



2024

Insight Report

The Association for
Academic Leaders

The Association for Academic Leaders 2024 Insight Report

At the Association for Academic Leaders, our goal is to provide members the community, learning, and resources for them to be successful in your current and future roles. This report delivers on that goal.

Throughout the school year, Academic Leaders expertly balance dozens of competing priorities. From staffing issues to difficult conversations, each day presents a new set of demands. Academic Leaders rise to the occasion, adjust to new challenges, recalibrate the pace, and keep going.

All year, Academic Leaders have shared their top concerns: workforce development, student mental health, and Generative AI. More recently, you've added community polarization to the list.

During the school year, you deal with the day-to-day impacts of these challenges. Now, as the summer approaches you can take a deep breath and look back on what you've done, explore new approaches, and prepare for the next year.

You're about to have more time, focus, and opportunity for reflection. You're preparing for end-of-year meetings, where you'll ask your teams to reflect on the year and, at the same time, thinking about the start of the next academic year, when you'll plan new initiatives with your teams.

That's why we're bringing you our 2024 Insight Report now—because when you have the chance to step back and look at the big picture, you can see something new:

The seemingly separate challenges you've been wrestling with all year are all manifestations of larger shifts in how humans work, think, and interact.

When you recognize the root causes of these challenges, you'll see the larger cultural forces at play and develop effective approaches to the dilemmas your school faces. The Association for Academic Leaders is committed to providing the learning and community you need to lead, and bringing you essential resources just when you need them most, this summer and throughout the year.

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Introduction

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The seemingly separate challenges you've been wrestling all year are all manifestations of larger shifts in how humans work, think, and interact.

These larger forces impact independent schools in workforce development, student mental health, community polarization, and adoption of Generative AI.

When Academic Leaders can turn away from managing the impact of the shifts, and turn towards identifying and responding to the forces, they can develop more effective approaches to their challenges.

In 2023-2024, Academic Leaders consistently identified three issues as top-of-mind: workforce development, student mental health, and Generative AI. As you've started to look forward to 2024-2025, you've added community polarization to that list.

On the surface, many see these concerns as four discrete domains. Our 2024 Insight Report provides a different perspective:

The seemingly separate challenges you've been wrestling all year are all manifestations of larger shifts in how humans work, think, and interact.

When these larger forces affect independent schools, the impact is felt in workforce development, student mental health, community polarization, and adoption of Generative AI.

When Academic Leaders think bigger, turn away from managing the impact of the shifts, and turn towards identifying and responding to these large-scale forces, they can develop more effective approaches to their challenges.

These issues are all real and persistent dilemmas for independent schools and Academic Leaders. They're becoming more pressing because the solutions Academic Leaders have used in the past don't fit today's world. The old ways of doing things don't address the new realities, so traditional strategies become less effective.

As the educational landscape evolves rapidly, Academic Leaders need to recognize and respond effectively. By doing so, leaders can develop innovative strategies that will allow them to thrive. These four top-of-mind challenges stem from three major cultural shifts that are transforming the educational landscape.

Technological Change

When Generative AI made a splashy entrance in November 2022 the technology felt like a surprise to many. Technological innovation follows an exponential curve, but humans don't adapt to change that quickly. It's no longer possible to "keep up" with technology, and new developments emerge before the majority of humans have fully adapted to the current landscape. Generative AIs that use large language models have been especially challenging to adapt to because they capably (and to many, disconcertingly) mimic so many behaviors we believed were solely human.

Pandemic-Accelerated Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the pace of various social, technological, and economic transformations that previously would have unfolded at a more measured rate. Shifts that were expected to take years or decades, like remote work, distance learning, digitized commerce, were completed in days or weeks. When acute pandemic restrictions eased, many people didn't return to pre-pandemic behaviors. Instead, they continued to opt out of large and small communal experiences like office work, movie theater attendance, traditional schooling and volunteering.

Erosion of Social Cohesion¹ and Social Capital

Social cohesion is the feeling of belonging to a group; social capital is the value of those group connections. As wealth inequality in the United States continues to expand, the sense of shared prosperity has diminished. Traditional institutions, like religious communities and local social clubs, used to be places where people of different backgrounds met and built trust, but membership in these organizations has steadily declined.²

In this piece of writing, our goal is to look at four top-of-mind challenges Academic Leaders face, and connect them to big ideas beyond the education sphere like economics, technology, psychology, and sociology. When we have a wider perspective on our challenges, new strategies and opportunities can emerge. No one report could cover the manifold forces that impact Academic Leaders and their schools. We chose to focus on these areas because they take time and produce tension.

Since our beginning two years ago, the Association for Academic Leaders has brought educators big ideas, real-world expertise and pragmatic strategies for growth and change. The 2024 Insight Report, our flagship publication, is designed to be a springboard for exactly this kind of exploration. We invite you to delve deeper into these interconnected issues and discover how a broader lens can illuminate new paths forward for your school.