



## 2026 Institute for Teaching Excellence

September 23-25  
Hilton Post Oak, Houston, TX

### Day 1

September 23 | 12:00 – 12:30 p.m.

#### Conference Check-In

Ballroom Pick up your conference name tag  
Foyer Beverages and light snacks available (lunch is not served today)

September 24 | 12:30 – 1:15 p.m.

#### Independent School Culture: A Refresher

Ballroom C A brief overview of independent school culture including the differences between independent and public schools, the role of ISAS, and communication with peers and parents.

September 23 | 1:15 – 1:30 p.m.

Break

September 23 | 1:30 – 2:30 p.m.

#### Active Learning Session

Ballroom C This session will provide an overarching frame for the three days we will spend together. Participants will work through three active learning situations with emphasis on simulating classroom experiences. Teachers will be asked to reflect on the activities in relation to their specific content with a particular eye on the ways in which the principles of the work can be adapted to their current school context.

*Kevin Burke, Tia Madkins, Maria McKenna*

September 23 | 2:30 – 2:45 p.m.

Move to divisional breakouts



September 23 | 2:45 – 3:45 p.m.

**Active Learning Breakouts** (breakout by division)

- PreK-4: facilitated by Lindsey Stenberg and Tim Reilly
- 5-8: facilitated by Byron Williams and Sara Zedlitz
- 9-12: facilitated by Amy Clark and Steven Fletcher

September 23 | 3:45 – 4:00 p.m.

Break

September 23 | 4:00 – 5:00 p.m.

**Teaching Experience Cohorts**

- People brand new to teaching in the past 3 years; *Maria McKenna*
- Public Teachers transitioning to Independent Schools; *Tia Madkins*
- People transitioning from other professions or Higher Ed to Independent Schools; *Kevin Burke*

## Day 2

September 24 | 7:00 – 7:45 a.m.

Ballroom E      Breakfast Buffet

September 24 | 7:30 – 10:30 a.m.

**Board Buses and Visit Local Houston Schools** (school is assigned in advance)

Lobby      EC (ages 0-4 years) Teachers depart for Host School  
LS (K-4<sup>th</sup> grade) Teachers depart for Host School  
MS (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade) Teachers depart for Host School  
US (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) Teachers depart for Host School

September 24 | 10:45 – 11:30 a.m.

**Divisional Breakouts – debrief the school visits at the Hilton**

- PreK-4: facilitated by Lindsey Stenberg and Tim Reilly
- 5-8: facilitated by Byron Williams and Sara Zedlitz
- 9-12: facilitated by Amy Clark and Steven Fletcher



September 24 | 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Lunch with Teaching Experience Cohorts (tables will be marked for groups)

September 24 | 12:30 – 1:30 p.m.

### Mapping Your Resources and Classroom Management

Ballroom C We will center our discussion on two main questions: What are the resources available to us and how do we actively deploy them in service of our students? The session will focus on various modes of mapping. Teachers will be asked to bring with them photos (or videos) of their classroom spaces, with particular attention paid to the ways in which the space is being utilized to foster learning. From there facilitators will work through asset mapping with teachers as well as other techniques in service of shifting thinking about the value of physical (and conceptual) space.

*Kevin Burke, Tia Madkins, Maria McKenna*

September 24 | 1:30 – 1:45 p.m.

Move to breakouts

September 24 | 1:45 – 3:00 p.m.

### Classroom Management Breakouts by Division

PreK-4: facilitated by Lindsey Stenberg and Tim Reilly

5-8: facilitated by Byron Williams and Sara Zedlitz

9-12: facilitated by Amy Clark and Steven Fletcher

September 24 | 3:00 – 3:15 p.m.

Break

September 24 | 3:15 – 4:30 p.m.

### Speed Innovating

Ballroom C Participants will attend 3 discussion groups during this session (20 minutes each).

*Topics are TBD and will be announced in August.*



September 24 | 4:30 – 4:45 p.m.

**Building Classroom Culture**

Ballroom C      What are ways that we can think about constructing learning environments that are collaborative and effective? This brief session will set the tone for dialog among colleagues about frustrations and opportunities in building student spaces open for collaboration. There will also be some ideas about classroom culture shared to take back to your own classrooms.

*Kevin Burke, Tia Madkins, Maria McKenna*

September 24 | 4:45 p.m.

Dinner and evening on your own

**Day 3**

September 25 | 7:00 – 8:00 a.m.

Breakfast Buffet

September 25 | 8:00 – 8:45 a.m.

**Lesson Planning**

Ballroom C      The focus here is twofold: What can I, as a teacher, take away and use for my classroom on Monday and: What larger planning structures might make my life easier—and my students' educational experiences stronger—in the long term? Teachers will be asked to bring lesson and/or unit plans from the current year for discussion. Facilitators will provide sample lesson and unit plans at tables. Groups will be asked to share their own lesson plans for feedback, but also to critique lessons provided for them as a way to envision differently considering their own planning processes.

*Kevin Burke, Tia Madkins, Maria McKenna*



September 25 | 8:45 – 9:45 a.m.

**Lesson Planning Breakouts by Division**

PreK-4: facilitated by Lindsey Stenberg and Tim Reilly  
5-8: facilitated by Byron Williams and Sara Zedlitz  
9-12: facilitated by Amy Clark and Steven Fletcher

September 25 | 9:45 – 10:00 a.m.

Break

September 25 | 10:00 – 11:15 a.m.

**Intentional Conversations**

Ballroom C      How to communicate effectively with students, parents, and others in your school life so that you are heard and your boundaries (and time) are clear and respected.

September 25 | 11:15 – 11:30 a.m.

**Closing**

**Workshop Leaders**

Kevin Burke

Kevin Burke originally fell into teaching because he didn't own a suit for an interview with General Mills. We'll call that providence. As a member of the ACE program at the University of Notre Dame, he became a high school English and Theology teacher in Phoenix, because of a course he took in college focused on the nature of meaningful work. Since then he has spent time teaching college writing on the East and Third coasts respectively. After ending his K-12 teaching career, he spent five years at the University of Notre Dame supervising practicing teachers in grades 2-12 in schools across the southern United States. He is now a Professor of English Education and department head at the University of Georgia. His teaching focuses on middle and secondary methods for English Language Arts and his research is centered on curriculum studies as it intersects with sexuality, religion, and civic youth engagement. His recent professional development work is rooted in youth participatory methods for community-based research.



### Tia Madkins

Tia C. Madkins grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia in the prime of the ATL R&B and Hip-Hop music! She was a biology major at Boston University and after freezing for four years decided to get a master's degree in science education and a teaching credential at the University of Southern California. Since she comes from a family of teachers, Tia was destined to become a 3rd generation educator. She taught elementary school children in the Los Angeles Unified School District but has worked with children of all ages (PK-12) and was a science specialist and teacher educator. After leaving the classroom, she pursued a PhD in STEM Education at UC Berkeley. Tia is now an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the STEM Education Program at The University of Texas at Austin. Her expertise is in equity-focused teaching practices like culturally responsive teaching and supporting educators to redesign classroom environments to best support minoritized learners. She loves traveling internationally, shopping, and spending time with family and friends—especially on a beach spending quality time with her nieces and nephews!

### Maria McKenna

Maria McKenna was lucky enough to go to a high school in Canada where the arts were valued and had access to a phenomenal theatre program. She fell in love with theatre and as an undergraduate at Notre Dame, she studied theatre while adding a “practical” economics degree to the mix. One fateful summer of wearing a suit and heels each day to work at her “bank job” was all it took for her to know she was probably destined for something different. After finishing a graduate degree in Education from Northwestern University, she taught first and second grades at Free Union Country School, an independent, progressive, multi-aged focused elementary school housed in a log cabin built by parents at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Fast forward multiple decades, add four children, stay at home mothering, many other jobs, and a Ph.D. in Educational Foundations. Maria now teaches, researches, and writes as a professor in Africana Studies and the Institute for Educational Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame. She currently oversees all of the Mission Scholars Programs at Notre Dame for first generation, low income, and differently prepared students at Notre Dame. Her expertise focuses on youth and young adult empowerment, cultural contexts of education, ethical care in education, and Montessori education.