MERCER
Montcrest School (ON)
— *“Way to Grow”*, pg. 36



“That’s why we have private education: schools are meeting different needs and charting specific courses on any given day, and that’s a good thing.”

DEBRA WILSON
NAIS President
— *“Debra Wilson”*, pg. 45

Thank You to Our Authors, Contributors, and Readers

We're thrilled to provide you with this spring issue of *The Yield*, packed with valuable insights and professional development tactics to help you achieve your enrollment goals. We hope you found this issue informative and came away with numerous tips and tools to help you successfully do the work you do.

But, you wouldn't be enjoying this magazine today without the content submissions and story ideas offered by readers just like you. We are privileged to publish truly outstanding, high-quality articles and data that make important contributions to the work you do and we thank each of our authors and contributors for their submissions.



Submit to *The Yield*

Do you have a great tip, a favorite best practice, a streamlined process, or other expertise to share in a future issue of *The Yield*? We want to hear from you.

EMA welcomes content submissions from contributors throughout the year for our various publications and are always on the lookout for fresh ideas, advice, and thought-provoking articles and stories. Share yours today.

enrollment.org/submissions

THE Yield

Enrollment Management Association

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