



Frequently Asked Questions & Answers for Acera Head of School Transition, effective July 1, 2025

1. Why is the founder and head of school stepping down, and why now?

Courtney is eager to start a new chapter in her life in which she hands over the responsibility of running Acera to Heather, and transitions to an ambassador role focused on outreach. Courtney will be available to help with admissions, to support fundraising, strengthen Alumni engagement, or evangelize how Acera is a microcosm of what is possible for all schools.

2. What role, if any, will the founder have at the school after the transition?

Courtney will continue to support Acera in several ways through admissions, fundraising and Alumni support. For example, Courtney plans to catalyze a series of information sessions throughout Greater Boston on gifted students. She is also eager to support AceraEI, our public school outreach arm. While Courtney will not be on campus, she will be transitioning into a new role in which she hopes to help change the conversation nationally about how we, as a society, define the purpose of education for all students. Courtney will also remain on Acera's Board of Directors.

3. How was the successor chosen, and what was the selection process?

The process for finding the next head of school was a thorough and rigorous one that began last December. We are very fortunate that our board includes two former heads of school with collectively 30+ years of experience in Jane Moulding, former Head of Cambridge School of Weston, and Diane Rosenberg, former Head of Nueva School, who were both able to provide wise counsel throughout the process. Jane's and Diane's advice and engagement early on helped us align on a search process in which we sought an Associate Head of School, with succession planning top of mind. At that time, after interviewing several potential search firms, Courtney and the Board selected Educational Directions and recruiter Jay Underwood, himself a former head of a gifted school, to help us conduct our search for an Assistant Head of School, with the hope that we might ultimately be identifying Acera's future Head.

After posting the search nationally, Jay reviewed and interviewed a vast number of applicants presenting the initial pool to Courtney, who further whittled them down. We established a Search Advisory Committee that included representatives from all constituencies including: Acera parents, faculty, administration, alumni, and Board members. After extensive reference checking and initial interviews, the top five candidates were brought to this committee for a structured group interview. From there, three finalists emerged all with different experiences and strong backgrounds. Each finalist then came to Acera for a daylong visit which included in-person interactive workshops with staff, and

question / answer sessions with parents. The parent sessions were recorded and shared with the entire parent community; all were invited to provide input. The entire process revealed Heather as the break-away, preferred candidate for our school. Our recruiter shared that he had never seen such unilaterally positive feedback for a school leader candidate. Though perhaps unconventional, it was Courtney and the Board's desire to hire an Associate Head of School who had the full capability of becoming the next head, and to give her time to integrate into the community, deeply align around our mission and values, and allow both parties to assess mutual fit.

4. Is Acera ready for this kind of transition?

For over a year, our community has been engaged in creating our updated strategic plan. Quite fittingly, it is titled '*Building To Last*,' and functioned as a North Star in our search for a potential new Head of School. The strategic planning process included hundreds of voices (parents, faculty, students, and alumni) through 18 different input meetings. Of note, these discussions helped us further align around the centrality of gifted education as the core part of our mission, and to ensure that this mission endures through sustainable leadership and thoughtful succession planning.

5. What are the new head of school's qualifications and background?

Dr. Heather J. Pinedo-Burns brings over two decades of experience in gifted education to her role as Head of School at Acera, where she has been a part of the community since August 2024. Her dedication to innovative, inquiry-based learning and her passion for fostering the potential of gifted learners align deeply with Acera's mission. Heather is honored to lead the school into its next chapter, continuing to cultivate an environment where intellectual curiosity, creativity, and collaboration thrive for all Acera community members.

Heather holds an Ed.D. in Curriculum, Teaching, and Educational Leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University, where she also earned her M.A. in the Teaching of English. Heather holds a B.A. in English and Secondary Education from the College at Geneseo, State University of New York. Her career began as a middle school classroom teacher and literacy coach in public schools in Rochester, NY, eventually leading to positions in curriculum development, faculty leadership, and professional development focused on gifted learners.

Heather previously served as Head of Lower School at Speyer School, a K-8 institution for gifted children in New York, NY. In this role, her post-pandemic leadership emphasized strengthening community collaboration among families, faculty, staff, and administrators. She also elevated the role of the arts in gifted education by spearheading annual divisional art shows and dance performances.

Earlier in her career, Heather spent eleven years as the director of a lab school at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she prioritized equity and inclusion in

admissions, hiring, and curriculum. Throughout her tenure at Teachers College, Heather also served as an adjunct professor, teaching graduate courses in gifted education, focusing on differentiated instruction for gifted children.

An active scholar and speaker, Heather's work on gifted education, nature-based learning, progressive education, and the role of wonder and play in learning has been featured in peer-reviewed publications and at international conferences and keynote presentations. Most recently Heather concluded her role as a professional developer for NYC public school teachers through a Javits grant focusing on differentiated instruction for gifted learners. Heather has also served on the advisory boards of the Bright Day Foundation and the Geneseo English Department Alumni Association at SUNY College at Geneseo.

Outside of her professional work, she enjoys exploring New England's natural beauty with her husband, Aristides, and their two children, Frankie and Fern, along with their two French Bulldogs. Heather enjoys gardening, crafting, baking, exploring traditions new and old, and most importantly watching her children embrace each day with wonder and joy.

6. What is Heather's vision for the school future and how does it align with Courtney's original mission? Will the transition affect the school's current programs, values, or policies?

Constancy and continuous improvement have always been cornerstones for our approach in education. Heather believes strongly in our emphasis on individualization, choice and evidence based pedagogy and her leadership will help us deepen and expand that for all students. She is partnering with the instructional leadership team in the continuation of the curriculum mapping project. Heather has strong relationships with staff and in particular our teachers, which honor their expertise and will support them to continue teaching at Acera. On a day to day basis we predict your child will see very few changes.

7. What steps are being taken to ensure a smooth transition for students, parents, and staff?

Although it may be considered unconventional, Courtney and the Board intentionally decided last spring to hire an Associate Head of School with the potential to become the next head. This approach allowed her time to integrate into our community, experience our mission and values firsthand, and ensure a mutual fit for both parties. Since August 1, 2024, Heather has been deeply engaged in our community, building relationships with staff, parents, and students to ensure a smooth and seamless transition.

8. Will there be a new Assistant Head of School?

No, an Assistant Head of School will not be hired. At this time, Heather will work closely with the Management Team, the Instructional Leadership Team as well as the Upper and Lower School Coordinators to guide the school. The Associate Head of School position was intentionally created with succession planning in mind, and there are no plans to create an Assistant Head of School position at this time.

9. How can parents provide feedback or ask further questions during this transition?

There will be many opportunities to connect with Heather, including open dialogue “get-to-know-Heather” sessions during our Friday morning coffees and open Zoom meetings. Additionally, Acera will host three spring presentations on education and giftedness, where Heather will be a featured speaker. You are encouraged to attend and invite others! As a former Columbia University faculty member and international presenter, Heather brings a wealth of knowledge and insight on a variety of topics.

Our first gathering will be this Friday, January 17, 2025, for Coffee with Admin from 8:45–9:45 AM in Room 9. Heather will share the core principles that will guide her leadership of the school.

For additional questions, please contact Trent Ramsey at trent@aceraschool.org, and he will direct your inquiry to the appropriate person.