



Senior Director of Philanthropy
The Taft School
Watertown, Connecticut

THE SEARCH

The Taft School (Taft), one of the nation's premier college-preparatory boarding and day schools, seeks an experienced and collaborative leader to serve as the senior director of philanthropy (senior director). This is a compelling opportunity for a skilled leader to oversee the critical areas of annual, principal, major, and planned giving, while also managing a select portfolio of major and principal gift donors. The senior director will expertly devise cohesive strategies to elevate these functions as the advancement enterprise raises sights under the new leadership of Kathleen Cleary, who began her tenure as chief advancement officer (CAO) in September 2025 and comes to Taft following a decade of leadership experience at Phillips Academy. This leadership role to strategically guide and elevate Taft's frontline fundraising divisions comes at an exciting time of growth and momentum as the School prepares to embark on a historic comprehensive campaign that will further Taft's mission, values, and culture: its insistence on excellence, passion for community and belonging, commitment to improvement and to service, and pride in school spirit.

The Taft School was founded in 1890 by Horace D. Taft, who believed that character, above all else, determines success in life. Nearly 135 years later, Taft students, or Tafties as they are colloquially known, continue to live out the School's motto of "Not to be served, but to serve" both in and out of the classroom. Taft's appeal is strong, as evidenced by its 1,650 annual applications and 16 percent acceptance rate. The campus attracts a mix of boarding and day students and prioritizes enrolling diverse classes: 42 percent of students identify as students of color; 19 percent are international students, hailing from 54 different countries; and 35 percent of the student body receives financial aid. The School's tradition of alumni giving is notable, with 34 percent of alumni donating annually, ensuring its ability to sustain excellence for the coming generations. Additionally, more than 90 percent of Taft's current parents contribute annually to the Parents' Fund.

Reporting to the CAO, the senior director will serve as a leader within the advancement enterprise and build and motivate a dynamic team focused on maximizing the level of support for the School. Leading by example, the senior director will manage a portfolio of individual donors and prospects to secure major and principal gifts, while overseeing and building a team of cohesive, high-performing gift officers across

all giving levels and vehicles, effectively growing the School's pipeline and volume of individual donors. As Taft continues to invest in the growth and sophistication of its advancement enterprise, the senior director is presented with the unique opportunity to build out these key functions and make a number of significant hires to the team, most notably in major and principal giving. The senior director will oversee a growing team of 8-12 professionals.

The ideal candidate will be a seasoned development professional with strong analytical, managerial, and frontline fundraising skills. The successful candidate will be a dedicated and motivational team leader adept at optimizing, retaining, and advocating for staff, while facilitating team success. The senior director will inspire collaboration across the advancement enterprise, most notably with colleagues in advancement services, alumni and parent relations, and constituent relations. Ideally, this individual will also bring a depth of experience in a comprehensive campaign setting. The senior director will be a self-assured, results-oriented development professional with a collegial and accessible leadership style. This individual must also possess strong organizational and program-building skills; a keen understanding of best practices in fundraising, and a comprehensive knowledge of all major advancement functions. Importantly, the incoming senior director will bring a deep appreciation for the mission, history, and values of Taft, along with an authentic and enthusiastic spirit to serve as an external representative of the School.

The Taft School has retained Jack Gorman of the national executive search firm Isaacson, Miller to conduct this important recruitment. Confidential inquiries, nominations, and applications may be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT THE TAFT SCHOOL

[The Taft School](#) opened its doors in 1890 with a broad – yet singular – mission that was ahead of its time: to educate the whole student. Originally known as Mr. Taft's School, Taft was established by Mrs. Robert Black near the turn of the century. She fortuitously asked her friend, Horace D. Taft, a Yale-educated teacher, and brother of the future 27th U.S. President, to lead the School. He accepted the job with enthusiasm, and for 46 years, he led Taft as Head of School through several name changes, campus moves, and new waves of students.

Throughout his tenure as the School's leader, Horace Taft remained committed to the holistic education The Taft School provided its students – both through rigorous academics in the classroom and extracurricular learning in clubs, sports, hallways, and dormitories. To this day, Taft students graduate with a strong sense of self, a sense of place, and a readiness to take on the world.

Taft's 226-acre [campus](#) features historic buildings with state-of-the-art and sustainable technologies. Notable buildings include: the Lady Ivy Kwok Wu Science and Mathematics Center, measuring at 48,000 square feet and featuring a PCR machine for DNA replication and an aquatic biomes center; the STEM Laboratory, which houses three makerspaces, a laser cutter, CNC machine, 3D printer, and interactive smart tools; and the Hulbert Taft Jr. Library with 58,000 volumes and full text databases with access to

more than 12,000 periodical articles. Additionally, the campus features multiple dance and art studios, two theaters, 16 tennis courts, two field houses, two ice rinks, and an 18-hole golf course. Serving as a community connector, Main Hall, through which every student and teachers walks multiple times each day, is a key feature of Taft's architecture and culture.

The Taft community is comprised of 583 students in grades 9-12, including a small group of post-graduate students. With 130 faculty, Taft students benefit from a five-to-one faculty ratio. While most students board (five-sixths of the student body), the remaining one-sixth commute daily from neighboring towns. Taft receives around 1,650 new student applications per year, 61 percent of which are from private schools and 34 percent from public schools.

Academics, Co-Curricular Programs, and Student Life

At the core of Taft's mission to educate the whole person lies an emphasis on high scholarship and intellectual endeavor. Taft translates that mission into a roadmap for learning that is bolstered by a broad, evolving, and innovative curriculum. This is further advanced by a robust Honor Circle, and built on a strong intellectual and academic foundation, all of which is brought to life by a dedicated and caring faculty, made up of highly educated experts in their respective fields.

Courses at Taft are spread out across six [academic departments](#): Arts, English, History and Global Studies, Mathematics, Science, and World Language. Each semester, students choose from more than 200 one-unit courses to fulfill the School's 26-unit graduation requirement. Taft also offers one of the nation's first independent study programs, which, for more than 50 years, has allowed students to pursue their passions through high-level, inquiry-based, self-directed courses of study. Taft students may choose to study away from Taft for a semester or two and/or enroll in [Global Online Academy](#) classes. Students may apply to participate in the two-year [Global Leadership Institute](#), a competitive co-curricular program linking Taft and Waterbury public schools through shared learning and leadership experiences. Students may also pursue a [Global Studies and Service Diploma](#), which pushes its students to engage locally and globally as agents of social change.

Additionally, Taft's experiential and applied learning opportunities prepare students from Grade 9 and onward to not only thrive in the 21st century, but also to lead the way as globally literate, intellectually robust, and ethically principled graduates and citizens of an increasingly interconnected world. A hallmark of Taft's academic approach is the continuous evaluation and modification of its academic program to reflect the most advanced teaching and learning methodologies, while providing students with unique opportunities to pursue their passions. As previously mentioned, students are also guided by a campus [Honor Code](#) informed by Taft's core tenet of "character, above all else, determines success in life." Every assessment, whether daily homework or a final exam, ends with the student's written pledge: "I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment," a testament and commitment to the importance of honor and integrity.

Academically and co-curricularly, Taft students are surrounded by the [arts](#). They may pursue artistic inquiry in a wide range of disciplines, from ceramics and sculpture to design and drawing, from dance and music to theater and video arts. Academic courses in the arts support the School's mission of educating the whole person and are required to graduate. Opportunities outside of the classroom – from centers and theater to gallery exhibits and travel – not only broaden and enhance learning, but also bring energy, culture, creativity, and balance.

Taft's [athletics](#) program is also an integral component of school life. Students at Taft participate in athletics at all levels – from intramural programs to 27 competitive varsity teams. Through physical health and wellness classes, in addition to the athletic program, all students are taught the value of health and wellness, the importance of a lifelong commitment to fitness, and the enjoyment that participating in all forms of athletics can bring. Taft coaches have built one of the most successful athletic programs in New England and encourage fair play, respect for opponents, a love of the game, competitive spirit, and team loyalty. As a result, students leave Taft with an understanding of hard work and good sportsmanship, a sense of responsibility to one's team and teammates, the ability to set goals, and an overall commitment to healthy living through physical activity.

FINANCIAL AND FUNDRAISING OVERVIEW

The Taft School endowment has a current value of approximately \$370 million. The long-term growth of the School's endowment, net of distributions to support operations, is the result of both strong investment performance and generous donations from its loyal donor base. In Fiscal Year 2025, Taft raised more than \$27 million in philanthropic contributions, of which \$6.2 million constitutes the Taft Fund and \$2.7 million constitutes the Parents' Fund. The School's alumni participation rate typically ranges close to 40 percent and parents have consistently given at or above 90 percent.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Peter Becker '95, Head of School

On July 1, 2023, [Peter Becker '95](#) began his tenure as Taft's sixth head of school. He received a bachelor of arts degree with distinction in religious studies from the University of Virginia and a master of arts in history from Yale University. He was awarded a Fulbright Grant to study classical history, architecture, and archeology at the American Academy in Rome, Italy. After working briefly as an investment banking analyst, Becker first worked with independent school students while on the staff of FOCUS (the Fellowship of Christians in Universities and Schools). He began his boarding school career in 2003 at The Lawrenceville School. In 2012, Becker was appointed head of school at The Frederick Gunn School, where he left a legacy of school innovation, improvement, and change. Becker is also a leader in the independent school educational landscape, attending and presenting at professional conferences, and serving or having served on the board of The Association of Board Schools, the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools, The Washington Montessori School, and as a member of the Heads and Principals Association.

Kathleen Cleary, Chief Advancement Officer

On September 10, 2025, [Kathleen Cleary](#) began her tenure as Taft's chief advancement officer, reporting to the head of school and serving as a key member of the senior administrative team. Cleary joined Taft following a decade at Phillips Academy where she oversaw the major and principal giving operation. Her work and leadership were integral to Andover's \$400 million *Knowledge & Goodness* campaign, and to the growth and elevation of their advancement operation. Cleary distinguished herself through her work on a women's philanthropic initiative, metric development and implementation, philanthropic mentorship, and strategic programming. She was instrumental in progressively increasing Andover's philanthropic success, and she and her team were responsible for nearly half of Andover's annual fundraising total.

Prior to her arrival at Andover, Cleary served The Nature Conservancy (TNC) as director of philanthropy. In this role, Kathleen led a robust team across major, annual, and planned giving; operations; and prospect management. She played a key role in recruiting new members to the regional boards of trustees, developing and executing a \$50 million regional fundraising endeavor, and contributing to the planning and strategy of an organization-wide \$4 billion comprehensive campaign. Cleary started her more than 20-year career in advancement at Mayo Clinic in major and principal gift officer roles.

Cleary earned a bachelor of science degree in marketing from the University of South Florida. She has also participated in numerous certificate programs through the Harvard Division of Continuing Education.

Board of Trustees

Taft is governed by a dedicated [Board of Trustees](#), chaired by Sarkis D. Izmirlian II '90, P'20, '22, '24. Nearly all 35 trustees are Taft alumni or parents of Taft graduates. They bring important expertise, insight, and a personal commitment to guiding Taft's future. The Board operates through a committee structure, and the Chief Advancement Officer works with the Committee on Trustees, to ensure a proactive approach to cultivating the next generation of board leadership, and Institutional Advancement Committee to oversee philanthropic engagement at Taft.

ROLE OF THE SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PHILANTHROPY

Reporting to the CAO and serving as a leader within the advancement enterprise, the senior director will provide the vision and strategic direction for annual, major, principal, and planned giving during an exciting period of growth and momentum for Taft. The senior director will oversee a growing team of 8-12. In leading the team, particularly in preparation for Taft's next comprehensive campaign, the senior director will provide clear direction and oversight of all department activities to develop and achieve annual goals, including budgeting, planning, and staff development.

MAJOR FUNCTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Provide leadership and guidance for the Taft annual fund and major, principal, and planned giving team to ensure donor engagement and revenue targets are achieved for both annual and long-term fundraising initiatives; oversee comprehensive team with a focus on strategy to cultivate, solicit, and steward existing and new donors to support School priorities.
- Create and manage a comprehensive donor development strategy for personal portfolio and direct staff member's portfolios; provide motivation, strategy, accountability, and structure for staff to engage in ambitious major gift fundraising campaigns.
- Serve as a trusted advisor to the CAO and other advancement leaders; build effective partnerships that both enhance the School's overall fundraising results and help leaders meet the goals of their individual programs.
- Leading by example, manage an individual major and principal gift portfolio to cultivate, solicit, and close gifts from key prospects at \$100,000 and above through multiple contacts and face-to-face visits.
- Partner closely with advancement directors across the giving levels to develop fundraising strategies for top School prospects.
- Support annual giving through solicitations and engagement.
- Serve in a supervisory capacity, providing leadership guidance and communicating the organization's goals.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The successful candidate will possess many, if not most, of the following skills, qualifications, and characteristics.

- An appreciation for an independent school education, a keen understanding of the mission and goals of Taft, and the ability to persuasively articulate its uniqueness.
- At least seven to ten years of progressively responsible fundraising and managerial experience, preferably within a comprehensive campaign.
- An ability to envision and propose new methods to perform tasks that support revenue generation; take thoughtful risks; and accept new and ongoing initiatives, objectives, and solutions to gain sought-after results.

- An entrepreneurial approach to fundraising, combined with professional integrity and commitment to the collaborative process.
- The ability to build bridges and strong collaborative relationships with all members of the advancement operation and the diverse body of Taft's alumni, parents, and students.
- Demonstrated success in personally cultivating, soliciting, and stewarding gifts at major and principal levels, including outright and deferred gifts.
- Supervisory experience of gift officers, including setting metrics, promoting professional development goals, and managing towards successful outcomes. Ability to create an environment where direct reports have the freedom and security to take initiative; deal with complexities with resilience, resourcefulness, and optimism; and appreciate open-mindedness, creativity, and agility in thought and tactics.
- Strategic planning, organizational, and communication skills to articulate the mission of the School and fundraising goals of fiscal year and multi-year campaigns.
- Flexibility and willingness to travel on behalf of Taft.
- A bachelor's degree.

LOCATION

The Taft School is located in Watertown, a historic and rural town in western Connecticut with just over 20,000 residents. Its location allows easy access to the conveniences and cultural attractions of Connecticut's larger cities and towns and the beautiful hills and open spaces of northwest Connecticut and the southern Berkshires. Taft is less than an hour away from Hartford's Bradley International Airport and less than 30 minutes away from both Amtrak and Metro-North train stops. Conveniently, Taft is also located two hours from New York City and two and half hours from Boston.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website below:

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/taft-school/senior-director-philanthropy>.

Jack Gorman, Partner
Nicole Poe, Managing Associate
Maureen Perry, Associate

Ryan Cheung, Senior Search Coordinator
Isaacson, Miller

The Taft School is an affirmative action-equal opportunity employer in accordance with regulations adopted by the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities. It is the policy of The Taft School to provide equal employment opportunities to all qualified individuals without regard to age, gender, race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, actual or perceived disability, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, veteran's status, genetic predisposition, or any other class protected by law.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by The Taft School. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by Taft would supersede any conflicting information in this document.