



2025 Department Chairs Conference

September 11-12

Hilton Post Oak, Houston, TX

all meeting rooms are on the second floor

Day 1

September 11 | 8:30 – 9:00 a.m.

Conference check-in and morning coffee

September 11 | 9:00 – 9:25 a.m.

Introductions and Welcoming

San Felipe

September 11 | 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.

Effective Listening and Conflict Navigation: Transformative Practices for Department Chairs

San Felipe This workshop is a two-hour experience designed specifically for department chairs navigating the relational elements of their work. Participants will explore listening techniques that transform communication patterns, develop strategies to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively in challenging situations, and engage with practical conflict resolution strategies tailored to situations they are navigating. Through a balance of reflective individual exercises and applied small-group practice, department chairs will identify their specific communication challenges and develop personalized action plans. Participants will come away with a toolkit of immediately actionable strategies to shift challenging interactions into opportunities for departmental growth and enhanced collegiality.

Lori Cohen, Lori Cohen Consulting

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

Richmond Lunch Buffet – sit with cohorts



September 11 | 12:30 – 2:30 p.m.

SEL Isn't Just for the Kids: Taking Care of Ourselves and Our Departments

San Felipe As department chairs, we often find ourselves in the in-between — leading a team while juggling our own teaching load, navigating directives from senior leadership, and supporting colleagues through both professional and personal challenges. It's a role full of purpose and excitement — but it also takes a toll.

This interactive session offers practical tools for caring for ourselves and the departments we lead. Grounded in nervous system science and adult SEL, we'll explore how the ongoing demands of school life affect our capacity to lead, connect, and sustain ourselves over time.

Key topics include the threat response in action, personal care in practice, and leading with relational care. You'll leave with tools to help navigate the complexity of this work — and space to identify a couple of key shifts you'd like to make, both for your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of your department.

Alan Brown, Learning to Thrive LLC

September 11 | 2:30 – 2:45 p.m.

Break

September 11 | 2:45 – 4:00 p.m.

Leveraging AI for Leadership Tasks

San Felipe Independent school department chairs juggle a wide range of responsibilities, from supporting faculty to aligning departmental goals with school-wide priorities. As generative AI tools become more powerful and visible, department chairs are increasingly looked to for leadership and informed guidance.

This session will explore how generative AI can enhance your work by streamlining daily tasks, expanding access to ideas and resources, and increasing your capacity to focus on the human-centered elements of department leadership: coaching teachers, making sound curricular and pedagogical decisions, and fostering meaningful professional conversations.

Whether you're just beginning or already using these tools regularly, you'll have opportunities for hands-on practice with thoughtfully designed, role-specific prompts. The session will also include time to reflect, exchange ideas, and learn from peers — recognizing that the best insights often come from the community in the room.

Sarah Hanawald, Senior Director, Association for Academic Leaders



September 11 | 4:00 –4:15 p.m.

Break

September 11 | 4:15 – 5:00 p.m.

Cohort Meetings

San Felipe Review today's content with people who work in the same area as you do: English, Math, Science, Social Studies, World Languages, Electives, etc.

September 11 | 5:00 – 6:00 p.m.

Reception

Richmond Reception at the Hilton

September 11 | 6:00 p.m.

Dinner and evening on your own in Houston

Day 2

September 12 | 7:30 – 8:30 a.m.

Richmond Breakfast Buffet at the Hilton

September 12 | 8:30 – 9:30 a.m.

Unconference

San Felipe Participants will brainstorm for 10 minutes to determine topics the group wishes to discuss. Each topic will be assigned to a table, and participants will have 50 minutes to engage in as many discussions as they choose.

September 11 | 9:30 –9:45 p.m.

Break



September 12 | 9:45 – 11:15 a.m.

Giving Great Feedback: How to Use Self-Designed “Value Grids” to Give Teachers the Timely Feedback They Want and Need

San Felipe It’s essential to observe teachers regularly and give feedback that will promote professional growth—but 3 obstacles stand in our way:

1. Finding the time to see every teacher.
2. Knowing how to take observational notes that will be helpful.
3. Sharing these notes with teachers in ways that will inspire them to reflect on their practice.

This practical workshop will address all 3 of the above issues, focusing primarily on the “15-minute Drop-in” and using customized observation grids to share meaningful feedback with your faculty.

Joshua Wolf, Middle School Principal, The Park School of Baltimore

September 12 | 11:15 a.m.

Adjournment

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Speakers

Alan Brown



Alan Brown (he/him) is a resilience educator and coach who works with schools across the country to create cultures of belonging and balance. Alan spent 15 years of experience as a classroom teacher in the humanities and as a high school administrator, including as one of the founding deans of the High School Division at Grace Church School. As a faculty member at Mindful Schools, Alan was architect of multiple training programs, and supported thousands of educators to practice and teach mindfulness, and to create programs that support self- and community care.

Alan specializes in working with overwhelm and other extreme nervous system states. He has served as an LGBTQ+ youth crisis counselor with the Trevor Project, and he supports the Tourette Syndrome community as a facilitator of the Tourette Association of America's New York Chapter family and adult support groups. Alan is also the co-developer of MBIT (a Mindfulness-Based Intervention for Tics & Tourette Syndrome), and is currently collaborating with Johns Hopkins Medicine & Bowdoin College on a 5-year NIH-funded clinical trial to improve non-pharmacological treatment options for people with tics.

Alan holds academic degrees in the humanities from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship of the US State Department in Italy. Alan has completed certifications or advanced trainings in Somatic Experiencing™ Trauma Therapy, mindfulness in education, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), positive psychology & positive education, and vinyasa yoga.

Lori Cohen



Lori Cohen has over 25 years of experience in education as a teacher, coach, school leader, professional development facilitator, and author. As a consultant and coach, she has partnered with educators, schools, and organizations worldwide to transform teaching, learning, and school leadership. Lori is the co-author (with Elena Aguilar) of *The PD Book: 7 Habits That Transform Professional Development*, co-author (with Elizabeth Denevi) of *Integrating Educator Well-Being, Growth, and Evaluation: Four Foundations for Leaders* and of an upcoming book on lesson planning.

Sarah Hanawald

Sarah Hanawald spent over twenty-five years leading education innovation in curriculum and pedagogy in independent schools. During that time, she was a classroom teacher and advisor, department chair, technology director, and an academic dean at three North Carolina Independent schools. In just three schools, Sarah still worked in environments that included boarding and day, K-12 and just high school, single gender and co-ed, faith-based and secular philosophies. She currently serves as the Senior Director for the Association for Academic Leaders, a professional association dedicated to supporting those in academic leadership roles in growing in the competencies that empower them to further their schools' growth in meeting their missions.

During her independent school career, Sarah also worked as a consultant to schools seeking a strategic partner in making sense of the intersection of technology, curriculum, and pedagogy. As a consultant, Sarah worked with public, independent, and charter schools across the US.

Sarah has a BA from Duke University and an M.Ed. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Sarah resides in Raleigh, NC with her spouse and two children.

Joshua Wolf

Joshua Wolf has been an educator at The Park School of Baltimore for 31 years, where he has taught Spanish, served as the Modern Language Department Chair, coached boys varsity basketball, and since 2011 served as the middle school principal. Josh received his undergraduate degree in English from the University of Pennsylvania and a Master's degree in Educational Leadership from Columbia University, where he focused on teachers' receptivity to feedback. He has been published in Baltimore's Child Magazine and The Baltimore Sun. When not at school, Josh bikes, hikes, journals, makes short films, and enjoys time with his family.