

POLY Q&A

The Footes were new to Poly Prep in 2015, and quickly embraced leadership roles in the community. Blake has helped spearhead Freedom from Bias, a parent-based diversity, equity, and social justice initiative, and has served in various Parents' Association roles in the lower and middle schools. Andrew, a Trustee since 2018, became the 24th Chair of the Board of Trustees in July. The couple discuss what they value most about Poly, what motivates their service, and priorities for the coming year.



Blake and Andrew Foote P'27, '29

Both of you devote an incredible amount of time to Poly Prep. What influences your commitment to the school?

Blake: For me, community. Poly creates such a strong community and connection between the students, the faculty and staff, and the parents. From the get-go in Lower School, we really got to know the faculty and staff. Getting involved with the Parents' Association was a big influence too, because the school really sees parents as part of the educational process. There's also a diversity of wonderful people in the Poly mix and that is a huge motivation. I want to spend my time making Poly the best it can possibly be, not only for my own children, but for the broader community.

Andrew: Education is kind of the family business so it's hard for me to not be interested in education environments. I grew up at an independent school, and my dad was headmaster at Horace Mann. My brother is a dean and I used to be a teacher, so the commitment comes pretty naturally. Still, when we started at Poly, I was surprised at what a special place it was. The diverse environment created an incredible community I really hadn't anticipated. That made me interested in devoting a lot more time and energy to it.

I think we did a better job of handling COVID-19 than about any institution in the U.S. It was easy to see the nature of the institution, and the focus on character in doing the right thing. It was a live example of perseverance and ingenuity that our kids all learned from.

As parents, what are you looking forward to most this academic year?

Blake: Seeing parents in-person and the return to school rhythms. Poly did a great job keeping the students in school last year during COVID-19, but understandably, parents didn't get the benefit from it in terms of events and activities. I'm looking forward to reconnecting with parents and meeting with faculty and staff more. I'm also looking forward to working with Dr. Omari Keeles, who began his role as Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in July. I'm excited about what Dr. Keeles will bring to this work at Poly in partnership with students, faculty/staff, parents, and alumni. It is important to embrace this opportunity to make Poly a model institution in this regard.

Andrew: We will also have both of our boys on the Dyker Heights campus. That will be interesting. Our eldest is starting seventh grade, so that's when a bit of real-life starts in terms of academics and sports. As a parent, that's the

stuff I'm super interested in and looking forward to. This will be the first year we won't be on the Lower School campus every day, but I should emphasize, Poly is two campuses and one school. That's just the truth: the culture and community extend to both campuses.

In terms of your respective leadership roles, Chairman of the Board of Trustees and co-Vice President of the Middle School Parent's Association, what are your priorities this academic year?

Andrew: First, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Nick Gravante '78, P'20, '23, because he initiated the work that made our Board more reflective of the community it serves. His leadership added 10 trustees, which added diversity the Board didn't have previously. We need to continue that direction. Speaking from my own perspective, I think the Board should continue to support Poly administration. COVID-19 and the effort to run plain old regular school last year, unearthed a huge amount of talent. These highly competent and creative voices need support, and we as a Board, have an opportunity to support school leadership, and empower them to be the best administration they can be.

Blake: This will be my first year as co-Vice President of the Middle School Parents' Association. Our Middle School Head Andre De Valle Jr. P'29, '33, started when COVID-19 hit, so he hasn't really had an opportunity to show his vision, so I'm excited to do more around that. Our Middle School programming is substantive compared to other programs and I think that can be better understood and appreciated within our community. It's something parents should be proud of and can do more to support, so one of my priorities will be helping to get that word out.

What makes you proud to be a part of the Poly community?

Blake: When we first came to an Admissions Open House it was not long after Superstorm Sandy. Rebekah Sollitto P'29, '33, Assistant Head of School, Strategic Initiatives, spoke about how the Poly community rallied to raise money for families who'd been left homeless and displaced by the storm. She was on the verge of tears, reading a letter from a family that will stick with me forever. It was really an example to me of how this community can rally around a crisis. Lo and behold, six years later, we rallied around the COVID-19 crisis. I think that really says something about the character of the Poly community.

Andrew: I think we did a better job of handling COVID-19 than about any institution in the U.S. It was easy to see the nature of the institution, and the focus on character in doing the right thing. It was a live example of perseverance and ingenuity that our kids all learned from. My boys aren't going to articulate exactly the lengths people went to, to make

school happen last year, but they learned a lot from it. I'm also proud of our identity. The three pillars of the school — Diversity, Pursuit of excellence, Brooklyn — it's sincere and legit. The diversity is greater than any institution that I've ever been affiliated with, and it fosters the excellent outcomes in academics, arts, and athletics. Having people learn from each other and from the differences between their own backgrounds and upbringings, that produces better outcomes. I think the world is starting to, slowly, learn that.

Doing it the Brooklyn way, means doing it our own way and having the confidence, creativity, and self-reliance to be able to believe that we can achieve great outcomes in the way that we want to rather than following some other institutionalized path. It sounds somewhat staid and Board speak, but there really isn't anything else to say, because it's legit.

Any advice for new families coming into Poly this year?

Blake: The Parents' Association offers a great way to get involved with the community. You can volunteer to be a class rep or volunteer for an event. Even just attending events like Homecoming and PolyCultura in the Lower School (a unique celebration of diversity through art and storytelling) offer ways to connect in the way you feel the most comfortable. Poly Pals is also important because not every family comes in at a traditional entry point.

Andrew: I can only speak from our experience; it was really easy to connect in the Lower School. Young kids don't come with an instruction manual and Head of the Lower School Dr. Francis Yasharian has a strong good sense of what parents need, and how to bring them together.

As Board Chair, I'd also advise new parents: Be responsive to all the information and appeals that will come your way about Annual Giving. Every independent school requires Annual Giving above and beyond tuition, and 100 percent of the community benefits from it. Annual Giving funds everything we've been talking about for the last hour, everything that is the richness in the tapestry of Poly Prep. My hope is that everyone comes to understand just how powerful the Annual Giving dollar is. It goes directly to the programs and the daily life for all our kids, every day of school.

Parents of John '27 and Luke '29, Blake and Andrew Foote joined the Poly Prep community in 2015. They reside in Brooklyn.

Board of Trustees At a Glance

Poly Prep is governed by the Board of Trustees, a body made up of current parents, alumni, alumni parents, and friends of Poly. Its role is to uphold Poly's mission, vision, and strategic goals, and to work in collaboration with the Head of School to set policy. The Board is charged with overseeing the school's financial sustainability, approving the annual budget, and supporting and promoting Poly's philanthropic initiatives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership, expertise, and resources Trustees provides was instrumental in keeping Poly open, resilient, and thriving.

Parent Association At a Glance

The Parents' Association is a parent-led organization with a board that represents Poly's three divisions. All parents are welcome to engage in the PA's divisional meetings, learn more about how they can engage in volunteer opportunities with the school, and most importantly share in the experience of building a community with their fellow families. The PA meetings are intended to be a forum for open dialogue, and a great learning opportunity for parents whether this is their first year at Poly, or their 10th. Parents who are interested in leadership positions are invited to serve in various PA leadership roles in the two year terms. Some examples of volunteer opportunities for PA members include serving as a class representative, helping to plan Poly signature events such as Homecoming, engaging in the efforts of the Annual Giving Team, or supporting the Admissions Team. To learn more about how you can be involved with the Parents Association or volunteering at Poly, please contact Jill Tejani, Parent Volunteer Liaison at jtejani@polyprep.org.

MEET OUR BOARD OFFICERS



“I think I can speak for all of us on the committee when I say that we have one of the strongest teams in Poly history. I’m excited to join Andrew and Blake on new endeavors and introduce them to our wider community in a way that makes us all feel valued and heard.”

— Robin L. Bramwell-Stewart '86, P'16, Treasurer



“The commitment we’ve made to providing leadership and direction for our students, faculty, and wider constituents is unparalleled this year. We are proud of the efforts underway that reinforce Poly as the leader in K-12 education in this city.”

— Arnold F. Mascali '84, Vice Chair



“As a new member of the committee, I look forward to helping Poly complete goals that will continue enriching the school academically, financially, and philanthropically. Together, we are dedicated to guaranteeing the success of Poly and its students.”

— Cassandra Metz P'26, Secretary