

Data for Leadership:

How international schools
are meeting the challenge of
using assessment data
effectively

**Report from GL
Education's survey
of COBIS and CIS
international schools
and the associated
panel debate at the
2018 COBIS annual
conference**

INTRODUCTION

How can assessment data be used more strategically to support international school improvement? This was the pressing question behind an international school survey carried out in association with COBIS¹ and CIS². The results were then debated by an expert panel at the 2018 COBIS annual conference in May on the theme, 'Leading Learning'.

Moving goal posts

International schools have been dealing with some big changes in assessment practices over the last few years, from the escalating wellbeing agenda, to more emphasis on the measurement of student progress and the modification of national curriculum levels for schools that follow the national curriculum of England.

There is also a growing realisation that data, when effectively collected, analysed and reported on, can help mitigate these changes and boost school performance. Yet barriers to best practice remain.

The results of our survey with school leaders in international schools revealed that this is an increasingly important topic for schools all over the world, and that there are a number of recurring challenges.

This report summarises the key survey findings, then details suggestions and ideas from the resulting panel discussion on how schools can leverage better use of data for increased success.

Panel of experts

- James Neill – International Director, GL Education, London, UK (Chair)
- Matthew Savage – Principal, International Community School, Amman, Jordan
- Karen Jones – Academic Director, Intuitive Education Consultants, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- Matthew Dagan – Deputy Principal, Riverside School, Prague, Czech Republic



¹COBIS – Council of British International Schools (<https://www.cobis.org.uk/>)

²CIS – Council of International Schools (<https://www.cois.org/>)



Survey results: Setting the scene

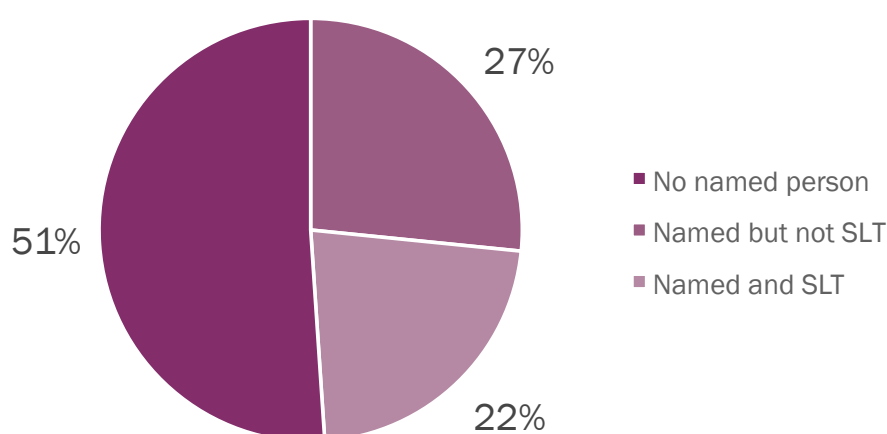
To gain an accurate picture of the challenges international schools face, a survey on how assessment data is currently being used to improve school performance was sent out to COBIS and CIS schools. It was clearly a topic that resonated with many school leaders. During the six-week response window, 82 international schools from 42 different countries responded.

More than 80% were all-through schools, with the remaining number evenly split between primary only and secondary only.

The results are summarised here.

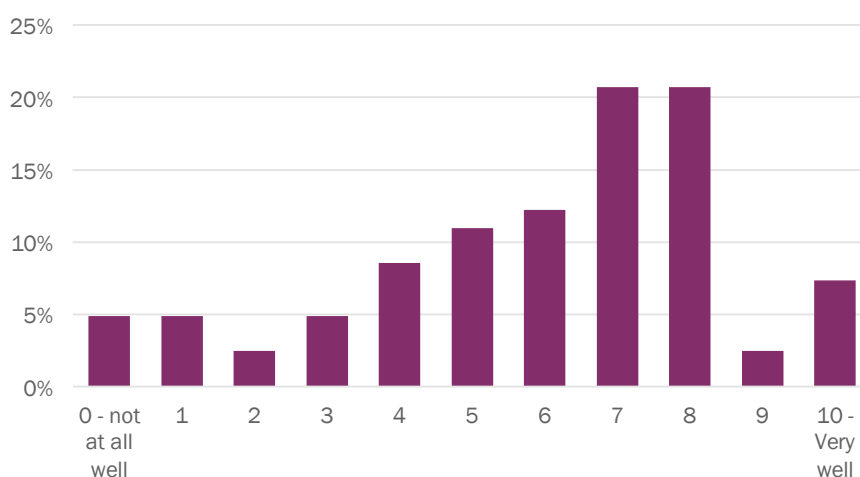
1. Who is responsible for data?

73% of schools stated that they had a named key person in charge of data across the school. Of these, just over half stated that this was a senior leadership team (SLT) member. However, more than a quarter of schools do not have someone specifically designated to this role.



2. How well is assessment data used?

We asked schools how well assessment data was used across the whole school to support teaching and learning, on a scale of 0 to 10. Consistent with our understanding that schools have mixed expertise and may be at very different points on their assessment journeys, this question drew a wide range of ratings.



What really stood out, however, was a marked difference between schools that have a designated lead – especially on the SLT – and those that don't, in how well they feel data is used.

	Mean
All schools	5.8
With designated data lead	6.7
Without designated data lead	4.0

3. Where could data be more helpful?

Respondents displayed lowest confidence in using data to:

- Identify student wellbeing concerns
- Identify CPD needs
- Identify gifted and talented students
- Calculate value added

Perhaps most surprisingly, a quarter of schools were not at all confident in using data to identify wellbeing concerns at school. There could be many reasons behind this and we would like to explore this beyond the report to further understand what could help schools in this area.

4. What are the biggest challenges?

While school leaders obviously face numerous challenges daily, when it comes to good use of assessment data the biggest barrier was time. 66% of respondents cited lack of time for data analysis as an obstacle to using data well.

Other significant challenges included teacher understanding (61%) and teacher engagement (39%).

5. What can we do to address these challenges?

We asked what one thing would help schools use student data more effectively. Despite this being an open response question, a third of schools mentioned training and CPD. This included help with getting the SLT on board.



THE PANEL DISCUSSION



Panel discussion: Sharing best practice for data leadership

The panel discussion at the COBIS annual conference was chaired by the International Director at GL Education, James Neill. Each member of the panel shared their views and experience on some of the key survey findings, as well as answering other questions posed by the audience. This is what they had to say.

Having a designated data lead on the SLT is important....

Matthew Dagan, the Deputy Principal at Riverside School in Prague, took the view that, without a person in a key named role on the SLT, it is very difficult to adequately fulfil a school's improvement vision or filter data throughout a school.

Karen Jones, the Academic Director at Intuitive Education Consultants, agreed. "It allows your SLT to actually look at patterns and trends across the whole school and see a bigger picture, rather than a head of subject looking just at their subject-level data. Without that high-level approach, the way that data is used across your school can become very fragmented and you lose the consistency you need to be effective in identifying key issues in your school."

.... but it doesn't stop there.

Matthew Dagan also pointed out that, to move forward, putting together a data team across a school or group of schools was crucial. James Neill cited an example of a school that tasked a team of 'super-users' with supporting other staff in best practice data use until it became a norm within the school culture.

Matthew Savage, the Principal at the International Community School in Amman, was of a similar mind. "Everybody in the entire school needs to be a data lead if it is to permeate anything. At ICS, I ensure that all of my senior and middle leaders are data doctors and data advocates to whom anybody can go. Where I think you need a named person is in terms of data entry and management."

How to increase confidence in using data for student wellbeing

When James Neill broached the subject of the mental health crisis facing students, the panellists resoundingly agreed on the magnitude of the issue. Karen Jones highlighted the moral purpose schools have to build emotional resilience. "We need to look at the whole child rather than churning them through exam factories."

Matthew Savage shared the tactics he uses to identify wellbeing concerns. "My duty as a principal is to repair damage and prevent it in the future. Whenever there is any sort of behaviour choice that a child is making, the first question I want the teacher to ask is, 'Why? Why is the child making that choice?'. Often, it's the data which will help you understand the choice the child has made. For me, the attitudinal survey PASS is the best way I have found to do that. It does not diagnose, but it plants flags in the sand beneath which we can dig."

Matthew Dagan also noted that teachers are keen to accept wellbeing data. "Teachers can see something happening in their classroom and the PASS survey results help them say, 'Right, I've always suspected that. Now I can learn a little bit more and formulate a plan'."



Challenge 1: Finding the time

Matthew Savage argued that, as data is at the heart of understanding children, schools need to prioritise the time to use it well. “I believe my teachers cannot understand their children’s needs, strengths, complexities or see beneath their masks, without data as their friend. How do we find the time? How do we not find the time, because if we don’t start with that data, we won’t understand the kids, and everything else will be reparatory rather than pre-emptive and preventative.”

Karen Jones shared her experience of rapidly gaining information despite high rates of student mobility. “Working in a German school attached to the military, families came in and out all the time. The beauty of buying in packages, particularly digital and online for CAT4³ or NGRT⁴, is that you can assess students as they join. Making this data accessible to teachers gives them an insight they can use from the start and the return is very quick.”

James Neill added, “Schools need to invest initial time in training staff, but using data well isn’t time intensive. It could be as simple as two different subject teachers talking in the staff room about a particular child’s progress or struggles, then referencing the data to see if it adds an extra dimension or insight. Don’t forget that the same reports can be seen through different lenses by different stakeholders to support school improvement. It’s not about just looking at it once, then closing the book.”

Challenge 2: Aiding teachers’ understanding and engagement

There were several suggestions made as to why some staff prefer not to engage with data, including feeling as though it might question their professional judgement.

Matthew Dagan felt the solution lay in two distinct parts. “Do you have the culture in which data permeates throughout your school? And then does it get to the teacher so that it impacts teaching and learning?” His solution was to collate the most important data – standardised age scores, verbal deficits and fragile learner marks – and place it into teachers’ hands in a visual format. “Teachers can reference it, understand it, and not feel overwhelmed by the numbers.”

Matthew Savage suggested that staff organically grow to engage with data when it simply becomes an accepted part of professional conversations. “I often talk about the Mona Lisa Effect™ – the idea that learning always feels personalised to the student – and at ICS, we have the Mona Lisa questions.

“Number one is, how well do I understand the needs and strengths of my student? And two, how do I use that understanding to enhance their wellbeing and their learning? I expect every teacher in my school to be able to answer both of these questions about every single child that they teach. Data is not, therefore, a peripheral thing.”

Karen Jones added, “It’s the accessibility you give your staff, whether it’s through SharePoint or an app. If you build in systems whereby it’s part and parcel of your induction procedures, and take away the fear, it becomes part of the language even when staff are very mobile.”

Challenge 3: Training and CPD

To get good insight into the training his staff might need, Matthew Savage asks his teachers to map on a graph how well they understand the data they use and how much they believe in it. “We try to ensure our CPD answers staff needs in a real sense, rather than simply ticking boxes. We’re looking at longer courses, both online and face-to-face, led by our data doctors.”

³ CAT4 is an assessment of reasoning ability that can identify where a pupil’s real strengths lie

⁴ NGRT is a termly adaptive test designed to drill down into pupil’s reading and comprehension skills

James Neill made the point that training needs to be both purposeful and ongoing. “Schools making the best use of data are the ones that use it to support their overall vision and aims. With ongoing training, schools see more benefits and can put in place much more effective and targeted interventions, whether these are needed to address literacy and verbal deficits, wellbeing or even underperformance.”

Challenge 4: Getting the SLT on board

Karen Jones acknowledged that changing a culture can be incredibly difficult, especially if senior leaders are the blockage.

Matthew Savage shared his strategy for tackling the issue, which is only recruiting senior leaders who share his vision of data. “As part of their application process, potential senior leaders have to sit a number of the assessments that our school uses. We ask them in their interview about how they would use the results to boost progress if they had a child like them in their class.

“If your guiding statements as a school actually talk in any way about understanding the individual – and true personalisation, and wellbeing, and all of those things that most of your schools’ guiding statements do – then you have a moral imperative to place data at the heart of it. Without that, you can’t achieve those guiding statements.”

Top five strategies

- 1.** Consider having a named person in charge of data on your SLT, but remember that the best results come from all staff taking ownership.
- 2.** Establish data as a tool to be used in conjunction with teacher’s professional judgement, to look at children holistically.
- 3.** Ensure data use supports individual school aims and circumstances. For example, if student mobility is high, use a digital package to assess on enrolment for quick returns.
- 4.** Embed a data culture within your school, so that it becomes a routine part of life.
- 5.** Reduce staff fear of using data through targeted training, sharing positive examples of the impact of data use, and even highlighting its importance during the process of recruiting new staff.



SUMMARY



International schools are increasingly recognising the need to use data strategically to support school improvement. From promoting pupil wellbeing to measuring pupil progress, data plays a pivotal role in any school's improvement journey. However, there are some important steps school leaders need to take to build data into the everyday life of a school.

When it comes to good data practice, schools need to lead from the top, and having a named person with responsibility for data, preferably a member of the SLT, is the best way to achieve this.

As Dave Stanfield, Head of Research & Development at the Council of International Schools (CIS) says, "Having a key data person responsible for consolidating data from multiple sources adds considerable value. Schools collect and maintain data through such a range of unconnected sources and platforms that it discourages the use of data broadly amongst school leaders and teachers. Though time consuming, having a designated person (or external organization) responsible for collating key data points into an easy to use (and accessible) database or data dashboard can contribute significantly to the use of data across a school."

Creating a data culture in schools is the key to engaging all staff with data, and presenting data visually, making it easily accessible and above all relevant, will encourage staff to dedicate time to understanding data, so that it becomes a core part of the school's language. Training and CPD have an important role to play here, to allay any fears teachers have about data, and demonstrate its power to improve outcomes for pupils.

Colin Bell, CEO of COBIS shares his thoughts about the way schools are

embracing data to help them deliver positive outcomes.

"There's no doubt that data is becoming more and more central to the decisions that school staff and governors make on a daily, medium and longer term strategic basis. It's important that all decision makers are kept up to speed with how this data can be used to positively influence both school operations and high-quality teaching.

"This can't be done without adequate training and this fantastic research by our colleagues at GL Assessment shows us that schools want to learn, improve and develop, despite time constraints and other challenges. At COBIS, we recognise the importance of CPD for British international schools and have responded to the concerns of our members, specifically in relation to data usage and student wellbeing, by organising a Pastoral Care Conference in 2018 for schools with a particular focus on wellbeing in the digital age.

"But COBIS offers CPD opportunities for the whole school workforce because we know that data analysis is now vital for every role in schools, whether you're a teacher, leader, governor or member of the administration team."

To conclude, there is clearly a strong conviction that the effective use of data has a powerful impact on the performance of a school, and is vital in driving improvement. The strategies we have outlined in the report will assist schools in developing their understanding of data, and provide direction in how that data can be implemented to guide and inform decisions. Now is the time for schools to take the opportunities presented by CPD and training in the use of data to prepare them for the next phase of their journey.