BATTLE ADVANCEMENT SOLUTIONS · INDEPENDENT SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

When everyone rows together: the power of a unified approach to school advancement

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When I stepped into the role of Interim Head of School at Forsyth Country Day School in December of 2024, I entered during a moment of transition marked by uncertainty, concern, and the natural questions that arise when a community experiences an unexpected leadership change.

In independent schools, transitions like this often cause organizations to shift into preservation mode. Leaders become cautious, operations tighten, and the general impulse is to hold the boat until a permanent head is named.

But I believed from the outset that our school did not need to slow down. It needed to pull together.

As I met with faculty, staff, parents, and other key constituents that winter, one theme emerged clearly: we had the people, the potential, and the passion to keep moving forward, even without a permanent Head of School in place. What we needed was shared direction and the confidence to continue pursuing projects that supported our strategic vision and, most importantly, the daily experience of our students.

So we made an early decision that would define the next eight months. Rather than wait for calmer waters, we chose to row together. In doing so, we facilitated almost $1.5 million in community investment during a period when many schools would have intentionally pressed pause.

~$1.5 Million

in community investment facilitated during an active leadership transition, without a permanent Head of School in place.

From pause to progress

In January 2025, five campus projects sat quietly on the shelf. They were worthy initiatives to improve the student experience, but they had yet to progress beyond the idea phase.

01	**Preschool Outdoor Classroom**	Funded by the first six-figure gift from a preschool family in the school's history.
02	**Lower School Creation Station**	A hands-on maker space blending play, creativity, and problem-solving at recess.
03	**The Library Glen**	A serene outdoor space supporting reading groups, story time, and reflective learning.
04	**The Fury Front Porch**	A senior class gift transforming an overlooked courtyard into a lasting gathering space.
05	**Middle School Renovation**	Outdated classrooms reimagined as flexible hubs of collaboration, creativity, and connection.

In most schools, this is exactly where they would have remained during a leadership transition. Conventional wisdom suggests that major projects should pause until a permanent head is in place to offer stability and long-term direction. But we decided to ask a different question: what if we move forward together, right now?

A team effort rooted in purpose

Our progress was not the result of any one person's efforts. This was a collective act of leadership: shared, distributed, and deeply collaborative.

Our Assistant Head of School and Director of Teaching and Learning ensured that every project decision reflected our instructional values and supported how students learn best. Our

CFOO brought the fiscal responsibility and transparent communication that built confidence with donors and project teams. Our Director of Facilities took high-level concepts and translated them into workable timelines without disrupting campus life. Our Architect-in-Residence transformed inspiration into purposeful design. And our Director of Philanthropy served as the integrator, connecting readiness, resources, and relationships so that each project could move at the right pace.

What united this group was not urgency alone. It was conviction. We shared a belief that every project mattered, and that accelerating them would tangibly improve the lives of our students.

“We spoke with one voice. And that unity generated the confidence that fueled every gift that followed.”

What donors actually respond to

By August 2025, all five projects were funded and complete. To walk that campus at the start of the school year was to see what collective leadership, organizational trust, and shared mission can accomplish, even in the middle of a transition.

Donors do not give to organizations that seem certain. They give to organizations that seem trustworthy. Trust is built not through a single compelling ask, but through the accumulated evidence of a team that knows what it stands for, speaks consistently about why it matters, and follows through on what it says it will do.

During those eight months, our donors did not hesitate because we lacked a permanent head. They gave, generously, because they believed in our direction and trusted the people communicating it.

Lessons for schools in transition

Leadership transitions are often viewed as times for careful maintenance, cautious messaging, and modest expectations. But our experience at Forsyth Country Day School reveals a different possibility. Moments of transition do not have to be moments of pause. They can be moments that reveal the depth of a school's culture, the strength of its leadership team, and the collective will of its community.

What we learned was this: true leadership is not tied to titles or timelines. It is born from clarity of purpose, trust in each other, and a shared commitment to what students deserve.

On the first day of school in August 2025, I walked across campus and visited all five completed projects. I saw students engaged and energized, exploring new environments that inspired joy, creativity, connection, and learning. And I thought about the donors who partnered with us and the trust they placed in our vision.

Leadership transitions come and go. But teamwork leaves a lasting legacy. At Forsyth Country Day School, that legacy is not defined by the transition we weathered, but by the progress we made together.

Key takeaways

1. Unified leadership amplifies donor confidence. When internal teams speak with one voice, donors respond with trust, even during transitional periods.
2. Leadership transitions do not require an institutional pause. With clarity, communication, and collaboration, schools can maintain or even accelerate progress.
3. Distributed leadership strengthens results. Empowering leaders across academics, facilities, finance, and advancement creates a mission-aligned decision-making model.
4. Align projects to student experience. The more directly a project improves students' daily lives, the more compelling the case becomes to donors.
5. Momentum grows when the whole team rows together. Cross-department collaboration builds capacity, breaks down silos, and fuels transformational outcomes.

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