

INSIGHTS FROM
REGIONAL
INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL
ASSOCIATIONS
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Innovating for Post-COVID Admissions

BY EMILY CRETELLA, CURSIVE CONTENT

When a global pandemic suddenly pushes everyone apart, how do you move forward when it's your mission to pull people together?

That's the question regional independent school associations have grappled with since COVID-19 began disrupting business-as-usual in early 2020. Groups like the Atlanta Area Association of Independent Schools (AAAIS), Bay Area Directors of Admission (BADA), Independent Schools Admissions Association of Greater New York (ISAAGNY), and New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS) were forced to pivot quickly in order to fulfill their mission of fostering cooperation and collaboration among their member schools.

“We saw schools become more flexible, diversify their practices, and adopt new ways to connect with families. I think this will continue to evolve — the pandemic will have both a short- and long-term impact on our industry.”

—AMY-MARIE RIVERA, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ISAAGNY

“Collaboration is key to serving families,” said Brad Brown, Director of Admissions and Enrollment Management at Trinity School in Atlanta, GA, and Chairperson for AAAIS. “We need to draw all of our strengths together to best serve students and families and ensure our schools are sustainable.”

While schools were forced to take a hard look at current practices and reimagine every step in their admission process, these associations were tasked with helping to identify emerging best practices that could strengthen all member schools. What they saw were innovative, positive disruptions to the admission process.

“Every single school had to adjust something in their process, if not their entire process,” said Amy-Marie Rivera, who was ISAAGNY’s executive director until June 2021. “We saw schools become more flexible, diversify their practices, and adopt new ways to connect with families. I think this will continue to evolve—the pandemic will have both a short- and long-term impact on our industry.”



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE INNOVATIONS EMERGING FROM THE PAST YEAR, AND WHICH OF THESE NEW PRACTICES ARE HERE TO STAY? HERE'S WHAT AAAIS, BADA, ISAAGNY, AND NYS AIS PREDICT INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS WILL NEED TO WORK TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE IN THE YEARS TO COME. >>>

» A Recommitment to Family-Focused Admissions

The COVID-19 shutdown forced many independent schools to return to the basics and focus on the ultimate goal: helping students and their families find their right-fit school.

"Our member schools took this moment to redefine their admission processes to be more about serving families and less heavily focused on the evaluative process," said Rivera. "I saw new ways of thinking about connecting with families, understanding their hopes and dreams, and best meeting their needs."

"A lot of families like to have choices in the process, especially when the world is spinning out of control," Brown said. "We needed to think about how we could serve both the family that wanted to be a fly on the wall and do their own research, and the family that wanted to be immediately known and involved."

Maile Uohara, Director of Enrollment Management and Admissions at Punahou School (HI) and former Chief of Enrollment Management and Variable Tuition at International School of the Peninsula (CA), said the goal was to make the admission process easy and transparent for families. "It forced us to focus on what's actually important and to clarify our priorities. We had to ask, 'Why are we asking this of families? Because we always have? What is the actual purpose?' It created some great discussions," she said.

By recentring admissions on the student and family experience, independent schools were able to ensure that each step in the assessment process optimally served its purpose.

» More Equitable, Accessible Admission Practices

"How do you adequately assess a class of applicants if they don't have access to the same instruments?" asked Barbara Swanson, NYS AIS former Associate Director for Residential Professional Learning. "Accessibility has always been a huge issue, but this year it became even more evident."

The pandemic highlighted the barriers many families face during the admission process, and schools used this opportunity to provide more options and increased flexibility.

"Exploring an independent school is a huge time commitment, and it can be a challenge for many families to leave work for interviews, testing, and school visits," said Rivera. "Schools are now diversifying their processes to account for different family needs. Some are providing both in-person and virtual options for different touchpoints. Some are offering more flexible time options for interviews and open houses."

"Accessibility and equity must anchor our decisions when we're deciding on the best ways to serve our families," said Brown. "More and more families need the convenience of flexible scheduling, and I imagine that having hybrid in-person, online, and recorded admission events will continue moving forward."

Matt Suzuki, NYS AIS Associate Director for Professional Learning and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives, said providing more options proved smart for schools. "Things that schools did this year out of necessity may remain in place because they were good at engaging more parents," he said. "For example, virtual Q&As reached more parents than on-campus informational sessions ever could. This year showed that technology is our friend."

Brown noted that disparities in resources and access exist not only in the applicant pool but also among independent schools themselves—which makes collaboration even more critical. "Different schools are all working with the resources they have, and they're not always the same. We have to work together to ensure we emphasize equity, accessibility, dignity, and worth as an industry," he said.

THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS FOR SHARING THEIR INSIGHTS WITH US:



BRAD BROWN
Director of Admissions & Enrollment Management, Trinity School (Atlanta, GA)



AMY-MARIE RIVERA
Former Executive Director, ISAAGNY (New York)

“We don’t have to abandon norms, but we do have to continue to ask hard questions. What changes do we need to make? How do we market our programs? How do we engage prospective families?”

BRAD BROWN, DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT, TRINITY SCHOOL

» Customized Solutions and Continuous Self-Evaluation

What were long considered standard industry best practices were strained under the weight of the pandemic, forcing schools to reevaluate.

“So many schools talk about tradition. Those traditions can anchor us, or they can hinder us from meeting our current families’ needs,” said Brown. “We don’t have to abandon norms, but we do have to continue to ask hard questions. ‘What changes do we need to make? How do we market our programs? How do we engage prospective families?’”

“A lot of schools are stuck in the tried and true, but those practices are not always appropriate. Schools have to figure out what’s best for their unique situation,” said Suzuki. “Every school needs to take a look at what criteria they use and what assessments best suit their school community.”

Rivera noted that schools often rely on a process or a routine because it provides stability and consistency. “However, the pandemic deteriorated that infrastructure,” she said. “Schools need to be vulnerable enough to say, ‘This isn’t working; we need to rethink this.’ And then decide, ‘Whose voice should be heard around the table, and how can we create a plan to move forward?’”

» More Cross-Department (and School-to-School) Collaboration

One positive development among the pandemic’s challenges: the sense of belonging, camaraderie, and we’re-all-in-this-together spirit that emerged across school departments—and between “competitor” schools.

“We’re seeing more collaboration between the different school facets—from financial aid, to DEI, to admissions. These departments have always been adjacent, but now their collaboration is even more essential in creating a dynamic that will help schools absorb challenges and support their community members,” said Rivera.

“Sometimes it’s difficult to balance your immediate school needs with your commitment as part of an association with a broader goal,” said Brown. “I was very proud to see early on that a number of our schools put their minds together to create resources to benefit the collective.”

Uohara said it was this spirit of collegiality and collaboration that pulled many admissions professionals through this past year. “Nobody else in your life will understand the frustrations of what you’re going through as much as another admissions professional,” she said. “It’s important to continue to lean into each other.”

“Schools are gaining a broader perspective, moving past their own priorities and objectives to include a more multifaceted perspective of where they fit into their communities and how they can support those communities,” said Rivera.



BARBARA B. SWANSON
Former Associate
Director for Professional
Development, NYSAIS



MATT SUZUKI
Associate Director of
Professional Learning
and Diversity, Equity, and
Inclusion Initiatives, NYSAIS



DANA NELSON-ISAACS
Founder and Principal,
DNI Consulting



MAILE UOHARA
Director of Enrollment
Management and
Admissions, Punahou
School (Honolulu, Hawaii)

» More Nimble, Innovative Strategies

The pandemic proved to schools that it was possible to innovate quickly, pivot successfully, and overcome immense obstacles.

“Now that we’ve been through this, we know that we need to look at any and every scenario when planning for next year,” said Suzuki. “We now have this experience in our back pocket. We know we can do everything virtually, we know what we can enhance, and we know what we can improve upon. We just have to keep innovating.”

“We saw how important it is to speak directly to the value of independent schools, as well as the value of each specific school,” said Brown. “Schools came up with impressive solutions to showcase that value. Some did tours of the exterior, some demonstrated how outdoor space was used as an extension of the classroom, some did drive-through tours, some invested in virtual tour tools on their website, and some did self-guided tours.”

Suzuki saw many member schools innovating the assessment process. “Traditionally, group visits provide great information about younger applicants. But because we couldn’t do that, schools got creative. Some had virtual assessments, and some had parents send in videos of their children in social interactions. I think this type of creativity will continue,” he said.

BADA member schools collaborated on the development of a Kindergarten Shared Assessment. “It felt like a symphony of people, all in it together, sharing their strengths and identifying challenges in order to tackle the process from all angles,” said Dana Nelson-Isaacs, BADA Coordinator. “We all felt that it was the best way to support our families and our schools, and to keep our community safe and well.”

Overall, independent schools in every region rose to the challenges of the past year to create even stronger admission practices.

“Our distinctions as independent schools became apparent strengths during the pandemic because so many families were attracted to schools that could adapt quickly,” said Brown. “It changed the timeline for families who may have considered independent schools down the line.”

It was a year of difficult work, but it paid off. “When everyone saw their students come back through their doors, there was a joy and sense of purpose returned,” said Rivera. “It’s so easy to feel untethered in remote life. The more we can get back to one another, the better we’ll be—not to go back to the original, but to find a stronger sense of resonance and meaning in our work, our school mission, and our larger purpose.” +

AAAIS:

Brad Brown currently works at Trinity School in Atlanta, GA, where he has served as Director of Admissions and Enrollment Management since 2016. Before Trinity, Brad worked at his alma mater, The Walker School, in Marietta, Georgia, where he served in multiple roles, including Spanish Teacher, Soccer Coach, Director of Multicultural Affairs, Assistant Director of Admissions, and Director of Admissions. Brad is proud to have attended the Admissions Training Institute in San Diego, 2000.

ISAAGNY:

Amy-Marie Rivera has been a dedicated educator and leader for over 25 years. She received her master’s degree in Early Childhood Education and her advanced master’s in Literacy Specialization from Bank Street College of Education. She has been a classroom teacher, a reading specialist, and more recently, has worked in administrative and leadership capacities. Her work has always been centered on supporting schools and families, leading with compassion and equity. Amy-Marie has partnered with and engaged in a variety of professional development experiences over the years, including through NYSAIS, EMA, Center for Racial Justice in Education, WARE, The CARLE Institute, and others. Her work with ISAAGNY has focused on centralizing the organization and revitalizing its mission of ethical and equitable admissions practice for independent schools.

NYSAIS:

Barbara B. Swanson became the first Associate Director for Professional Development at NYSAIS in 1983. Prior to joining NYSAIS she was a product tester and trainer for a small software distributor in New York City. After she received her BA in Art History and MA in Library Science from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, she became the slide librarian for the Art History Department and then a public librarian in Altadena, California. Born and raised in Hawaii, she has also lived in Texas, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, California, Scotland, New York, and Tennessee. A passionate traveler, she currently lives in the Catskills, where she enjoys the spectacular scenery, warm friendships, and visits from her family. She retired from NYSAIS in June 2021.

Matt Suzuki is the Associate Director of Professional Learning and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives for NYSAIS. He previously was Director of Admissions at Rye Country Day School (NY). A history teacher by training, Matt holds a B.S.Ed. in History and Secondary School Education from Northwestern University, a Master of Education in Educational Administration from the University of Hawai‘i, a Master of Arts in Private School Leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University, certificates from the University of California at Los Angeles (College Counseling) and Harvard University (Administrative Fellows Program), and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania. He has been a regular presenter at NAIS’s People of Color Conference and a member of the NAIS Student Diversity Leadership Advisory Committee Task Force, NAIS Call to Action (think tank), Fairchester Admissions Directors and Faculty of Color Committees, and NYSAIS Diversity, Admissions, and Professional Learning and Collaboration Committees.

BADA:

Dana Nelson-Isaacs is the Founder and Principal of DNI Consulting, an intentionally small firm focused on enrollment and marketing in independent schools. She has 20 years of experience working within and between all levels of administration and faculty, parents, students, board members, and other community stakeholders and is an expert in market research, survey design and implementation, and enrollment management strategy. As a facilitator and coach, Dana leads her signature mastermind program, “The Assembly,” for a select group of school leaders each year and provides executive coaching services one-on-one and for school teams. Since 2013, Dana has served as the coordinator of the BADA consortium.

Maile Uohara is the Director of Enrollment Management and Admissions at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii. Previously she served as the Chief of Enrollment Management and Variable Tuition at the Silicon Valley International School in Palo Alto, California. During her time in the Bay Area, Maile served as the president of the BADA, a consortium of over 110 independent schools, for four years.