



Toolkit for Designing a Signature Parent Event

Combatting Transactional Attitudes by
Building Dedicated Parent Communities

Independent School Executive Forum

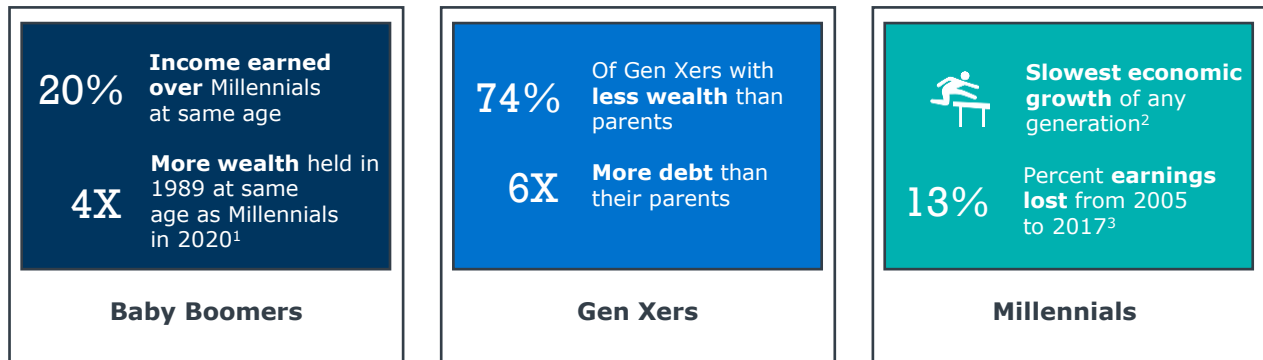
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Introduction: An Overview of Today's Parents

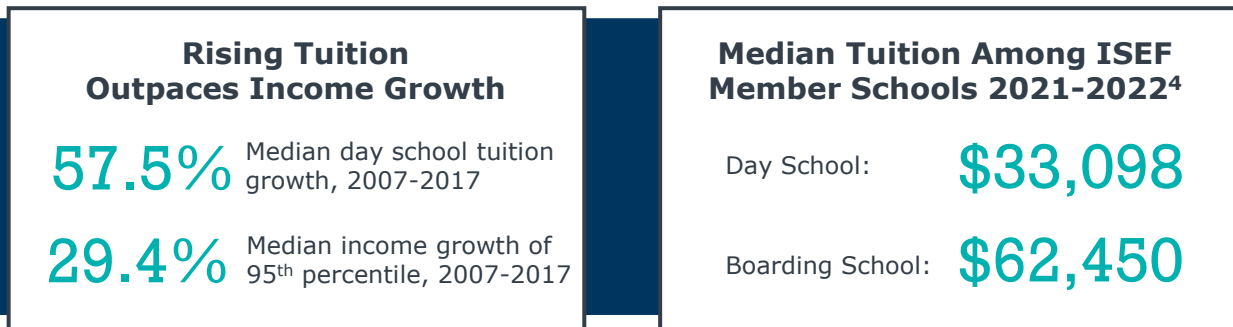
A recent EAB survey of independent school heads found that 81% agree transactional attitudes among parents have increased in recent years. Between the changing economic picture and the continuous rise in tuition, today's parents want to see what they perceive to be a return on their investment in their children's education.

This is, in part, due to the fact that the overall economic picture has looked worse across all major economic metrics for each subsequent generation since the Baby Boomers. Below is an economic snapshot of average Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials, which depicts how today's parents have lower incomes, less wealth and more debt on average than previous generations, including their parents.



Rising Tuition Exacerbates Transactional Natures

Additionally, parents today are paying significantly more for independent schools than in the past, as tuition has grown faster than the median income of even the most affluent families.



As tuition has increased, several things have happened: many schools have started serving a smaller percentage of households, parents have increased expectations, and the dynamic between school and family has shifted. This has resulted in a significant misalignment between the desires of today's transactional parents and independent schools' traditional approach to working with families.

Independent schools have typically operated as communities with shared goals, rich traditions, and close-knit relationships. But parents nowadays are looking at independent schools to fulfill a certain experience or deliver a specific outcome or goal that they seek for their individual child, regardless of the greater student experience provided by the school. To date, independent schools have not done enough to intentionally combat this increase in transactional attitudes among their parents.

1) 21.3% vs. 4.6% of US wealth

2) Since joining the workforce

3) By average millennial

4) Data from analysis of ISEF Member Tuition Rates for 2021-2022 school year. N=93.

Source: Currier, Erin. "How Generation X Could Change the American Dream," *Pew Trend Magazine*, January 26, 2018; Van Dam, Andrew. "The Unluckiest Generation in U.S. History," *The Washington Post*, Jun 5, 2020; Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics; DQYDJ, "2016 Household Income Percentile Calculator for the United States," <https://dqydj.com/household-income-percentile-calculator-2016/>; U.S. Census Bureau; NAIS Trend Book 2017-18; EAB interviews and analysis.

Introduction: An Overview of Today's Parents (Cont.)

Today's Parents Are Increasingly Lonely and Isolated

Beyond changes in the economic picture of today's parents, research shows that today's parents are spending more time on child-rearing activities than ever, with mothers spending an average of 104 minutes a day tending to children in 2012, versus only 54 minutes in 1965. Unfortunately, the added time spent with their kids has meant sacrificing their own sense of social fabric, as adults are increasingly unaffiliated and uninvolved with other adults.

In fact, studies found that more than one-third of adults 45 and older felt lonely in 2020¹, a number that jumped to 71% when it came to Millennials.² Adults today report a significant decline in the number of close relationships with friends, neighbors and coworkers, as well as a decrease in involvement in houses of worship.



33%

Average decline in number of close adult relationships between 1985-2004



23%

Decline in Americans' membership in houses of worship between 1999-2020

The result is that despite being more "connected" than ever online and through social media, today's parents are increasingly isolated.

An Opportunity for Independent Schools

Today's parents' desire for community presents a unique opportunity for independent schools, who are exceptionally well-positioned to satisfy this unmet need for connection. When done effectively, community-building events can help schools to counter today's parents' transactional natures by providing parents with a sense of deeper connection and belonging with the institution.

Indeed, investing in programming that builds community will enable schools to add to their value proposition and leverage the benefits of brand evangelism among their current parents. From increasing positive word of mouth to bolstering support for ongoing advancement and enrollment efforts, schools have a lot to gain from establishing stronger parent communities that foster lasting partnerships.

1) National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine
2) Cigna Health

Source: National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, "Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults", 2020; Jones, Jeffrey M. "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," *Gallup*, March 29, 2021; Hobson, Katherine, "Feeling Lonely? Too Much Time on Social Media May Be Why," *NPR*, March 6, 2017; "Loneliness in the Workplace," Cigna, "Today's parents spend more time with their kids than moms and dads did 50 years ago," *UCI News*, September 28, 2016; Miller, Claire Cain; 2020; EAB interviews and analysis.

What Is a Community-Building Event?

Independent Schools' Current Approach Falls Short

While many independent schools offer events or activities for parents to engage with the school community, they rarely reflect the level of intentionality needed to establish dedicated parent communities. Instead, these opportunities occur by happenstance and are centered around the students, not the parents. When schools fail to intentionally design community-building events for parents, they lose key opportunities to build strong bonds and risk leaving some parents out (especially those who live or work far from the school or do not feel as included on campus).

Key Elements to Establishing a Sense of Community

Fortunately, independent schools can use the following elements to build a sense of belonging for *all* parents on campus. Research has found there are four key elements to establishing a sense of community, two of which are particularly salient for independent schools:

● Membership

Feeling of belonging or sharing personal relatedness. Attributes include:

- ▶ *Boundaries*
- ▶ *Emotional Safety*
- ▶ *A Sense of Belonging and Identification*
- ▶ *Personal Investment*
- ▶ *A Common Symbol System*

Examples from independent schools: common language (e.g., mottos), school apparel and bumper stickers, access to shared spaces

● Shared Emotional Connection

Commitment, belief that members share history, common places, similar experiences. Attributes include:

- ▶ *Positive Ways to Interact*
- ▶ *Important Events to Share*
- ▶ *Opportunities to Honor Members*
- ▶ *Opportunities to Invest in the Community*
- ▶ *Chances to Experience a Spiritual Bond*

Examples from independent schools: school traditions, pep rallies, religious gatherings, ceremonies that recognize major accomplishments

Our research found that creating a signature parent event— an event that is unique to your school and whose intention is to foster a sense of belonging among parents through shared emotional connection and membership at your institution – is an effective way to build community.

How to Use this Toolkit

- 1 Use the foundational guidance** on pages five and six to create a signature parent event that is inclusive, accessible, and effective.
- 2 Connect with your dedicated EAB advisor** for any of the supports outlined on page six as you embark on planning your own signature parent event.
- 3 Review the case study** on page eight for an in-depth look at an event in practice. This example from Columbus Academy showcases how a signature parent event can help bolster connection and tackle existing challenges within parent communities.

McMillian and Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory", *Journal of Community Psychology* (1986).

How to Ensure Access, Inclusion, and Impact

There are three criteria that all signature parent events should have. Events should be:



1 Designed Intentionally as a Community-Building Activity

2 Accessible for All Parents

3 Opportunities for Connection Between Parents, Regardless of Background

Use the following guidance to ensure that your signature parent event meets these criteria, resulting in a successful and effective event.



Designed Intentionally as a Community-Building Activity

Elevate Event Significance

Take steps to demonstrate your event's importance by investing in marketing, showing leadership buy-in, or involving the board when possible.

Solicit Feedback

Distribute a survey after each event to collect feedback on areas of strength and opportunities for improvement in future events.



Accessible for All Parents

Charge Nominal Fee (If Any)

While a fee can encourage parent commitment to attend, be sure to keep fees low so that all interested families can join.

Provide Childcare

Provide childcare onsite to allow parents with children of varying ages to attend.



Opportunities for Connection, Regardless of Background

Set Clear Expectations

Establish a set of conversation or behavioral norms for event attendees and place them in high traffic spaces so all parents will see them.

Guiding Questions and Working With EAB

Designing Your Own Signature Parent Event

As your team considers the right event for your community, consider the following guiding questions. Be sure to work with your leadership teams and Board members to brainstorm ideas:

- What are events that could be unique to your school (e.g., tie into existing programming, play off a distinctive campus feature or amenity, highlight a distinguishing element of your mission or identity?)
- Are there any existing events that stand out from your Advancement or Enrollment Teams that could be repurposed as a signature parent event?
- Is there an event that could work well on an annual basis (e.g., tied to seasons, become a part of major school-year milestones, complement yearly student programming)?
- What kind of events will appeal to the largest percentage of your parent community? What are parents already excited about or engaged with?

Next Steps: Work with EAB

Additionally, be sure to contact your dedicated advisor to set up a time with our experts. EAB is here help as you design your own signature event. These supports include:



**Providing
Planning
Support**



**Reviewing
Design Plans**



**Connecting
with Peers**

Case Study: Signature Parent Event in Practice

Columbus Academy, a PreK-12 School just outside of Columbus, Ohio, provides an excellent example of how to intentionally design a signature parent event with their Dinner of Great Conversations.

How the Dinner of Great Conversations Started

Columbus Academy realized that it had a problem within its parent community: despite the student body becoming more diverse and inclusive, the parents remained exclusive. Parent involvement at the school was dominated and defined by select groups of parents – and school leaders wanted that to change.

The goal of the Dinner of Great Conversations was to build relationships among parents from across the community—no matter where they live, the field in which they work, the age of their children, or their status as donors—through structured, intimate conversations that focused on their unique and shared values, beliefs, and experiences.

The Problem:

- An exclusive parent culture
- Community dominated by parent “cliques”
- Relationships harder to form for “outsider” parents

The Solution:

A Dinner Centered on Intimate Conversation

The Dinner of Great Conversations Logistics Overview

Each year, Columbus Academy parents receive an invitation from the Board to attend the Dinner of Great Conversations, which typically takes place on a weekday evening.

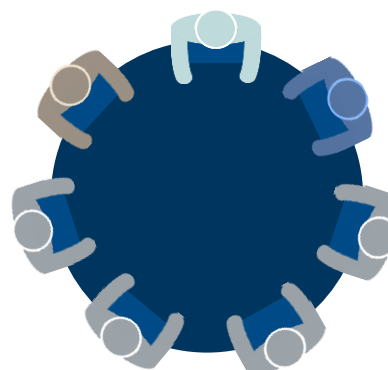
On the night of the event, parents arrive at the school’s campus, where they receive a nametag with different table assignments for each course of the meal. This ensures that they do not stay with just the people they know, and that they have an opportunity to interact with a wide variety of community members.

Each table includes a board member, an administrator, and an influential parent that stays at the table throughout the dinner courses to ensure focus and buy-in throughout the event. The remaining parents at the table rotate for appetizer, entrée, and dessert.

Typically, 150 participants attend the dinner, which garners positive feedback as a result of deep, meaningful conversations, and new bonds and friendships.

Structured conversations happen at tables with key stakeholders:

- Board Member
- Administrator
- Influential Parent
- Rotating Group of Parents



Ensuring Meaningful Conversation Between Parents

Pre-Determined Conversation Questions and Established Event Norms

During the event, parents are asked to answer a series of questions provided at their table. Unlike in a typical conversation that happens between parents—*where do you live? where do you work?*—these questions go deeper during each course and are structured to get past the superficial and build toward intimacy, vulnerability, and connection.

Administrators at Columbus Academy also provide a list of discussion expectations and norms to ensure that everyone at the table feels safe and heard. These two elements represent the intentional and proactive effort to ensure quality conversations can happen in each round of dinner, as these discussions are key to creating the shared connections at the heart of building community.



During each course, questions get progressively more personal, substantive to deepen connections

Sample Dinner Questions:

Round One

- If you could have witnessed one event in history, what event would that be?
- What is your favorite moment of the day and why?
- If you could bring back any fashion trend, what would it be?

Round Two

- What can you learn from your biggest mistakes?
- What traditions would you most want to pass on to your children?
- What are some of your pet peeves?

Round Three

- How has conflict led to change in your life?
- What creates prejudice and what can an individual do to overcome it?
- At what age should kids be exposed to current issues within our society? Do you feel like it is better to expose your kids to current issues or do you try to shield them?

Discussion Norms

1. Listen to listen and ask questions to learn.
2. Allow for quiet.
3. Be crisp.
4. Share the table.
5. Speak from the "I perspective".



Discussion norms ensure everyone feels safe, heard

"The goal of the dinner is to bring the community together around a meal. We want to **get to know people beyond the surface, into the values and beliefs that allow us to be fully 'us.'**"

Pascal Losambe

Assistant Head of School for Student Outreach, Columbus Academy

Key Elements and Outcomes



Tip: Columbus Academy asks groups of trustees to reach out to their social networks with personal invitations to ensure there is a mix of parents in attendance. Consider asking trustees, influential parents, and PTA members to extend personal invitations when hosting your own parent community-building events.

Administrators at Columbus Academy wanted to strike an important balance when hosting the Dinner of Great Conversations: ensuring that the event was inclusive and accessible to all families, while also making it stand out as a formal, intentional affair. To achieve this, they charged a nominal attendance fee and covered the remaining difference. School leadership found that the cost of the event was well worth its impact on the parent community.

By the Numbers: Event Budget and Expenses

\$10

Fee charged per parent to attend, ensuring parents felt committed without limiting access

\$20

Cost per meal for caterer, including beer, wine and full table service

\$5,000

Approximate total cost to the school to host event annually, including catering, childcare, etc.

Event Feedback Survey Proactively Seeks Parent Input

Following the Dinner of Great Conversations, administrators at Columbus Academy sent all parents a post-event survey to measure what had gone well, where there were opportunities for improvement, and to gauge the overall parent experience. Sample questions included:

- If you attended the dinner, please explain why you decided to. If you did not attend, please explain why.
- What did you like the most about the progressive dinner?
- Did you begin to establish authentic connections with individuals within our community that you did not have before? If so, explain how and why. If not, please elaborate.
- If you did not attend the dinner, would you attend a similar event if the board of trustees hosted another one in the future?
- How can the progressive dinner be improved in the future?
- What were some challenges you encountered during the progressive dinner?

Added Benefit: Expanding the Potential Pool of Board Members

In addition to bolstering a sense of community and building brand evangelism, signature parent events can have the added benefit of identifying new Board members who would have been overlooked in the past. By the end of the evening, Columbus Academy's Board had compiled a list of 30 previously untapped people they would consider for future positions. In this way, expanding the parent community also leads to the potential for expanding Board leadership.