

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SEARCH

CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

caisca.org

Start Date: July 2026



**Carney
Sandoe**
& ASSOCIATES

CARNEYSANDOE.COM

Mission Statement

CAIS supports schools that strive for ambitious educational standards within equitable and inclusive learning communities.

At a Glance



Member schools
234



Total enrolled students in
member schools
93,000



Financial aid distributed annually
by member schools
\$460M



Students of color enrolled
in CAIS schools
51%

Overview

The California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) seeks a new Executive Director starting July 2026. With 234 member schools spanning from 31 to nearly 2,000 students, CAIS partners with schools that reflect the rich complexity of California's demographics, cultures, and communities. The Executive Director leads a team of eight talented employees to deliver the CAIS mission: to support schools that strive for ambitious educational standards within equitable and inclusive learning communities. Ideal candidates will offer wise counsel to school leaders and trustees while looking to the future to help schools imagine and meet the needs of tomorrow's students. The Executive Director will be expected to skillfully lead the CAIS team remotely and travel frequently to member schools and conferences.

CAIS members schools value the Association's guidance in times of uncertainty and crisis as well as its ongoing support for improvement and reflection with highly-regarded programming and accreditation. A spirit of growth and a desire to help schools rise to the aspirations of their respective missions animates CAIS's work and creates a collegial culture in which schools feel connected as they grapple with complexity and continue to evolve.

Opportunities and Challenges

CAIS's new Executive Director will lead the Association in ways that support both the member schools and a committed team of colleagues who serve its membership. Specific opportunities and challenges for the Executive Director include:



Lead and Strengthen CAIS's High-Capacity Team – Critical to CAIS's success as a high performing organization for member schools are dedicated and talented staff colleagues who individually do their own jobs but collaboratively work together to help schools. Leading with equity, integrity, approachability, trust and a commitment to belonging will foster team building and inspire the CAIS team to serve each other and member schools at even higher levels.

Refine and elevate the accreditation process while also deepening the capacity of accreditation to assess how schools cultivate inclusive practices, belonging, and continuous improvement, to help schools fulfill their missions and respond to the evolving needs of their communities more effectively – CAIS is widely recognized for its thoughtful, rigorous accreditation process—one that not only supports schools in maintaining high standards, but also fosters collegiality and ongoing professional learning through service on visiting committees. Schools have expressed a desire for CAIS to more actively publicize the accreditation process, showcasing member schools' commitment to continuous improvement and attentive accountability while also underscoring the strong value proposition of independent education. The new Executive Director will work with the CAIS staff to keep the CAIS accreditation process on the leading edge for independent schools.

Support Heads of School – The ideal Executive Director will bring deep empathy for the challenges and complexities inherent in the Head of School role. Energized by visiting campuses and experiencing each school's unique mission in action, the Executive Director will engage with Heads from a place of curiosity, respect, cultural humility, and genuine support to better understand the needs of member schools and their leaders. As a trusted advisor, the Executive Director will also demonstrate the strategic insight and agility required to deploy CAIS resources effectively in service to member schools' respective missions.

Build Leadership Capacity – The Executive Director will continue to assess and enhance existing professional development programs for trustees and heads of school while championing expanded leadership development opportunities at all levels within member schools. By fostering a robust pipeline of future executive and governance leaders, the Executive Director will help ensure the long-term strength and sustainability of independent school leadership.



Model Agility and Embrace Innovation – In an era defined by rapid change, including demographic shifts in California, the rise of AI, evolving student identity and community needs – schools need bold, forward-thinking leadership to envision the future of education while staying rooted in the value of belonging and ensuring students receive a relevant and enduring learning experience. Building on CAIS’s invaluable support during past challenges such as the pandemic and wildfires, the Association must continue to help schools navigate evolving political, cultural, and societal pressures while remaining grounded in their core values. The Executive Director will be adept at balancing prudent risk management with a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement.

Address Financial Sustainability, Affordability, and Enrollment Volatility – Independent schools across California are experiencing increasing pressure from declining enrollment, rising tuition, shifting demographics and evolving conceptions of what access and inclusion mean in independent education. The Executive Director will help CAIS support schools in developing financial and tuition models that advance accessibility, foster inclusive enrollment practices and strengthen community belonging, exploring alternative revenue streams, strategic collaborations, partnerships, or mergers where appropriate. The Association should also promote data-driven approaches to enrollment forecasting and resource allocation to ensure long-term sustainability and accessibility.

Qualifications and Personal Attributes

Professional Qualifications

- Extensive experience in independent school leadership, with a deep understanding of school operations, leadership dynamics, associations, and community culture.
- Demonstrated cultural competence and a track record of leadership in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) initiatives across diverse populations and settings.
- Proven ability to engage diverse constituencies in mission-driven work and in communities with varied socioeconomic, cultural and geographic profiles.
- Capacity to lead with empathy and compassion in collaboration with a team.
- Confident and articulate public presence, able to serve as an inspiring voice for CAIS and independent education.
- Proven experience with effective governance practices and a strong grasp of the Head/Board partnership.



- Knowledge of the accreditation processes, including experience chairing and/or serving on visiting committees.
- An innovative systems thinker who integrates research, data, and emerging trends to inform strategy and decision-making.
- Strong organizational and self-management skills to balance the demands of a remote leadership role with active engagement across schools and communities.

Leadership Style

- A leader who intentionally creates space for diverse voices, builds psychological safety, fosters a culture of belonging in which all members can do their best work
- A strategic thinker who maintains a broad vision, anticipates challenges and opportunities, and manages the systems and processes aligned with the values of inclusion, equity, and belonging.
- A clear and inspiring communicator who listens attentively, engages authentically, and empowers others to contribute their best work.
- An organized and reflective director who seeks feedback, fosters accountability, and nurtures a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth.

Personal Qualities

- An educator with a deep belief in the transformative power of education and the essential role independent schools play in cultivating inclusive, challenging and caring learning communities for California's children and families.
- An educational innovator attuned to emerging research and trends, committed to fostering creativity and forward-thinking practice.
- A trustworthy and empowering leader who attracts, develops, and retains talented colleagues, while delegating effectively and cultivating shared ownership.
- An accessible and empathetic advisor who listens with care, provides wise counsel, and takes the time to know and be known by members.
- A natural connector who thrives on collaboration and leverages a strong professional network to benefit the community.
- Genuine enthusiasm for professional learning, leadership development, and organizational growth.
- Intellectual openness and curiosity, with a willingness to engage in thoughtful dialogue that builds understanding and commitment.
- Strong cultural competence to support and engage a diverse community of educators, students, families and schools — and to lead initiatives that deepen belonging, equity and inclusive practice.
- Warmth, curiosity, emotional intelligence, a sense of humor.

Learn More

Click on the links below to learn more about the California Association of Independent Schools.

[Organization Website](#)

[CAIS Schools](#)

[Strategic Plan](#)



To Apply

Interested and qualified candidates are invited to contact the consultants in confidence. Candidates will ultimately need to submit the following materials as separate PDF documents:

- A cover letter expressing their interest in this particular
- A current résumé;
- A list of five professional references with name, relationship, phone number, and email address of each (references will not be contacted without the candidate's permission) to:

Karen Whitaker

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We would appreciate receiving application materials by **Friday, November 28.**

The full-time equivalent salary range for this position is \$350,000 – 390,000. The starting salary is based upon, but not limited to, several factors that include years of experience, education level, and expertise.