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A SCHOOL WHERE
PEOPLE COME
FIRST AND THE
NUMBERS FOLLOW

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Head of School



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Paragon Prep's academic performance is not an accident of enrollment cycles or favorable demographics. It is the result of a deliberately constructed school environment in which culture drives execution and execution drives outcomes. The premise is straightforward: when educators are trusted, students are known and systems are clear, performance compounds.

This philosophy is visible in how faculty growth is measured, how leadership access is structured, how technology is evaluated and how achievements are celebrated. Culture at Paragon is not a supporting element. It is the operating framework through which every decision flows.

That coherence between people, process and performance reflects the leadership behind it.

Under Lindsay Porter Hay, the school has treated relational trust and operational discipline as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities. The result is a campus environment where staff stability strengthens instruction, instructional clarity strengthens student confidence and student confidence strengthens measurable academic outcomes.

It is this human-centered yet structurally rigorous leadership model that led Education Insider to recognize Lindsay Porter Hay as its Top Head of School of 2026. The distinction acknowledges not only individual stewardship but the sustainable system she has built at Paragon Prep.

A Path Built in Unexpected Places

Porter Hay did not arrive at school leadership through a conventional route. She began her career as a camera assistant on TV shows, music videos and films, drawn to storytelling as a way to shape how children's experiences were seen and understood. When she became a parent herself, the demands of film production pulled her away

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from her family in ways she was unwilling to accept and she stepped away.

What followed was unplanned. She joined Paragon Prep in 2011 to temporarily cover for a lunch monitor on maternity leave. She never intended to stay. But Paragon turned out to be unlike any school environment she had encountered.

"At Paragon, school felt joyful. It was the first time I had experienced that. I remember listening to eighth graders passionately debate how to balance the federal budget. These were young students thinking critically, challenging one another respectfully and deeply invested in their learning," says Porter Hay.

The founders had created something she had no interest in walking away from. What began as a temporary stop grew into bus driving, then into marketing and video production, then into administration and finally into leading the school as its founders prepared to retire. She earned a master's degree in educational leadership along the way. When Spring Education Group's acquisition was announced, without her involvement in the decision, she took the time to research the organization thoroughly before deciding to stay.

So, she chose to stay. Today, she describes that decision as one of the clearest she has made as a leader. The SEG network has since become a meaningful operational support, providing expertise in financial planning, compliance, professional development infrastructure and leadership collaboration, freeing her to focus on what matters most at the school level: people, academics and community.

The Film Set as a Leadership Blueprint

What Porter Hay brought from the film industry was the systems. A film set is, by necessity, a highly coordinated operation. There is a call sheet. There is a schedule. Everyone knows their role, their timing and what happens if something falls through. Accountability is built into the structure.

She translated that framework directly into school operations. Building a daily schedule for 222 students and a whole staff team uses the same logic as coordinating a crew on a production: who is where, at what time and what needs to happen if something shifts. The discipline of pre-production became institutional planning.

The marketing instincts transferred just as cleanly. On a film set, you create conditions that make people want to show up and participate. She applies the same principle to school events. Paragon's annual field day event was reframed as the Knight's Tourney, complete with team competitions and a silver jousting lance as the trophy. The event's content remained the same. The framing made it something students invested in and talked about.

"You have to make it an event people want to be a part of. That is the marketing business and it is event coordination, making everything a big deal so that people want to participate," says Porter Hay.

That instinct for making the operational feel meaningful shapes how Porter Hay approaches the full range of her work, from enrollment tours to parent communications to staff recognition. Every process is designed not just to function, but to build the kind of environment people want to be in.

Access as an Operational Standard

One of Porter Hay's most deliberate leadership choices is accessibility. She does not manage the school remotely. She knows all 222 students. She knows their 222 pairs of parents. She knows her staff's significant others, their personal goals and what motivates them professionally.

That is a structural commitment. Her admin team of seven meets with her every morning. Teachers meet biweekly. Support staff meets weekly. These rhythms are the mechanism through which delegated leadership actually functions. Each member of the admin team owns a defined part of the school day and those meetings are where accountability, support and course-correction happen in real time.

"Accessibility builds trust," says Porter Hay. "When families feel heard and connected, teachers feel supported and valued and students know they matter, a school becomes more than a building. It becomes a community."

Parent engagement is built with the same intentionality. Monthly parent coffees, a parent book club, an annual State of the School address and a weekly newsletter all serve the same purpose: making families feel genuinely connected to the school's direction, not just informed of its decisions. Porter Hay approaches those relationships as a parent of four herself—

someone who understands, firsthand, what families carry when they drop their children off each morning.

Investing in Teachers to Sustain Student Outcomes

Porter Hay is direct about the connection between teacher experience and student performance. Schools that expect sustained academic results without attending to the professional environment in which their teachers work are, in her view, asking for something that will not hold.

Believe in your team. Invest in them. Build them up and trust their ability to do hard things. When you position people in roles where they can be successful and feel supported, they rise to the occasion.

Her approach to teacher development begins with hiring. She looks for lifelong learners, people who are coachable, reflective and genuinely curious about improving their practice. Once teachers are part of the community, she asks each of them, every fall, to share their personal and professional goals and what she can do to help them get there. The conversation is individualized support.

Along with that personal investment, she uses what she calls consistent, balanced pressure: regularly asking staff what they are working on, how they are growing and what their plan is to continue improving. The goal is momentum. People perform better when they are growing and growth requires a regular structure that takes it seriously.

The Bill Murray Award, a staff recognition tool in use for 20 years that features a digital image of Bill Murray with the message that the recipient is appreciated, follows the same logic. So is the weekly breakfast she brings for her team. Celebration is not a morale program but an operational signal about what the organization values and how it treats the people who carry its mission forward.

Technology on Paragon's Terms

Porter Hay does not resist technology, but she is deliberate about the terms on which it enters the school. Paragon operates as a tech-free campus, meaning students are not given screens as a substitute for human engagement. The concern is specific: children are losing the capacity for in-person conversation, for navigating conflict without a digital buffer and for forming genuine attachments with peers and adults.

At the same time, she sees real opportunity in how technology is used with intention. AI is introduced in age-appropriate ways across pre-K through eighth grade. Students

are taught how to access information critically, evaluate sources and understand the difference between a tool and a crutch. The school's World's Fair-style Art and Innovation Night asks students to frame technology as purposeful innovation, building something that solves a real problem or serves others.

The governing question for any technology decision is the same one applied to everything else: Does this serve students and does it make educators' work more sustainable? If the answer is no, the tool does not come in.

Leading through What Cannot Be Planned

The clearest test of any operational philosophy is what happens when the systems are under pressure. At the start of the current school year, Porter Hay's office manager resigned on a Friday without warning. The enrollment director had already transitioned back to the classroom. A new ancillary director was still in training. Suddenly, she was covering three major roles while running the school full-time, billing, enrollment and her own position, with four children at home and no margin left in her schedule.

What she learned from that period was a practical one: know your limit, name it and ask for help with specificity. She broke the work into small, manageable tasks that colleagues could absorb temporarily. She went to her leadership at Spring Education Group and asked for support directly, something she had not done before. The resources came. The positions were eventually filled.

"I didn't sleep. I was pushed to the limit. But in hindsight, now that I'm on the other side, it made me a stronger leader. It made me know my limit and know when I needed to ask for help," says Porter Hay.

That experience reinforced a broader operating principle that resilience is not about endurance alone. It is also about knowing when to distribute the weight and building relationships beforehand that make it possible.

Building Leaders Who Are Ready

Porter Hay's closing advice to aspiring heads of school carries the same operational directness that runs through her leadership. Know your why and make sure it aligns with where you are going every day. Stay close to students; that connection is what keeps the 'why' clear. Build relationships before you need them, because leadership depends on trust that cannot be manufactured in a moment of pressure.

And celebrate the wins, she adds, the significant ones and the small ones alike. Because in a school, where the work is human and the stakes are high, people need to know that what they are doing matters.

"Believe in your team. Invest in them. Build them up and trust their ability to do hard things. When you position people in roles where they can be successful and feel supported, they rise to the occasion," says Porter Hay.

At Paragon Prep, that is how the place runs. [ED](#)

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