



President  
Public Education Forward  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

## THE SEARCH

Public Education Forward (PEF), one of Tennessee's most respected education-focused nonprofit organizations, seeks a visionary, entrepreneurial, and relationship-oriented President to lead the organization through a pivotal moment in its history. For nearly four decades, PEF has served as an independent catalyst for educational improvement in Chattanooga and Hamilton County, helping launch transformative initiatives in leadership development, teacher preparation, college access, STEM education, and workforce readiness. PEF's reputation among local educators is strong; its staff is talented, dedicated, and close-knit; and its legacy of innovation has shaped public education across the region in lasting ways.

Today, however, the organization stands at an inflection point: how can PEF best leverage its existing strengths and sharpen its areas of focus to impact public education—locally, statewide, and nationally—in the years ahead?

The next President will inherit an organization with deep community roots and significant accomplishments, while also facing important strategic questions about identity, sustainability, and growth. As the educational and philanthropic landscape evolves, PEF seeks a leader who can tell a compelling story about its impact, strengthen critical partnerships, diversify funding sources, and position the organization for its next era of influence and relevance.

The President will report to the Board of Directors and will lead a high-performing team recognized for translating bold ideas into thriving programs. The successful candidate will combine strategic vision with operational and financial discipline, serving simultaneously as chief fundraiser, trusted partner to educators and community stakeholders, and public ambassador for PEF's mission.

Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, has been retained by Public Education Forward to partner on this important recruitment. Inquiries, nominations, and applications may be directed to the firm, as indicated at the end of this document.

## PUBLIC EDUCATION FORWARD

Founded in 1988, Public Education Forward was established to support Hamilton County in increasing academic achievement and attainment for educators and students alike. Over the past 38 years, PEF has helped shape the region's educational landscape through landmark initiatives, including Leadership Fellows, Principal Leadership Academy, PEF Teacher Residency, Camp College, STEP-UP Chattanooga, and the development of Volkswagen eLabs. The organization has consistently served as an incubator of ideas, developing innovative models that are later adopted and scaled by school systems and community partners.

PEF's influence can be seen throughout Hamilton County schools. Over 130 school leaders have participated in PEF leadership programs, and numerous recipients of Teacher of the Year and Novice Teacher of the Year have been alumni of PEF initiatives. The organization is widely trusted by educators and school leaders and is recognized for its deep expertise in professional development, educational leadership, teacher training, and emerging educational technologies.

Today, PEF's work spans educator development, student success, workforce preparation, digital fabrication, career-connected learning, and educational innovation. Through partnerships with organizations such as Volkswagen Group of America, school districts, higher education institutions, philanthropic foundations, and other major employers, PEF continues to explore new solutions that prepare more than 40,000 students and educators for an increasingly complex future.

## CHATTANOOGA AND HAMILTON COUNTY

Located along the Tennessee River and surrounded by the Appalachian foothills, Chattanooga has emerged as one of the Southeast's most dynamic midsized cities. The region has experienced significant population growth, economic development, and investment in recent years, attracting new residents, businesses, and philanthropic resources. Advanced manufacturing, logistics, healthcare, technology, and entrepreneurship continue to fuel economic expansion, creating both opportunities and challenges for the region's educational systems.

As Chattanooga grows, ensuring that students and educators are prepared to meet the demands of a changing workforce remains a critical civic priority. Community leaders increasingly recognize the importance of connecting educational achievement to workforce development, career pathways, and long-term economic mobility. PEF is uniquely positioned to bridge these sectors, leveraging its credibility in education and its growing expertise in innovation, technology integration, and career-connected learning.

## ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT

The President serves as the chief executive of Public Education Forward, providing strategic, operational, and financial leadership as well as expertise in education. The President directs the responsible stewardship of the \$4.8 million annual budget and the \$9 million endowment. Beyond financial resources, the President oversees the deployment of PEF's most valuable asset: its staff. Currently, of PEF's 18 staff members, seven directly report to the President: the Vice President and Director of Innovative Learning, the Chief Financial Officer, the Director of College and Career Success, the Director of Teacher Residency, the Director of Impact and Analytics, the Director of Development, and an executive assistant.

The President reports to a 13-member Board of Directors, an accomplished and highly engaged body of leaders who bring expertise from across various industries in Chattanooga and Hamilton County. The board of directors meets quarterly to provide strategic counsel and advocacy for PEF's continued growth, relevance, and impact.

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

PEF enters its next chapter with substantial strengths and meaningful challenges. The organization benefits from a respected brand within education circles, strong relationships within the school district, dedicated staff, impressive facilities, and a significant endowment. It is consistently described as a trusted "doer organization". To deepen and sustain its work, the next President will address the following opportunities and challenges:

### **Define PEF's next era of impact**

The next President must articulate a compelling vision that honors PEF's legacy while clearly defining the organization's future role in an increasingly complex educational ecosystem. This leader will determine where PEF can have the greatest influence, balancing program incubation, systems change, and direct impact while ensuring that resources are focused on the organization's highest-value opportunities. They will translate strategic aspirations into an actionable roadmap with measurable goals, clear priorities, and organizational alignment. Above all, the President will position PEF as an indispensable partner advancing educational opportunity, workforce readiness, and community prosperity across Chattanooga, Hamilton County, and beyond.

### **Spur innovation while leveraging PEF's enduring strengths**

PEF has built its reputation by identifying promising ideas, developing innovative solutions, and helping educational partners scale successful programs. The next President will build upon the organization's longstanding strengths in educator development, leadership training, and program innovation while exploring emerging opportunities in technology, artificial intelligence, workforce development, and career-connected learning. They will cultivate a culture that encourages experimentation, calculated risk-taking, and continuous improvement, ensuring that PEF remains ahead of emerging educational trends.

At the same time, the President will thoughtfully evaluate which initiatives should be expanded, transferred to partner organizations, redesigned, or sunsetted.

### **Support and empower staff to deliver high-quality programs with measurable outcomes**

PEF's talented and mission-driven staff are widely regarded as one of the organization's greatest assets. The next President will foster a culture of collaboration, accountability, professional growth, and shared purpose that enables employees to perform at their highest levels. They will invest in leadership development, create clear expectations, and empower staff while ensuring organizational priorities remain focused and aligned. The President will champion a data-informed approach to evaluating program effectiveness, helping teams measure outcomes, demonstrate impact, and continually improve service delivery.

### **Craft a compelling narrative of impact as PEF's public face**

There is an opportunity to better communicate the organization's value and impact to broader audiences. The next President will serve as PEF's chief storyteller, articulating a clear, compelling, and consistent narrative that connects the organization's work to meaningful outcomes for students, educators, schools, and communities. They will elevate PEF's visibility through strategic communications, stakeholder engagement, and thought leadership, ensuring that partners, funders, and community members understand both the organization's mission and its results. The President will champion rigorous impact measurement and leverage data alongside human stories to demonstrate effectiveness and inspire investment. They will simultaneously consider ways that PEF can broaden its locally-oriented narrative to inspire and influence organizations and school systems across Tennessee and nationally.

### **Prioritize financial sustainability while charting the path forward**

PEF enters this leadership transition with a solid asset base and a history of prudent stewardship, but also with important financial decisions ahead. Like many education-focused nonprofits, PEF operates in an increasingly competitive philanthropic environment. Revenue is derived primarily from charitable contributions, grants, contracts, and investment income, while major expenditures support personnel and programmatic activities. There is a need to diversify funding streams, strengthen grant-seeking capacity, carefully evaluate program investments, and ensure that the organization's spending aligns with long-term sustainability goals.

### **Cultivate and nurture strategic partnerships**

PEF's greatest achievements have been realized through collaboration, and its future success will depend on the strength of its relationships. The next President will cultivate trust-based partnerships with school district leaders, educators, philanthropic organizations, business leaders, elected officials, higher education institutions, and community stakeholders. They will strengthen existing relationships, rebuild connections where necessary, and establish new partnerships that expand PEF's influence and effectiveness locally and nationally. The President will serve as a convener and connector, bringing diverse

stakeholders together to address complex educational challenges and identify opportunities for collective impact.

## QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

While no candidate will embody every qualification, strong candidates will bring many of the following experiences and attributes:

- A minimum of five years of executive leadership experience managing programs and teams in education, philanthropy, workforce development, civic leadership, or a related field.
- An entrepreneurial mindset coupled with a sophisticated understanding of emerging trends in public education, workforce readiness, and technology.
- A systems view of issues and opportunities; expertise in planning strategically and offering innovative solutions to challenging problems.
- Experience testing what works and does not work when seeking to expand the scope, scale, and adoption of new programs or initiatives in a K-12 environment.
- A track record of developing, articulating, and building buy-in internally and externally towards a clear vision. Expertise in motivating, inspiring, and moving others to action to achieve ambitious goals.
- Demonstrated success raising philanthropic revenue and securing institutional funding.
- Strong financial acumen and experience managing budgets, investments, and organizational resources.
- Experience building positive relationships with diverse constituencies and maintaining a service orientation and a diplomatic and low-ego approach to working with others.
- Strong communication, storytelling, and public-facing leadership skills.
- High emotional intelligence coupled with humility and low ego in the face of mission-critical work.
- A master's degree is preferred.

## LOCATION AND TIME COMMITMENT

This is a full-time role performed at PEF's office in Chattanooga. Occasional attendance at community events in the evenings or on weekends will be required. Travel within the local Chattanooga region will be required on an as-needed basis, with occasional travel outside of the region for education-related events or meetings.

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## 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: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/public-education-forward/president>.

Berkley Braden, Berlinda Mojica, and Maria Connor  
*Isaacson, Miller*

### **Commitment to an Inclusive Workplace**

PEF is committed to fostering a workplace culture grounded in respect, collaboration, and shared purpose. We believe our effectiveness is strengthened when a diverse group of individuals—bringing a broad range of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds—works together in service of students, families, and teachers in schools across Hamilton County.

### **Equal Opportunity Employer**

PEF is an equal opportunity employer. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or any other legally protected status. We are committed to fair, merit-based hiring and to maintaining a workplace where all individuals have the opportunity to succeed and grow.

*This document has been prepared based on the information provided by Public Education Forward. 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 Public Education Forward would supersede any conflicting information in this document.*