



Engineering philanthropy.

Building a High-Impact Development Committee: Insights for Independent Schools

By Catherine A. Voeks, Independent School Lead for The Compass Group

Introduction

In every school I've worked with—large or small, rural or urban—the same question inevitably arises: *How can we make our Board's Development Committee meetings meaningful?*

Too often, meetings become reporting sessions where the Director of Development walks through plans and numbers, members offer well-meaning suggestions, and everyone leaves without clear next steps or ownership of the work. The result? A cycle of time-consuming preparation, little action, and no real progress toward strengthening philanthropic engagement across the school community.

Now more than ever, independent schools need this committee to operate at its full potential. According to the 2025 *Giving USA* report (reflecting 2024 giving trends), giving to education—including independent schools—continues to rise, yet there is a decline in participation rates with fewer households giving overall. Schools need strong volunteer leadership to secure and sustain philanthropic support—and the Development Committee is central to that effort.

Purpose and Roles

The strongest Development Committees do more than receive updates; they are active partners in advancing philanthropy. An effective committee is well-informed, provides thoughtful feedback, and engages in generative discussions about how they can meaningfully support the school's mission and vision. When trustees are invited to serve as strategic collaborators, shaping direction alongside staff, the work becomes more rewarding. That deeper investment not only strengthens their sense of ownership, but it also makes them more effective ambassadors for the school's development efforts. In partnership with the Director of Development and Head of School, the committee's purpose is to:

- Guide long-term fundraising strategy aligned with the school's strategic priorities, ensuring that development efforts support both immediate and long-term sustainability.

- Play an active role in building relationships with major and prospective donors, helping to open doors, deepen connections, and build trust between the school and its supporters.
- Model and champion philanthropy by sharing stories of impact, making their own personal commitment, and reinforcing the message that gifts of all sizes matter. This is less about making direct asks and more about ensuring the importance of philanthropy is clearly communicated, celebrated, and easy to share.
- Partner with the Governance Committee to identify and prepare trustees for active fundraising leadership, ensuring every trustee understands their role and feels confident—not overwhelmed—in supporting development efforts.

In addition to staying informed and providing feedback, the most effective Development Committees dedicate time to exploring strategic questions that spark action.

Questions to Guide Committee Conversation:

- Are we effectively communicating about why philanthropy matters to our school community? Are we telling compelling stories of impact, and do we know what messages resonate most with donors so we can amplify them?
- What opportunities exist for committee members (and all trustees) to best support relationship-building with major donors and prospective donors this year? What specific opportunities exist to increase trustee visibility and deepen engagement?
- What barriers or hesitations might trustees or volunteers have in engaging more actively in fundraising, and how can this committee help address them?

Committee Composition

The composition of the Development Committee matters as much as its charge. While most bylaws allow non-trustees to serve, the aim should be to keep the group small, strategic, and action-oriented. Ideally, the committee includes trustees who understand their role as ambassadors for the school and are willing to engage actively in fundraising discussions. Non-trustee participants may also be valuable additions, particularly community members with nonprofit expertise, curiosity about fundraising, or leadership potential as future trustees.

Leaders of initiatives like the Annual Fund, Auction, and Parent Association can be invited to participate in targeted conversations when their insights are relevant, but keeping their ongoing presence limited helps the committee stay focused on strategy rather than operations.

Occasionally inviting other school leaders can also add valuable context. Cameo appearances

from the CFO, Academic Dean, or Facilities Chair can enrich committee discussions by connecting fundraising priorities to programmatic impact, financial sustainability, and campus needs. These voices give trustees real examples and compelling stories they can share, inspiring community support for philanthropy.

Questions to Guide Committee Composition:

- Does our current composition bring the right mix of influence, expertise, and community reach to strengthen fundraising?
- What is the optimal size and structure for candid, forward-looking discussions that lead to action?
- What voices are missing from the table that could help us grow philanthropy over the long term?

Leadership Roles in the Development Committee

An effective Development Committee thrives on strong leadership from both staff and trustees. Clear roles help ensure meetings are focused, collaborative, and action-oriented.

- **Director of Development (DoD):** Acts as the primary staff partner to the committee, providing data, analysis, and strategic recommendations. The DoD frames discussion topics, prepares committee members with background information, and ensures follow-up actions are clear and achievable. Their role is to guide—not solely report to—the committee.
- **Committee Chair:** Sets the tone for meetings, ensures the agenda stays strategic, and engages all members in meaningful dialogue. The Chair acts as a bridge between trustees, the DoD, and other Board members, encouraging active participation in fundraising activities and modeling philanthropic leadership.
- **Head of School:** Brings the school’s vision, mission, and funding priorities to life for the committee. The Head’s presence underscores that fundraising is a shared leadership responsibility and provides context for how philanthropy supports programmatic and strategic goals.
- **Board Chair:** Helps align the Development Committee’s work with the Board’s overall governance and fundraising responsibilities. The Board Chair reinforces the expectation that every trustee plays a role in advancing philanthropy and occasionally joins committee discussions to emphasize its importance.

Meetings that Matter

The frequency and format of Development Committee meetings should reflect the committee’s purpose and what it aims to accomplish. The strongest committees set clear annual priorities, aligned with the Board’s focus and the school’s strategic plan, and revisits

these throughout the year to track progress and adjust as needed.

Meeting agendas should be intentional, shifting from one-way reporting to strategic dialogue. Share updates, dashboards, and reports in advance—this simple step frees meeting time for discussion and decision-making.

While there is no one-size-fits-all schedule, many committees find that three to five meetings a year—often held virtually to reduce barriers to participation—are sufficient to stay informed and engaged. When an in-person meeting is possible, it can help build connections among members.

A 60-minute meeting might include a brief “mission moment” or story of impact to equip members with talking points about the power of philanthropy, a concise update on fundraising progress, and, most importantly, ample time for generative conversation that moves long-term fundraising efforts forward.

Questions to Guide Committee Collaboration:

- What conversations or topics would add the most value in advancing the school’s philanthropic success?
- How often and in what format should the committee meet to provide input when it will have the greatest impact?
- What stories, data, or examples would best equip committee members (and all trustees) to serve as effective ambassadors for philanthropy?

How Committee Work Evolves During a Campaign

When a school launches a major fundraising campaign, people often ask how it affects the work of the Development Committee. The answer is that the committee’s work doesn’t stop—it evolves. Think of a campaign not as replacing the committee’s work, but as expanding its reach.

The Development Committee remains essential in building relationships, supporting annual fundraising efforts, strengthening the school’s overall culture of philanthropy, and ensuring broad community engagement.

The Campaign Committee drives high-level solicitation efforts in partnership with the Head of School and often with campaign counsel. The Development and Campaign Committees work in concert, each with a distinct role, while collaborating to maximize success.

Close coordination is key. Clear roles and responsibilities, consistent communication and reporting, and opportunities for joint discussion ensure that campaign momentum enhances—

rather than overshadows—ongoing development work. In some cases, a trustee may serve on both committees to act as a liaison, fostering alignment in messaging, donor stewardship, and shared goals.

As campaigns unfold, schools can benefit from considering how these committees can best complement each other, avoid duplication of effort, and jointly advance both near-term campaign goals and long-term philanthropic growth. These questions can help guide that conversation:

Questions to Guide Committee Collaboration:

- What structures will promote effective communication between the two committees?
- What role can the Development Committee play in stewarding donors who give to both the annual fund and the campaign?
- How can the Development Committee help ensure broad-based support continues even as leadership gifts take center stage?

Conclusion

A Development Committee that meets simply to receive reports is a missed opportunity. Done well, this committee can bolster community engagement, sharpen strategy, expand the school’s philanthropic reach, and set the tone for a thriving culture of generosity.

By clarifying its composition, purpose, and approach to meetings—and by collaborating effectively with a Campaign Committee during a major effort—the Development Committee can become a cornerstone of ongoing fundraising success.

About The Compass Group

At The Compass Group, we bring deep expertise in board governance, development committee best practices, and campaign fundraising for independent schools. We welcome your feedback on this white paper and invite you to contact us to learn more about how we can partner with your school to unlock its full fundraising potential.