

ARTICLE

A Conversation: A Head and Board Chair Get Candid About Their Partnership

Spring 2026

This article appeared as "Constant Contact" in the Spring 2026 issue of Independent School.



In every school, there are moments when leadership is tested—not just by budgets or strategy, but by uncertainty, feelings, and the weight of responsibility. In those moments, what steadies the institution is not the mission framed on the wall but the relationship at its center.

At Charles River School (MA), the mission lives at the heart of the partnership between Gabe Burnstein, head of school, and Kate Paglia, board president. It shapes how they lead, communicate, and make decisions together, grounding them when the work grows complex, emotional, or hard.

Their partnership isn't about perfection; it's about trust, accountability, shared purpose, and joy. Rooted in compassion, it keeps leadership human and serves as a constant reminder that every financial decision affects people. It shows up in how they listen deeply, respect each other's expertise, and pause to understand the lived experience behind the numbers. The mission doesn't eliminate hard choices, they say, it shapes how they approach them—with humility, care, and respect.

In this edited conversation, Burnstein and Paglia reflect on what makes their relationship work, and how a mission-aligned partnership allows governance to become not just a structure but a way of holding the school with both courage and care.

Kate Paglia: When you first started here, you had the faculty and the board of trustees memorize the school's mission. Why did you do that?

Gabe Burnstein: It's our north star and one of the reasons I wanted to be here. It's such an inspiring mission statement, right? That last line says our graduates know themselves, understand others, and shape the future of our diverse world with confidence and compassion. I felt like I could get up every day and chase that. Our world needs that. When I was coming in, people didn't know me or my values. Before we get to the how, the what, or the when, we have to start with the why. When we started working together, we were trying to ground everything we did in our mission.

Paglia: I think that framework grew out of a thoughtful transition. The previous board chair stayed on during your first year to help you settle into the role, then I began joining your meetings. From the start, being rooted in the mission's values was—and remains—a guiding light for us.

Burnstein: When I was interviewing, I asked if they knew who the next board chair would be. The search committee said it would be you. I'm curious why you wanted to take on the role.

Paglia: I love Charles River School and what it has done for my two children. It sees them for who they are and who they can become—and as a parent, that's everything. As a former classroom teacher, I still remember walking into an open house at Charles River School and seeing my graduate school education come to life—through thematic curriculum, hands-on learning, and an inquiry-based approach. I want my daughters, their peers, and future generations of students to have access to that experience. That's why I stepped into the role. I care deeply about the school's present and its future, and I know how directly strong leadership shapes both. I also understand how demanding the head of school role is, and I wanted to bring my experience as a teacher and a project manager in educational publishing to be a steady, trusted partner in this work. Serving as board president is a privilege—and one meaningful way I can help sustain and strengthen a school I truly believe in.

Burnstein: I had never been a head of school before, and I knew there would be one board chair for my first year and another the next—often a way to bridge an outgoing and incoming head. I appreciated how you and Leslie Judge, the previous board chair, approached the transition. What intentionality went into making sure we hit the ground running in your first year?

Paglia: As you said, I knew what I was signing up for. I served on the executive committee during your first year, so we were already talking regularly about board meeting planning, executive sessions, and confidential issues on campus. By January, I was meeting with you and Leslie, and the three of us were working through executive committee agendas and whatever was happening at the school. That gave me insight not just into the process, but into the partnership you were building.

Some of it was also organic. Within our first month working together, you and I attended the NAIS Leadership Through Partnership institute in Washington, DC. We discovered we both like to walk, which became a way to talk—not just about the work ahead, but about our lives and how we wanted to work together.

Burnstein: One of the things I appreciate is how we continually work on cultivating our relationship, which starts with the basics: We ask about each other's families when we see one another. We share book recommendations. We frequently verbalize how much we appreciate each other's strengths and how much we love the work we are doing together.

Paglia: And we laugh. A lot! We find moments of connection and we name the joy in the room: It is just more fun to do this hard work together than to do it alone.

Burnstein: I've talked to heads of school who say they haven't spoken to their board chair in weeks—or even a month—and that makes me anxious. With that kind of cadence, every conversation is something hard. I really appreciate that we meet every week, no matter what.

Paglia: I think this is really important when it comes to strategy versus operations. Meeting frequently allows us to focus on the school's strategic plan and forward-thinking initiatives, not just operational issues when things get hard.

Burnstein: One thing we say to each other a lot is, "No surprises."

Paglia: I think that's so important. I'd much rather have a 20-minute conversation than a two-hour one because something has blown up.

Burnstein: Sometimes I wonder, "Am I texting too much? Am I calling too much? Is this a normal amount?" But I don't want you to be surprised by what's happening on campus. And I really appreciate not being surprised as head of school—I don't want to walk into a meeting without knowing what we're going to discuss.

Paglia: We also use an inquiry-based approach as part of our governance practice, asking each other questions from my perspective as board chair and yours as head of school.

Burnstein: One of the key words in the mission is curiosity. And I think that's why we work well together—we start from that place, asking questions before jumping into problem-solving. That's what we want for students, and we have to model it, even if they never see us do it.

Paglia: Yes, not only for the kids, but for the trustees as well, as a way to engage with one another and work together on the school's strategic goals. You and I are always asking: What's governance and what's operational—the balcony and the dance floor? What are we solving for? Who needs to know? And, most important, how does this align with our mission? Even our harder conversations are grounded in our mission, values, and goals for the school.

Burnstein: One challenge of being head of school is that many adults are here to work with kids, not other adults in the way most jobs require. With that positional authority of the role, people

sometimes assume the head has all the answers. I don't know if it's the same for you as board chair, but I think we can model responses like, "I don't know yet," "I need to think about that," or "What do you think?"

Paglia: I think about board meetings and agendas the way I think about a classroom lesson: What are our objectives, and how do we engage the voices in the room? If it's just your voice or mine, that's not a strong agenda. I'm very intentional about creating space for all trustees to share their perspectives as we work on strategic initiatives.

Burnstein: If trustees are sitting passively and being presented to, it's not a joyful experience—no matter the content—and it's not how we teach. When trustees hear from one another and work together, it strengthens their relationships and understanding. You do a great job of making space for that.

Paglia: One of our more abstract values is compassion—the idea that compassion is a choice in how we act. Respecting other's lived experiences and listening to different voices helps create the compassionate, curious environment that we want to model for our students.

Burnstein: We're in the middle of our second year working together. Where do you think we can get better as partners?

Paglia: I think this goes back to you running laps between the balcony and the dance floor. You're running a school with 189 students and 54 adults, while also thinking about what that school will look like in five years. As board chair, my responsibility is ensuring the long-term sustainability of Charles River School. That means creating space in your day—and in our meetings—for more strategic thinking: the five-year financial plan, the next strategic plan, the next capital campaign. We need to keep carving out time to focus on strategy, not just react.

Burnstein: I agree. In a small pre-K–8 school where every family has access to the head of school, it's really easy to slip into "What do I have to do tomorrow?" You pushed me to make delegation one of my goals this year—empowering others on the leadership team and in the community so we can create more space for strategic work.

Paglia: I think about what our mission looks like in 2031. The world and the state of education is changing so quickly. What does it look like for Charles River students in 2031 or 2036? How can we plant seeds now that will meet the students where they are in five, 10, and 20 years?

Burnstein: Another way of putting it is how much of my day I'm thinking about the kids who are here now—and how much I'm thinking about the kids who aren't born yet. They'll show up at our doorstep four years from now, so what does the school look like for them?

Paglia: As board chair, that's the perspective I bring to the table every day. I remind myself that when we lead in unified, mission-aligned partnership, the entire school feels the benefit.

Families sense steadiness. Faculty experience trust. Trustees can focus on strategy, risk, and long-term vision. And the school is better positioned to fulfill its mission for future generations.

How We Talk

If you were to eavesdrop on one of our meetings, you would hear us return to a consistent set of questions:

- Is this a governance issue or an operational one?
- Is this a strategic priority?
- Does the board need to vote, or is this for information?
- Are we solving for a person or for a system?
- Who needs to know—and who decides?
- What perspectives are missing?
- What is the long-term impact?
- Is this aligned with the mission?

These questions slow reactivity and center institutional purpose over individual preference. They acknowledge the emotions inherent in school communities without allowing those emotions to drive governance decisions.

A Day in the Life

Here's a recent, ripped-from-the-headlines example: Something happens at school on a Friday. (Isn't it always on a Friday?) Let's call it an issue between students. At 11 a.m., under the "no surprises" ethos, Gabe texts Kate: "Do you have time to check in today?" A short phone call follows—complete with an accidental FaceTime and three inexplicable drops. We blame each other's phones and laugh. Once things are settled at school, Gabe follows up with a second text and a second brief call.

Five texts, two short phone calls, all in 20 minutes.

The goal isn't communication for its own sake or as oversight, but clear, purposeful alignment. Addressing issues in real time builds trust and creates space for shared inquiry, deeper analysis, and thoughtful decision-making.

The cadence also requires humility—the willingness to admit uncertainty, ask for help, and share information as it evolves. The trust it builds strengthens the institution, preventing misalignment and helping clarify priorities.

How We Work

We spend our time together thinking critically and creatively to more effectively serve the school. We meet weekly, without fail, and we almost always meet in person. And these meetings are working sessions shaped by a shared agenda:

- Review running “parking lot” document with ongoing issues that we both update and consider between meetings.
- Share updates from all sides—operational, strategic, or relational.
- Identify emerging risks.
- Prepare for upcoming board and board committee meetings.
- Reflect on school and board climate.

Between meetings, we send each other brief text messages and hop on quick calls.

National Association of Independent Schools

2001 K Street NW, Suite 1150

Washington, DC 20006

NAIS Office: (202) 973-9700

Bookstore: (240) 646-7052

