

# Where Opportunity Begins

An Interview with Lisa Dughi, Chief Executive Officer, NAF

**EDITORS' NOTE** Lisa Dughi is Chief Executive Officer at NAF ([naf.org](http://naf.org)), a national education nonprofit that provides access to opportunities for high school students and their communities. She oversees all functions and the strategic vision of the organization, which is responsible for supporting a network of over 600 NAF academies with over 113,000 students across 34 states and territories. Dughi graduated from Cornell University with a BS in policy analysis and management and received her MBA in marketing and operations management and strategic management from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. She has vast experience in implementing strategies, quantifying results, and effecting change within organizations, large and small.



Lisa Dughi

directly with industry professionals and real-world career experiences through internships, mentoring, resume building, mock interviews, and more. These experiences provide critical exposure to career options and workplace connections that enhance their success.

Our design consists of four elements: academy development and structure, curriculum and instruction, advisory boards, and work-based learning and internships. These components work together to enrich student learning,

align with school and district goals and standards, and foster collaboration between education and business leaders – strengthening local economies and talent pipelines.

At the heart of NAF's approach is the belief that if you can see it, you can be it. Through exposure to career options and chances to build upon one's aspirations, develop Future Ready Skills, and create critical workplace connections, NAF believes we can prime the next generation of leaders to be successful – no matter what pathway they choose.

**What have been the keys to NAF's growth and impact?**

NAF plays a vital role in transforming education by blending academic learning with career preparation, better equipping students for whatever post-secondary pathway they may choose. Our sustained growth stems from our commitment to innovation, leveraging technology and data-driven resources to enhance learning experiences. Education and workforce landscapes are constantly evolving, and while our mission remains resolute, NAF continues to adapt to meet the needs of students, educators, communities, and industry partners. We can't do this alone, and partnership is at the center of our growth and impact. By working alongside business partners who support work-based learning initiatives, we not only create access to opportunities for students, but also help companies build strong talent pipelines. Our design extends beyond philanthropy – it represents a strategic business imperative in the workforce of tomorrow.

**What excited you about the opportunity to lead NAF and made you feel it was the right fit?**

Coming from a corporate background, I sought a career that leveraged my skills and

**Will you highlight the history of NAF and how you define its mission?**

As we celebrate our 45th anniversary in 2025, we reflect on NAF's robust history and enduring mission. Our Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Sanford I. "Sandy" Weill, partnered with the New York City Board of Education in 1980 to establish the first NAF Academy of Finance. From that single academy, NAF has grown into a national movement, now supporting more than 600 academies across 34 states and territories, and 113,000 students annually, in some of the fastest-growing industries. For over four decades, NAF has championed a movement for immersive, career-focused education, integrating work-based learning into the high school curricula. By providing students with access to opportunities, we embolden them to explore their career aspirations and prepare for success. Together, we are redefining education by fostering meaningful experiences that transform the high school journey and open doors to future possibilities.

**How do you describe the NAF approach?**

NAF is where opportunity begins. We go beyond traditional CTE programs, blending experiential learning with career-focused curricula. Inside the classroom, students engage in hands-on learning experiences. Beyond the classroom, they develop future-ready skills and gain industry-specific knowledge that prepares them for success in any career pathway they choose. NAF academies connect students



NAF Next 2024 – NAF's annual professional development conference, bringing together the NAF network from across the nation to learn, connect, and be future ready. Lisa Dughi with the 2024 Sanford I. Weill Academy of Excellence Award Winner, Coral Reef Senior High School, Academy of Finance (Miami)





Calvin Coolidge Senior High School, Academy of Health Sciences and Academy of Mass Media site visit (Washington, DC)

offered deeper meaning. When I joined NAF as a director in 2013, I was inspired by the over half a million students it empowered. Now, as CEO, I remain humbled by the opportunity to lead an organization that has shaped the futures of so many young people. For 45 years, NAF has cultivated a generation of skilled, confident, and innovative leaders, contributing to economic growth and workforce development. It is impossible to have a bad day at NAF when you reflect on the 650,000+ lives transformed by our work. My passion endures because there is still much to do – ensuring every student has access to the opportunities they need to succeed. I take great responsibility in strengthening partnerships and expanding our reach to create positive effects for future generations.

**Will you discuss the strength and expertise of the NAF team?**

The team at NAF is familiar with a phrase I often like to use when illustrating the breadth of their work. It is, “Will it make the boat go faster?” which I learned after hearing about the 2000 British Olympic Men’s 8 Rowing Team story and reading *Will It Make the Boat Go Faster?* by Ben Hunt-Davis and Harriet Beveridge. The synopsis is about how an underperforming team of outstanding individual athletes was able to row their way to gold at the Sydney Olympics by channeling all their training, planning, and strategizing on one question, “Will it make the boat go faster?” Since starting my role as CEO, this has become something of a mantra for the NAF team – “Will this (program, project, relationship, effort, etc.) have greater impact on more students?”

A defining characteristic of our team is their unwavering passion and dedication. In a recent engagement survey, 100 percent of our staff affirmed that the work we do at NAF is

important. This shared commitment drives our mission forward. Our team members bring many perspectives and experiences, and I deeply value their collective contributions and invest in their professional growth. By fostering an environment where staff feel inspired and supported, we encourage them to be leaders not only at NAF, but in every aspect of their lives.

**How valuable is it for NAF to have such an engaged and committed board?**

Our Board of Directors is instrumental to NAF’s success. Comprised of leaders across various industries, they advocate for

career-connected learning and provide strategic guidance that strengthens our outcomes. Many have led some of the world’s largest companies, offering invaluable insights into both the education and nonprofit sectors. Sandy Weill’s vision set in motion a movement to connect high school students to their futures. He created the foundation for NAF to be a leader in work-based learning and career-centered education. As we embark on a new chapter under the leadership of our new Chairman, Greg Hayes, Executive Chairman of RTX, we are excited to expand our reach and deepen our impact. Together, we are committed to ensuring that all students have access to meaningful career prospects and successful futures.

**What are your priorities for NAF as you look to the future?**

Our top priority remains creating bright futures for our students. With increasing attention on the future of education and the workforce, NAF is positioned at the intersection of these conversations. We recognize that access to the right class, the right internship, or the right mentor can be life changing. Our focus is on expanding work-based learning experiences to ensure that students can define their career paths and achieve long-term success. Additionally, we aim to strengthen partnerships across the broader CTE field. By building coalitions and fostering collaboration, we can create even more opportunities for students nationwide.

Ultimately, our success is measured by the stories of NAF students who become alumni and remain engaged in our network. These industry connections, mentorships, and experiences extend far beyond graduation, preparing young minds for success in whatever path they choose. As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to expanding our reach and ensuring that every student has the tools to be future ready. ●



Forest Hill Community High School, Academy of Engineering site visit (West Palm Beach, Florida)