

# HEAD OF SCHOOL SEARCH

**CHINESE AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL**

San Francisco, California

cais.org

Start Date: July 2027



**Carney  
Sandoe**  
& ASSOCIATES

CARNEYSANDOE.COM

# Mission Statement

At CAIS, we are committed to inspiring and empowering learners to:

- Embrace Chinese
- Become our best selves
- Contribute to a better world

## At a Glance



Established  
**1981**



Enrollment  
**571**



Total faculty  
**83**



Student-faculty ratio  
**7:1**



Students of color  
**502**



Financial aid awarded (2024-25)  
**\$3.5M**



**35**



Campus size  
**5.4 acres**

Early Childhood enrollment: 176  
Lower School enrollment: 266  
Middle School enrollment: 129

Faculty of color: 59  
Students receiving aid (2024-25): 23.6%  
Annual operating budget (2024-25): \$23,808,210

# CAIS CORE VALUES



好奇  
**Curiosity**

毅力  
**Perseverance**



包容  
**Inclusion**

勇气  
**Courage**



善良  
**Kindness**

## Overview

Founded in 1981 as the first Mandarin immersion school in the United States, the Chinese American International School (CAIS) educates 571 students ages two through 8th grade. Over the last four decades, CAIS has been recognized globally as a leader in bilingual education and an innovator for its commitment to immersive, cultural education through the study of language. In 2024, the School moved into a newly renovated 5.4 acre campus with a theater, full-sized athletic center, art facilities, additional learning facilities, and abundant outdoor space to allow for continued growth of its world-class curriculum.

The Preschool program (ages 2 to 4) is a full Mandarin immersion program while Kindergarten and Lower School (grades 1 to 5) have a 50/50 model, alternating Chinese and English days. Middle School students continue to study Mandarin, and Chinese culture and history are integrated into the academic program. The distinctive program is a beacon to students and their families as well as to faculty and staff. The professional community also deeply values the mission, a culture of collaboration and curiosity, and the opportunity to innovate and grow. A faculty member noted that colleagues at CAIS are the “best group of humans I have worked with, we are unified behind the mission, we have a true singularity of purpose.”

CAIS’s strong sense of community is linked to a clear commitment to its mission and values. Students, faculty, staff, parents and guardians feel connected, seen, and supported, and there is a genuine sense of partnership amongst and between constituencies. One parent noted, “we could not have had a better experience at CAIS... it’s a bit like being at Disneyland, where every cast member is welcoming and helpful—whether it’s kids helping kids, teachers helping kids, parents helping teachers, or parents helping each other.”

Having led CAIS with vision, heart, wisdom, and wit since 2010, Head of School Jeff Bissell is concluding his tenure at CAIS at the end of the 2026–27 academic year after 17 years. The next Head of School will begin their tenure from a position of strength: a new campus, a guiding strategic vision, strong enrollment, and an engaged and mission-aligned community.



## The CAIS Story

When the doors of Chinese American International School opened on September 12, 1981, in the basement of a University of California Extension building, four of ten enrolled students showed up for class. Undeterred, founder [Carol Ruth Silver](#) and director Shirley Lee forged ahead.

CAIS attracted national attention from its inception. Former U.S. Senator Paul Simon handed out diplomas at CAIS's first graduation in 1987. That same year, CAIS moved to the Presidio, and the U.S. Department of Education designated CAIS as the "national prototype for Chinese language education in elementary schools."

Between 1992 and 1994, CAIS added the middle school grades. Soon after the middle school was established, Shirley Lee orchestrated the first exchange trip with Shanghai No. 3 Girls' School.

In 1997, the School moved into 150 Oak Street, with just 200 students including 28 middle school students. In 2010, the Early Childhood Division moved to The Alice A. Carnes Center at nearby Waller Street.

From 1997 to 2015, the middle school population grew to 120 students, which led CAIS to launch a capital campaign to move the middle school to the 888 Turk Street Campus. In 2015, CAIS launched the [Early Childhood Chinese Immersion Forum](#), an annual conference for early childhood Mandarin immersion educators from across the United States and the world to gather at CAIS and share best practices.

Today, CAIS educates more than 570 children at a best-in-class 5.4-acre campus in the Lakeside neighborhood of San Francisco, with access to families in San Francisco, the Peninsula / Silicon Valley, and the North Bay. The newly renovated campus boasts enviable arts, theater, athletics, and teaching and learning facilities, along with abundant outdoor space.



## Why CAIS?

### Chinese Immersion

Immersion in a new language and culture requires humility, curiosity, empathy, connection, and a true appreciation of difference. The attitudes and aptitudes that are cultivated through Chinese immersion extend far beyond language and prepare students to engage respectfully with a diverse world. In addition to the cognitive, character, and intercultural competencies, CAIS calls this expansive mindset part of the CAIS “Immersion Bonus.”

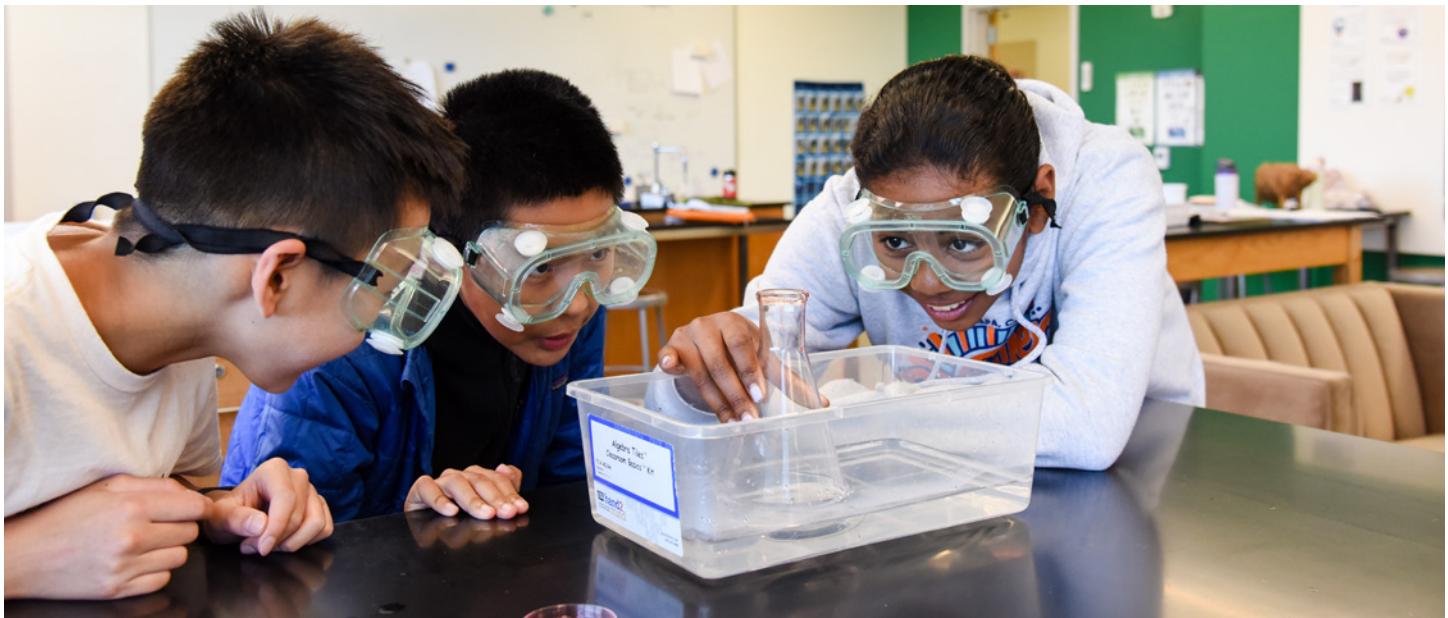
CAIS’s hallmark [global programs](#) put these skills to use in the wider world long before graduation. Through travel and homestays in China and Taiwan, fifth, seventh, and eighth grade students experience a cross-section of Chinese culture through a variety of lenses such as minority ethnicities and rural and urban settings.

### Culture of Learning

In a world where knowledge and information change and increase rapidly, CAIS students take control of their own learning, experiencing the joy and empowerment of a life in which learning is a continuous and never-ending journey. Students become adept at assessing new situations, and with an understanding of their own strengths, challenges, and passions, choose a path forward that will help them to become their best selves and contribute to a better world. CAIS fosters a culture of learning characterized by curiosity, agency, intellectual rigor, perseverance, and joy. From incorporating project-based learning and the Reading and Writing Workshop in both languages throughout the grades, to the focus on design thinking and arts integration across the curriculum, CAIS teachers help students build the skills they need to be prepared for 21st century challenges.

### Character & Community

CAIS challenges students to become their best selves and contribute to a better world. Realizing these aspirations requires a strong foundation in both academic learning and character development. CAIS firmly believes social and emotional competence must be explicitly taught in order for students to achieve their potential.



## Priorities, Opportunities, and Challenges

CAIS is looking for a dynamic and community-oriented educational leader with deep expertise in language immersion educational environments who can steward CAIS's tremendous legacy as the oldest Mandarin immersion school in the nation. In the near future, the next Head of School will have the opportunity to:

**Lead the work of a new Strategic Vision.** Last spring the CAIS community began to imagine and articulate its next priorities, and the work continues this year. The next Head will inherit a road map to guide their and the School's near-future work. [Click HERE](#) to learn more about the process and the progress. The vision will, inevitably, include the following priorities.

**Grow into and fully inhabit CAIS's new campus.** In 2021, CAIS embarked on a transformative journey to convert the former Mercy High School campus into CAIS's "forever home." After a successful capital campaign and significant transitional work, CAIS moved from four separate leased spaces to one campus for the 2024-25 school year. While the new campus is beginning to feel like home, there are many exciting opportunities and continued transitions for the next Head including:

- Building connections and alignment for grades PreK2 to 8th and developing a community-wide culture of collaboration and consistency around shared community expectations and norms.
- Aligning and connecting the three academic divisions while maintaining each division's distinctiveness.
- Assessing and developing spaces to best support students and the student experience with particular attention to the development of the performing arts and athletics.
- Leveraging the new campus to be a highly functional community hub to support CAIS families and connecting with Chinese communities in San Francisco and beyond.

**Continue to ensure the financial sustainability of CAIS.** With full and growing enrollment and with an engaged and philanthropic community, CAIS is on solid financial footing and seeks to increase its financial well-being. The launch of a summer program and auxiliary programs will support the needs of many families as well as serve to generate revenue. The next Head has the opportunity to support this effort, create new opportunities, and engage the community to establish an endowment.



**Advocate for and support mission-aligned academic excellence.** Throughout its history, CAIS intentionally evolved its program to best support bilingual and bicultural learning for students. The faculty embrace a culture of innovation, calculated risk, curiosity, and professional development to provide a compelling, engaging, and relevant program. The next Head will identify new opportunities to support and celebrate their efforts, provide resources for their work, and measure and share the program's successes.

**Serve as the chief storyteller and advocate for CAIS's distinctive mission and program.** Understanding the demographic shift in the San Francisco Bay Area alongside increased competition, CAIS needs to continually articulate, share, and celebrate its unique program and history. CAIS has enjoyed strong retention between divisions, and the next Head will need to support and evolve efforts to keep students and families in the community. The new campus allows greater reach to new neighborhoods, and the School seeks to appeal to families who value bilingual and bicultural learning but may not have considered Mandarin immersion as a potential option.

**Celebrate and foster a culture of inclusion.** CAIS has long navigated the differences in the diverse identities in Chinese history and culture (Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc.) and among Chinese Americans (first, second, third, etc. generations). CAIS seeks to stay open to the rich and vast learning opportunities in Asia. The community also seeks to support, celebrate, and include families who do not identify as Chinese. Of note, 70% of the families at CAIS do not speak Mandarin at home.



## Qualifications and Personal Attributes

The successful candidate will be an experienced educational leader inspired by and passionate about the CAIS mission and with understanding of, keen appreciation for, and deep interest in Chinese culture and language. In addition, the successful candidate will have the following qualifications and attributes:

- An educational leader with an entrepreneurial spirit who embodies CAIS's core values of Curiosity, Perseverance, Inclusion, Courage, and Kindness.
- Experience leading and working in a dual language immersion school environment.
- Highly collaborative, strategic, and dynamic communicator able to listen closely and to initiate clear dialogue with a dedicated and engaged community across a range of mediums.
- An energetic, visible, positive, and intentional community builder with ability to authentically and joyfully connect with students, faculty, staff, parents/guardians, alumni, and the broader community.
- Relational, inclusive leadership style rooted in empathy and humility, coupled with the courage to make difficult decisions in the best interests of students and the school community.
- Champion for academic programs that balance a nurturing environment with high intellectual standards and academic rigor.
- Able to navigate the current rapidly changing technological environment.
- Track record of building and leading high-performing teams, fostering a culture of mentoring, collaboration, and professional growth.
- Ability to recruit, develop, and retain top talent, aligned with the values and high expectations of a world-class independent and international school.
- Ability to work in partnership with the Board of Trustees to drive execution while engaging the Board as stewards of the school's mission, values, and future growth.
- Ability to engage, inspire, support, and lead a culturally diverse community around a shared vision.
- Successful leadership in fundraising, donor engagement, and building a culture of philanthropy.
- Mandarin language proficiency would be a significant asset.

# Learn More

Click on the links below to learn more about CAIS.

[School Website](#)

[Global Program](#)

[School History](#)

[High School Matriculation](#)

[Core Values](#)

[Summer Program: Camp Firedragon](#)

[Strategic Vision Planning 2026+](#)

[About San Francisco, California](#)

[Academic Program](#)

# 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 position;
- A current résumé;
- Selected candidates may be asked to submit responses to writing prompts and a list of professional references to:

## **Karen Neitzel, Ed.D.**

Senior Consultant

karen.neitzel@carneysandoe.com

## **Jennifer Wong Christensen**

Senior Consultant

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## **Malcolm McKenzie**

Senior Consultant

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## **Search Calendar**

January-March 2026: Interested candidates to reach out to consultants to express interest

March 15: Deadline to submit materials

Mid-April: Semifinalists interviews with Search Committee

Early-Mid May: Finalists visits to campus

June: Appointment

*The full-time compensation range for this position is \$500,000 - 600,000, plus a range of additional benefits. The starting salary is based upon, but not limited to, several factors which include years of experience, educational background, and expertise.*