

WHITE PAPER

How International Schools
are Prioritising Wellbeing for
Staff and Students

October 2025

Synopsis

Wellbeing has become a structural foundation of international education. Academic achievement, student retention, and staff sustainability all depend on communities where people feel safe, supported, and able to flourish.

This white paper explores how international schools are responding to the growing demand for wellbeing from parents, governments, and staff. It highlights the unique pressures faced by international schools, including student mobility, cultural diversity, high academic expectations, and staff turnover.

Drawing on research and case studies, the paper identifies three effective approaches:

- embedding wellbeing into school culture,
- integrating wellbeing into the curriculum, and
- measuring wellbeing using data

Examples from international schools in Kenya, Germany, Romania, and the UAE show how these approaches can work in practice, supported by partnerships with suppliers.

The paper concludes with recommendations for school leaders and suppliers, emphasising that wellbeing is no longer optional. Schools that prioritise it build stronger communities, attract and retain talent, and stand out in competitive markets.



Synopsis 2

The Landscape of Wellbeing in International Education..... 4

The Unique Pressures of an International School Environment..... 9

 Student Challenges10

 Staff Pressures10

 School Dynamics..... 11

 The Interconnected Challenge.....12

Strategies for Wellbeing13

 A Cultural Approach: Wellbeing as part of school identity.....14

 Case Study: Light International School, Mombasa14

 A Curricular Approach: Dedicated time for wellbeing15

 Case Study: Strothoff International School.....15

 A Data-Driven Approach: Measuring wellbeing’s impact16

 Case Study: Transylvania College.....16

 Integrating the Three Approaches17

 Case Study: Deira International School, UAE.....17

Recommendations and Implications.....19

Conclusion21

Acknowledgements.....22

The Landscape of Wellbeing in International Education

Around the world, international schools are recognising a simple truth: without prioritising wellbeing, learning cannot thrive. Academic achievement, student retention, and staff sustainability all depend on communities where people feel safe, supported, and able to flourish.

Wellbeing, once seen as an optional add-on, is now a structural foundation of international education having been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which shone a light on the psychological, social, and physical pressures faced by the international school community. Today, wellbeing is central to how parents assess schools, how governments shape policy, and how educators define success.

In 2021, ISC Research released a Specialist Report, '[Wellbeing in International Schools](#)', and defined stable wellbeing as:

“The balance between an individual’s challenges and the resources they have to meet them”.

ISC Research, 'Wellbeing in International Schools Report', 2021

Based on a survey of international school staff, the report found that:

94% of international school staff are proud of the work they do most or all the time

82% were proud of the wellbeing support they provided students.

However, implementation challenges remain. A 2024 study by the IBO¹ highlighted the significant impact that teacher wellbeing has on the academic success of students, noting that:

“Teacher-related factors are the most essential elements impacting learning in schools”.

IBO, ‘Well-being for schoolteachers’, 2024

While parents increasingly value wellbeing, the pressure for academic achievement remains a significant challenge for international schools, particularly in competitive international markets. This tension is amplified in international schools, where communities navigate cultural transitions, support third culture kids (TCKs), manage high staff turnover, and serve families with diverse expectations. For these schools, wellbeing is not only important but essential for long-term success.

To understand how schools are approaching wellbeing today, it is important to look at the wider forces shaping international education, including government policy, parent expectations, and the expansion of student support systems with insights taken from [ISC Research’s market intelligence reports](#).

¹ IBO, [Well-being for schoolteachers](#), 2024

Government-Led Prioritisation

In several markets, wellbeing is becoming a policy requirement rather than a school-level choice. Governments are embedding wellbeing expectations into national frameworks, reshaping how international schools structure time, resources, and priorities.



China: Daily two-hour PE mandates in public schools are influencing international schools to rethink curricula toward personalisation, bilingualism, arts, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).²



United Arab Emirates: [The National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031](#) drives policy requirements. In Abu Dhabi, the [ADEK](#) mandates counsellors and referral pathways, while in Dubai, [KHDA](#) tracks student happiness through annual census data.³



United Kingdom: [Universal Design for Learning](#) frameworks support the implementation of phone-free policies, screen-time limits, and enhanced pastoral support systems.⁴

² ISC Research, 'China Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025,'

³ ISC Research, 'UAE Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025'

⁴ ISC Research, 'United Kingdom Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025'

Parent and Community Expectations

In other regions, parents are the primary drivers of wellbeing initiatives:



Singapore: Parents increasingly choose schools for their community and positive culture, seeing wellbeing as central to academic and personal success⁵.



India: Families in Mumbai value stress-free learning models and are turning away from rote approaches; many are now reluctant to send young children, especially girls, to boarding schools post-pandemic⁶.

Parental support is not, however, always consistent. According to ISC Research data just under 50% of school leaders feel they can rely on parents “*a great deal of the time,*” only a third of teachers feel the same⁷.

Expanding Student Support Systems

The most visible global trend is the expansion of structured student support, reflecting wellbeing as foundational for international schools:



Special Educational Needs (SEN): Dedicated SEN departments are growing across all fee tiers, with SENCOs, therapists, and psychologists increasingly a part of school staff⁸.



English as an Additional Language (EAL): Schools are moving from pull-out models to integrated “push-in” support, where EAL specialists work alongside classroom teachers. This shift recognises the link between language, belonging, and confidence⁹.

⁵ ISC Research, ‘Singapore Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025’

⁶ ISC Research, ‘India Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025’

⁷ ISC Research, ‘[Wellbeing in International Schools](#)’ 2021

⁸ ISC Research, ‘[International Schools Global Market Overview 2025](#)’

⁹ ISC Research, ‘[Meeting the Challenges of Shifting Student Demographics: EAL Provision in International Schools](#)’, 2025



Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): SEL programmes are becoming widespread, with some schools embedding wellbeing curricula from primary to upper secondary¹⁰.

Prioritising wellbeing effectively

The global momentum is clear: schools that embed wellbeing into culture, curriculum, and data-driven decision-making can:

- Better serve students and staff
- Strengthen reputation in competitive markets
- Navigate cultural, parental, and regulatory complexities effectively.

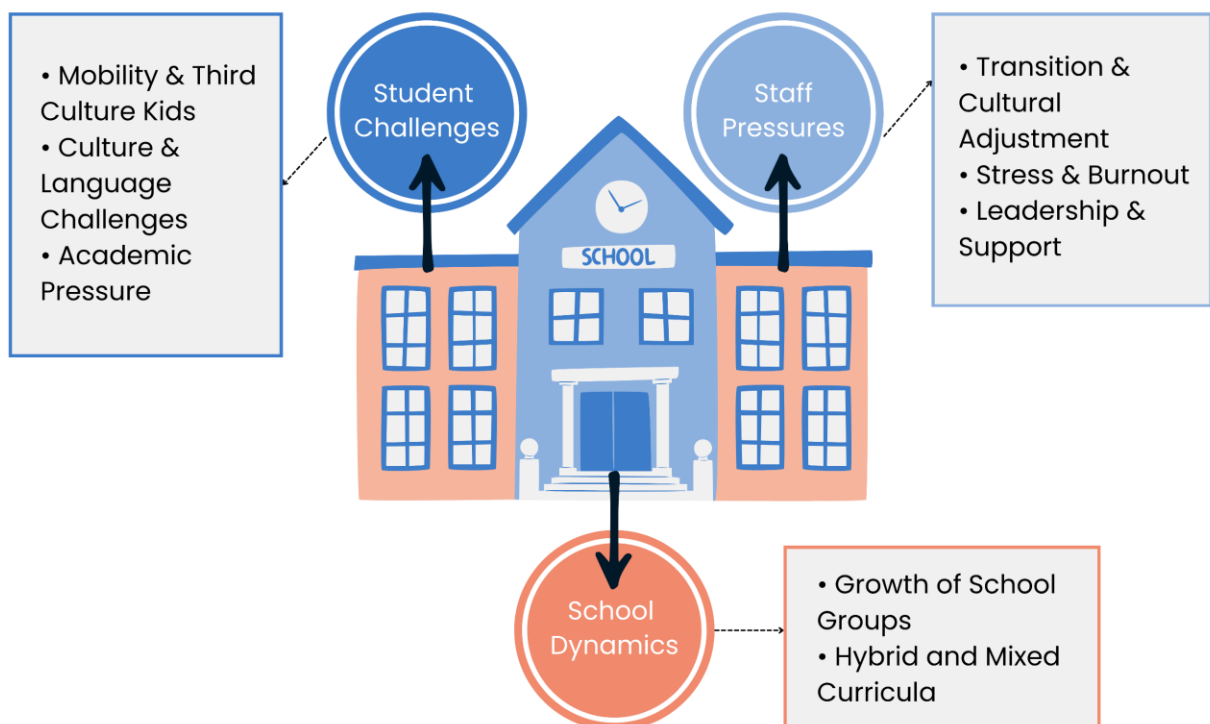
The question is no longer **whether** to prioritise wellbeing, but **how** to do it successfully.

¹⁰ ISC Research, 'Singapore Market Intelligence Summary 2024-2025'

The Unique Pressures of an International School Environment

While wellbeing is now a priority across education, international schools operate in particularly complex environments. Student and staff mobility, cultural diversity, and high academic expectations create overlapping challenges that require careful management.

To develop effective strategies for wellbeing, it is critical to understand this unique dynamic.



Student Challenges

Mobility & Third Culture Kids (TCK)

Frequent relocations, often every two to three years, disrupt friendships, social networks, and learning continuity. Many students develop adaptability, but repeated cycles of loss and adjustment can create a lasting sense of rootlessness.

Culture & Language Challenges

Students enter classrooms with different cultural expectations of learning, authority, and communication. They may seem well integrated but still struggle with unspoken social rules or classroom dynamics. Language fluency does not always mean mastery of subject-specific vocabulary, and supporting multiple nationalities requires tailored provision.

Academic Pressure

Rigorous curricula such as IB and Cambridge prepare students for global university pathways but can heighten stress, particularly when combined with mobility or gaps in learning. The additional challenge of presenting an international profile to domestic university admissions teams adds further pressure.

22% growth in the IB Curriculum at international schools since 2020

Staff Pressures

Transitions & Cultural Adjustment

Teachers and leaders face their own cycles of relocation. Each move brings new curricula, regulations, and community expectations. Adjustment takes time, and induction support is often inconsistent, affecting wellbeing and professional effectiveness.

Stress & Burnout

International school staff frequently take on broader responsibilities than domestic peers, with pastoral care and extracurricular activities, amongst others, added to their duty list. Supporting highly mobile students also requires significant emotional energy, often unrecognised or unsupported.

Leadership & Support

Staff wellbeing depends heavily on induction, mentoring, and professional development, but provision varies significantly between schools. Leadership turnover can also create uncertainty, impacting trust, policy stability, and staff retention.

54% growth in international school teaching staff since 2015

School Dynamics

Hybrid & Mixed Curricula

Many international schools now offer multiple curriculum frameworks simultaneously or hybrid approaches combining different educational philosophies. While this flexibility serves diverse range of needs, it significantly increases complexity for staff and students. Professional development and student support is essential but adds to existing pressures.

Growth of School Groups

The expansion of international school groups has created benefits such as shared resources and standardised policies. However, centrally designed wellbeing frameworks do not always fit local contexts, requiring careful adaptation to community needs.

38% of international schools belong to a school group

The Interconnected Challenge

These pressures rarely occur in isolation. Student mobility shapes classroom dynamics, staff turnover disrupts continuity, and curriculum complexity raises stress for both teachers and learners. Addressing one issue without recognising its impact on others risks creating short-term fixes.

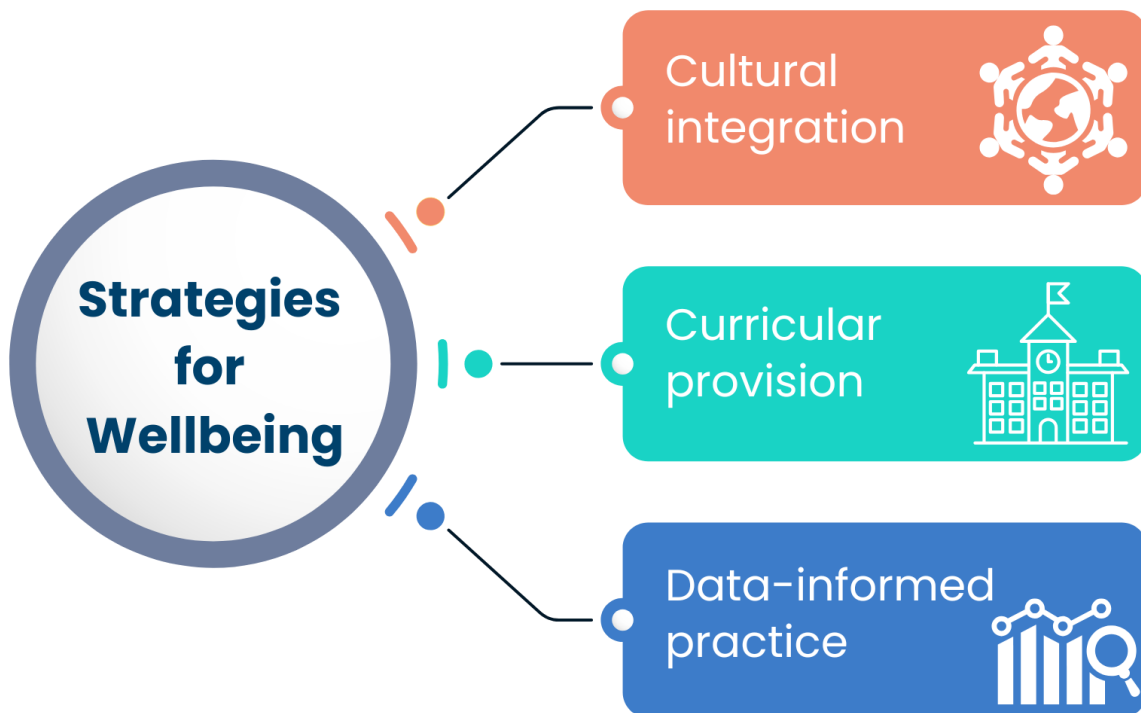
For international schools, effective wellbeing strategies need to reflect these interconnections and provide practical solutions that can be sustained across the whole community.



Strategies for Wellbeing

The challenges facing international schools – student mobility, cultural adjustment, staff turnover, and curriculum complexity – cannot be solved through isolated initiatives. Schools that are making real progress on wellbeing are embedding it into the heart of how they operate.

Research for this white paper highlights three approaches that, when combined, create a strong and sustainable wellbeing framework:



A Cultural Approach: Wellbeing as part of school identity

Wellbeing achieves its greatest impact when it becomes a shared cultural value embedded in daily operations, rather than a supplementary programme managed by designated staff. International schools are uniquely positioned to foster this integration, given their diverse communities, holistic educational philosophy, and emphasis on global citizenship.

Embedding wellbeing into institutional culture requires collective ownership across all stakeholder groups. Students, staff, parents, and leadership must each play active roles in creating and sustaining a community of care, rather than leaving wellbeing as the responsibility of counselling departments or senior management alone.

To illustrate how this works in practice, [Light International School Mombasa](#) provides an example of how wellbeing can move from an abstract goal to a lived community value.

Case Study: Light International School, Mombasa

Context & Challenge: The school faced challenges common in international schools: high parental expectations, academic pressure, and staff turnover.

Approach: Ildar Iliazov, Principal, led the development of a whole-community model. Parent advisory boards began contributing to wellbeing policies as well as academic discussions. Peer mentoring systems gave students cross-age and cross-cultural support networks. Teachers received training to model positive wellbeing behaviours in classrooms.

Impact: Wellbeing shifted from being leadership-driven to community-owned. Teacher retention improved, trust between staff, parents, and students strengthened, and students showed greater resilience in balancing academic and cultural pressures.

A Curricular Approach: Dedicated time for wellbeing

A school's timetable signals what it values. Without dedicated time, wellbeing provision risks being fragmented or tokenistic. Schools that embed wellbeing into the curriculum give students the skills to manage stress, build healthy relationships, and thrive beyond school.

[Strothoff International School](#) in Germany demonstrates how embedding wellbeing into the curriculum can shift student and parent attitudes and make social-emotional learning a recognised part of academic success.

Case Study: Strothoff International School

Context & Challenge: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, wellbeing at Strothoff had been limited to short homeroom sessions and weekly seminars, which students found ineffective. The lack of coherence meant wellbeing was not yet a focus.

Approach: Secondary Principal Julia Campbell-Ratcliffe led a curriculum redesign that introduced daily wellbeing lessons. These sessions combined IB core requirements, Approaches to Learning (ATL) skills, and themes such as mindfulness, empathy, and digital balance. Teachers were trained to connect wellbeing lessons with academic content, ensuring consistency across the curriculum.

Impact: Although initially sceptical, students came to value wellbeing lessons as a vital part of their education. Alumni identified them as among the most useful preparation for life beyond school. Parents recognised that dedicated wellbeing provision supported academic success. The school culture evolved to give equal weight to social-emotional growth and academic achievement.

A Data-Driven Approach: Measuring wellbeing's impact

Wellbeing can feel intangible, but schools that use data effectively are able to measure impact, identify patterns, and make timely interventions. This helps to secure buy-in from staff, parents, and students, and ensures resources are targeted where they are most needed.

[Transylvania College](#) in Romania offers a clear example of how partnering with an external provider can enable schools to turn anecdotal understanding into a reliable evidence base for action.

Case Study: Transylvania College

Context & Challenge: Wellbeing was a recognised priority, but leadership lacked consistent data to guide decisions. Anecdotal feedback was useful but limited.

Approach: In partnership with [Spark Generation](#), Transylvania College introduced regular surveys and short “pulse checks” for students and staff across six main areas (Mental & Emotional, Body, Relationships, Learning, Organisational, Wellbeing, and Future). Results were presented in dashboards, giving leaders clear visibility of wellbeing trends. Findings were shared openly with the community to build trust and encourage honest dialogue.

Impact: Evidence-based insights led to timetable adjustments, expanded mentoring, and better-targeted counselling. By embedding data into strategy, the school created a culture where wellbeing was openly discussed, monitored, and continuously improved with personalised courses for growth.

Integrating the Three Approaches

The three approaches outlined in this white paper – cultural integration, curricular provision, and data-informed practice – achieve the greatest impact when applied together.

[Deira International School](#) in Dubai provides a shining example of how these strategies can be combined to create an outstanding wellbeing culture recognised nationally and internationally.

Case Study: Deira International School, UAE

Context & challenge: Deira International School, part of the Al-Futtaim Education Foundation, is an Outstanding-rated British curriculum school serving 2,000 students from over 90 nationalities. While wellbeing was already a school priority, provision relied on annual surveys with delayed results and limited scope. Leaders identified the need for more immediate, whole-school data to shape timely interventions, while also embedding a culture of wellbeing that aligned with the UAE's National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031.

Approach:

- **Data-driven:** In 2022, DIS partnered with [BounceTogether](#) to implement regular, child-friendly surveys from FS1 through to secondary. Surveys, customised by the Wellbeing Lead, measured confidence, emotional regulation, friendships, safety, and engagement. Results were available instantly at whole-school, year-group, and class levels. Staff used this data to guide individual interventions, year-group initiatives, and whole-school planning.
- **Cultural:** Wellbeing became a shared responsibility across the community. Senior leaders, teachers, parents, and students contributed to shaping provision. Awareness days, parent workshops, and staff professional development reinforced the message that wellbeing was central to school life. Leadership ensured staff wellbeing was prioritised alongside student provision, modelling the culture they wanted to build.

- **Curricular:** Data insights directly informed curricular changes. Consistently low scores in emotional articulation led to the adoption of Zones of Regulation, giving students strategies to manage and express emotions. Challenges in conflict resolution prompted the introduction of Kelso's Choices Wheel, a framework helping children distinguish between "big" and "small" problems and equipping them with practical strategies to resolve minor issues independently. Both initiatives were embedded across lessons, assemblies, and displays, ensuring a consistent message.

Impact: The integrated strategy has produced measurable outcomes:

- A 40% increase in students' ability to articulate and regulate emotions.
- A 45% increase in conflict resolution skills across the school.
- Teachers now have clearer visibility of student needs, enabling faster, more personalised support.
- KHDA inspectors recognised wellbeing as "central to the school's mission," commending DIS as a national exemplar.
- The school also achieved the Wellbeing Award for Schools, praised for dismantling stigma around emotional expression and help-seeking.

Looking forward: DIS continues to adapt its wellbeing provision based on recurring data trends, ensuring it remains responsive to the changing needs of students. By integrating culture, curriculum, and data, the school has built a sustainable model that supports both student and staff wellbeing, while meeting the expectations of parents, regulators, and the wider UAE education agenda.

Recommendations and Implications

The case studies in this white paper show that successful wellbeing strategies are not about isolated initiatives, but about embedding wellbeing across the school. For school leaders, this requires a clear vision supported by structures and accountability. For suppliers, it means designing solutions that can be integrated and sustained in real-world school contexts.

For schools

- **Embed wellbeing into guiding statements**
Ensure that wellbeing is visible in your school's mission, values, and strategic plans. This signals to staff, parents, and students that it is a priority equal to academic success.
- **Dedicate time in the curriculum timetable**
Build structured time for wellbeing into the curriculum. Daily or weekly sessions give students the skills and space to manage stress, relationships, and transitions effectively.
- **Use evidence to guide decisions**
Move beyond anecdotal feedback by collecting consistent wellbeing data from students and staff. Share findings openly with the community and act on the trends identified.
- **Support and empower staff**
Provide induction, mentoring, and professional development focused on wellbeing, and recognise the additional roles international school staff play. Leadership modelling is critical.
- **Strengthen networks for leaders**
Heads and principals often carry the greatest responsibility with the fewest outlets for support. Build peer networks or external partnerships to ensure leadership wellbeing is not overlooked.

For suppliers

- **Design solutions that integrate**

Tools and programmes should align with curriculum and school culture, not sit as extras. Flexibility is key to meeting the needs of diverse international school contexts.

- **Support the whole community**

Effective solutions address students, staff, and parents. Programmes that strengthen trust and communication across these groups are especially valuable.

- **Demonstrate measurable impact**

Schools need evidence to justify investment. Suppliers should provide tools for tracking outcomes, enabling schools to show progress to parents, boards, and regulators.

Conclusion

Wellbeing in international schools has moved from the margins to the mainstream. It is no longer a question of *whether* to prioritise wellbeing, but *how* to do it effectively.

Successful international schools take a holistic approach: embedding wellbeing into culture, dedicating time within the curriculum, and using data to ensure continuous improvement. Each of these approaches strengthens the others, creating the conditions for students and staff to thrive.

For schools, the challenge is to make wellbeing visible in strategy, daily practice, and outcomes. For suppliers, the opportunity lies in creating solutions that are flexible, integrated, and evidence-driven.

The international schools market will continue to grow and diversify. Schools that place wellbeing at the heart of their identity will be better equipped to meet parental expectations, respond to policy demands, and prepare students for success beyond the classroom. For education suppliers, supporting this journey is not just good practice, it is essential for long-term relevance and impact.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to [Julia Ratcliffe-Campbell](#), [Ildar Iliazov](#), [Megha Jootla](#) and [Florina Popîrtac](#) whose passion for wellbeing shone through in the interviews for this white paper. Their unique perspectives and real-life examples showcase the fantastic work happening in the international education sector.

Thanks also to [Dr Helen Kelly](#) and [Ben Raybould](#) who provided further depth to this white paper.

Finally, thank you to the Field Research and Reports team at ISC Research whom the intelligence and data featured in this report was drawn from. Further examples of intelligence reports are available on the [ISC Research website](#).



ISCRESEARCH.COM

ISC Research supplies the most comprehensive, up-to-date and objective data, intelligence and research expertise available on the world's continually expanding international schools market.

We implement a management system, certified by QAS according to Standard ISO 9001:2015.

LIVE DATA PORTALS

ISC Insight for K-12 international schools
ISC Outreach for education suppliers and higher education institutions

INTELLIGENCE REPORTS

Global intelligence reports
Market-specific reports
Commercial intelligence reports
Bespoke reports
Specialist reports
White papers

EXPERT SERVICES FOR EDUCATIONAL INVESTORS

