

How international schools are governed

Richard Gaskell presents and evaluates the results of ISC Research's governance report

ISC Research has published its first report into governance practice in international schools. The report shares research conducted with over 400 international schools about typical governance practice, procedures and responsibilities. We produced the report in collaboration with the Principals' Training Center and its Director, Bambi Betts.

Why did we consider this research of value? Many international schools, in large part, work in isolation, because of either location, independent management, or competition. As a result, most international schools have no way of knowing how other international schools structure their governance framework and practices, or where they can learn from the examples of others, except through anecdotal feedback. This research offers international schools the chance to benchmark their governance structure and practice against others within this unique sector of education. It provides a baseline for evaluation and review, allowing schools to consider alternative, possibly better, ways of governance.

The research explored typical approaches to the legal status, composition and decision-making of international school governing bodies. Analysis of these, and correlations made within the report, offer insight into just how diverse international school governance has become. Whether it exists as a single entity or as a fully elected and diverse board, governance plays a significant role in the ethos and moral purpose of an international school.

The status and structure of governing bodies

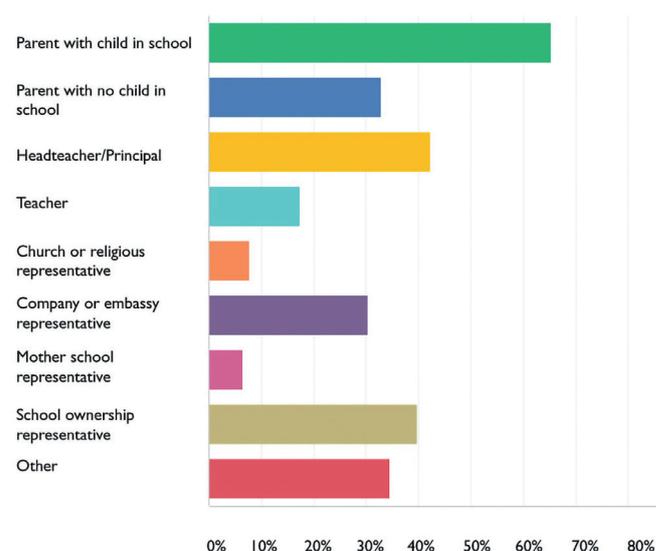
The research surveyed 403 international schools located in 44 countries, with a relatively even split of schools with a British or US orientation. 70% of the schools surveyed identified their legal status as not-for-profit. 21% were privately owned, and other statuses included charity, joint ventures, foundations, and government and diplomatic entities.

According to the research, international schools appoint or elect their boards in a wide range of ways. The most popular approach (almost 57%) is self-perpetuating; the board voting for replacement board members. 50% had no elected board members. Some schools elect board members at an annual general meeting of the parent body, while others are screened by the existing board members and then elected by the parent body – or by school staff. Others are appointed by outside groups such as the owning company, mother school, religious affiliation or embassy, and others adopt a mix of appointment approaches. 60% of the for-profit schools surveyed are fully self-perpetuating, with no appointments from external

sources or elections, compared to 42% of the non-profit schools surveyed.

The size and nature of the board varies extensively too, ranging from one to 60 members, although typically they are between six and twelve in number. Constituents include parents (with or without a child in the school), staff, and representatives from a variety of connected organisations. For most governing bodies (almost 80%), all members have voting rights. Others limit the voting rights of teachers or senior leaders who are part of the board.

Board size and representation

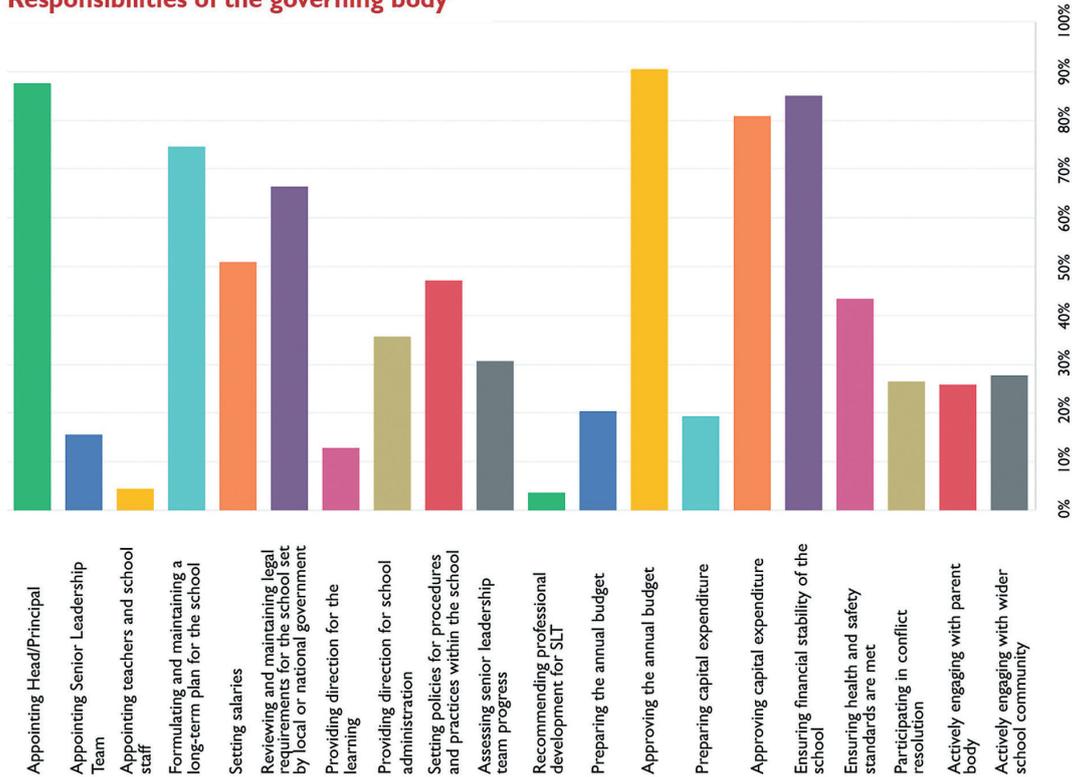


The frequency and structure of board meetings varies considerably from school to school. Almost 30% of the governing bodies in the research meet monthly, with 19% meeting termly and 17% meeting every half term. Over 81% conduct closed meetings, with some (almost 8%) conducting open meetings on occasion or by invitation.

Taking responsibility and making decisions

Responsibilities of international school governing bodies are wide and extensive. Most governing bodies in the survey said they are responsible for approving the annual school budget, appointing a new Head of school, ensuring financial stability of the school, approving capital expenditure and formulating and maintaining the school's long-term plan. More than half of the schools said their boards are responsible for setting salaries, as well as reviewing and maintaining legal

Responsibilities of the governing body



requirements for the school that are set by local or national government. Other responsibilities vary significantly.

71% of governing bodies make decisions by majority vote and 70% of the schools surveyed use and follow a board policy manual. When the responses were analysed against legal status of the school, the research found that 87% of not-for-profit schools make decisions by majority vote compared to 70% of for-profit schools, while 50% of both for-profit and not-for-profit schools work from a policy manual.

Although the responsibilities of school governance are significant and extensive, not many schools invest in training

for their board members other than initial induction. Board progress is also poorly monitored. 63% of the schools surveyed leave their board to self-evaluate board progress and 14% said there is currently no board assessment process in place.

A baseline for understanding

This research demonstrates that there are no clearly defined approaches to international school governance. However, international schools want to know how their governance structure and practice compares to that of other international schools, and this report helps to inform alternative ways. In addition, international schools want to know what their governing bodies should be doing and what they could be achieving. Bambi Betts, who advised and partnered with ISC Research on this report, asks: “How can governing bodies develop and improve? ... What are the benefits and potential challenges of moving from an elected to an appointed board? What are the dangers of modelling international school governance on that of a state or community school? Such big questions are frequently asked with little understanding of alternative frameworks in other, compatible international schools. This research provides a premise from which schools can start valuable conversations in order to move forward. It’s the first time international schools have had sufficient data to base their decisions regarding governance on anything other than hunches or personal experience.” We hope you will find that this first report helps to start such conversations in your own school.

Richard Gaskell is Schools Director at ISC Research: www.iscresearch.com

The report is free of charge and available from ISC Research at enquiries@iscresearch.com

Although the responsibilities of school governance are significant and extensive, not many schools invest in training for their board members other than initial induction. Board progress is also poorly monitored.