



Protecting Academic Integrity in International Schools: Educational Leadership, Stakeholder Pressure, and Institutional Trust

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Academic integrity in international schools is no longer merely a student-compliance issue; it is a governance condition underpinning assessment credibility, institutional trust, and market legitimacy. The issue has become increasingly urgent as the international-school sector expanded to 14,833 schools serving more than 7.4 million students worldwide and generating approximately USD 67 billion in annual fee income in 2025. This article aims to synthesize a governance-based framework for protecting academic integrity in fee-paying and internationally oriented school contexts under stakeholder pressure and generative AI disruption.

Materials and Methods: This article employs a critical integrative review design. No human participants were involved. The unit of analysis comprised peer-reviewed scholarship, policy guidance, and sector reports published mainly between 2012 and 2026. Sources were selected for relevance to academic integrity, educational governance, organizational trust, stakeholder pressure, international schooling, contract cheating, grade inflation, shadow education, and AI-mediated assessment. The literature was synthesized through four analytical categories: integrity values, stakeholder incentives, assessment evidence, and institutional trust.

Results: Four major findings emerged. First, academic integrity is strengthened when schools institutionalize honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage as operational values rather than post-hoc disciplinary rhetoric. Second, fee dependence may create tension between educational judgment and client-retention logic, particularly for middle leaders mediating among senior leadership, teachers, parents, and examination expectations. Third, formal integrity policies may become decoupled from practice when schools quietly soften sanctions, modify grades, or avoid reporting misconduct to protect institutional reputation. Fourth, generative AI weakens the reliability of product-based assessment by reducing confidence that final submissions represent independent learning unless supported by process evidence, supervised production, oral defence, and AI-disclosure mechanisms.

Conclusion: The article proposes an integrity-risk-chain framework linking board-level incentives, senior leadership decisions, middle-leadership pressure, teacher discretion, assessment evidence, and institutional trust. It argues that, in AI-rich educational environments, the capacity to certify authentic learning has become a strategic indicator of international school quality, credibility, and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Academic Integrity; International Schools; Educational Leadership; Stakeholder Pressure; Institutional Trust

Introduction

Academic integrity is a principle in education and a choice to act in ways that allow others to trust us. This framing matters because it shifts the conversation away from a narrow preoccupation with plagiarism or cheating and toward a wider concern with honesty, fairness, responsibility, and the credibility of educational judgments. The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI, 2021) has long argued that academic integrity rests on six core values - honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage - while Bretag (2016) positioned integrity as a pedagogical and institutional issue rather than a purely disciplinary one. In school settings, these values shape not only student conduct but also the professional obligations of teachers, coordinators, and senior leaders.

In practice, however, academic integrity in schools is often discussed as though it were principally a matter of catching student wrongdoing. Such a view is too limited. OECD work on integrity in education has shown that integrity problems are produced by systems, incentives, and weak governance arrangements as much as by individual misconduct (OECD, 2012). UNESCO-IIEP similarly emphasizes that an institutional culture of academic integrity is built through standards, communication, and consistent practice, not through reactive punishment alone (UNESCO IIEP, 2020). When academic integrity is reduced to detection and sanction, schools may miss the deeper organizational conditions





that generate misconduct, normalize exceptions, or weaken professional confidence in assessment processes.

This broader framing is particularly important in international schools. ISC Research (2025a) reports continued rapid expansion in the international schools market, with 14,833 K-12 international schools serving 7.4 million students worldwide as of January 2025, and the latter sector reporting described annual fee income above USD 67 billion and continued pressure to differentiate within a highly competitive field (ISC Research, 2025b). Growth itself is not the problem. The problem emerges when market logics, parental expectations, and brand-sensitive performance cultures begin to shape how schools interpret academic standards. In such contexts, integrity questions are rarely confined to student authorship. They extend to grade inflation, moderation pressure, informal exceptions, uneven sanctions, over-accommodation without transparency, and the erosion of trust in whether reported outcomes truly reflect student learning.

In this article, market logic refers to the situation in which enrolment, fee income, parent satisfaction, university destinations, and brand protection become part of the informal environment in which academic decisions are interpreted. This does not mean that international schools are academically compromised by definition. It means that fee dependence can create a conflict of interest when educational judgments that should remain independent also carry commercial consequences for retention, reputation, or future recruitment. The conflict is particularly acute for coordinators and middle leaders, who may be expected to defend teachers' standards while also absorbing pressure from senior executives, families, and external examination expectations.

The scope of this analysis is intentionally broad but bounded. It focuses primarily on fee-paying international schools, including both non-profit and for-profit models, that deliver internationally oriented curricula or pathways and operate in competitive markets. Governance pressures vary by ownership structure: elite non-profit schools may be more exposed to reputation and university-placement expectations, while corporate or for-profit groups may face more direct enrolment and revenue imperatives. In both cases, the central issue is the same: whether institutional structures protect the independence of academic judgment when stakeholders have strong incentives to influence outcomes.

The issue is not that parents should be excluded from educational processes. Research consistently shows that constructive family engagement can strengthen student achievement and school improvement (Harris, 2021; Zhang & Huang, 2025). Yet international school research also shows that parent-school relationships in such settings are often unusually complex because families bring strong expectations, high levels of financial investment, and sophisticated understandings of curriculum pathways and university admissions (McIntosh & Hayden, 2022). The challenge for leadership is therefore not to limit partnership, but to prevent partnership from becoming pressure. Once assessment judgments become negotiable, academic integrity is already under strain.

The rise of generative AI has intensified these tensions. UNESCO (2023), the IB (2026a, 2026b), and the OECD (2026) all point to the need to rethink teaching, assessment, and institutional policy in light of AI-enabled content generation. The problem is not only plagiarism in its traditional sense. AI changes the evidentiary relationship between product and learning. A polished submission may no longer serve as reliable evidence that the student independently developed the reasoning, writing, or disciplinary understanding that the school is meant to certify. For international schools, many of which operate within assessment-driven and university-facing reputational ecosystems, the implications are significant.

Generative AI, therefore, creates an existential challenge for the traditional product-for-credential exchange on which many international schools rely. If a final essay, project, or portfolio can be produced or substantially improved by external tools, tutors, parents, or commercial services, the school can no longer assume that the submitted product is sufficient evidence of the student's independent learning. The problem is not merely technological. It is reputational and ethical: schools certify learning to families, universities, examination bodies, and accreditation agencies, and that certification loses value if authenticity cannot be demonstrated.





The gap addressed by this article is that existing research has examined academic integrity, trust, stakeholder engagement, contract cheating, and AI assessment separately, while less attention has been paid to how these pressures interact within fee-paying international schools as a governance system. This article fills that gap by developing a practical integrity-risk-chain framework that connects market incentives, leadership behaviour, teacher discretion, assessment evidence, and institutional trust.

This article argues that academic integrity in international schools should be treated as a governance issue anchored in educational leadership, stakeholder management, and institutional trust. It does not present new empirical data. Instead, it offers an academic analysis that draws together relevant scholarship and policy guidance in order to clarify why integrity failures emerge in international schools and what school leaders can do to reduce them. The central claim is that academic integrity becomes durable when it is embedded in whole-school structures - policy coherence, assessment design, communication with families, professional calibration, and trustworthy leadership practice - rather than delegated to ad hoc disciplinary responses.

Objectives

The objectives of this academic article are:

1. To synthesize a governance-based taxonomy of academic-integrity risks in international schools, with specific attention to fee dependence, reputation, university-facing performance pressure, parent expectations, and generative AI;
2. To differentiate the integrity pressures generated by major stakeholder groups, including fee-paying parents, university admissions expectations, owners or boards, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, students, tutors, and accreditation bodies; and
3. To propose a practical leadership framework that specifies what schools should do, with whom, how, and with what expected results to strengthen policy coherence, assessment design, parent partnership, staff calibration, safe reporting, and AI governance.

Literature review

The literature on academic integrity increasingly converges on a point that schools sometimes overlook: integrity is not sustained by rules alone. The ICAI values framework is influential precisely because it defines integrity as an ethical culture before it defines it as an enforcement regime (ICAI, 2021). Trust sits at the center of this view. If teachers do not trust that sanctions will be applied consistently, if students do not trust that assessment standards are fair, or if parents do not trust the legitimacy of school decisions, then integrity policies become performative rather than formative.

This insight aligns with wider work on educational integrity and governance. OECD (2012) argues that integrity failures in education are produced when incentives, opacity, and weak accountability create openings for misconduct. In other words, corruption-like dynamics in education need not involve criminal behaviour to damage educational quality; they may also appear in softer forms such as favoritism, inconsistent grading, or the bending of procedures under pressure. UNESCO-IIEP's work on institutional cultures of integrity extends this point by emphasizing the need for proactive prevention, shared language, and visible commitment from leadership (UNESCO IIEP, 2020). For schools, this means that academic integrity cannot be isolated within exam offices or student handbooks. It has to be designed into the school's daily routines and decision structures.

School leadership research reinforces the same logic from a different direction. Trust in school settings is relational, but it is also organizational. Demir (2015) defines organizational trust in schools through beliefs that principals, colleagues, parents, and students will act in honest, responsible, principled, and just ways. Balyer (2017) shows that where teachers do not trust school principals, the broader functioning of the school is affected. Jack (2023) adds that leader visibility matters because trust is not built only through formal policies but through leader presence, accessibility, and credible follow-through. Lasater (2016) similarly argues that school leaders require explicit preparation in communication and rapport because trust is not an accidental by-product of hierarchy; it is an active professional practice.





The trust literature also helps distinguish between relational trust and calculative trust. Relational trust is grounded in repeated experience of respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity among members of a school community, while calculative trust depends more on incentives, risk management, reputation, and the expected consequences of compliance or non-compliance (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Rousseau et al., 1998). International schools rely on both forms. Teachers and students need relational trust to believe that rules are fair; families, universities, and accreditation bodies require calculative confidence that the school's reported outcomes are credible, auditable, and not distorted by commercial pressure.

This matters because academic integrity is fundamentally a trust-dependent process. Every assessment system assumes that a school can distinguish authentic learning from inauthentic performance. Yet that distinction is fragile if teachers feel exposed to contradictory expectations. Leithwood (2021) notes that equitable and credible school leadership depends on how leaders structure conditions for fairness, participation, and professional judgment. Applied to integrity, this implies that leaders must protect staff from pressures that encourage the quiet dilution of standards. Once teachers believe that difficult misconduct cases will be overridden, softened, or handled inconsistently, the culture of integrity weakens rapidly.

The literature on stakeholders and parent engagement clarifies why this is especially challenging in schools that rely on fee income and reputation. Harris (2021) shows that strong engagement with stakeholders, especially families, is important for student outcomes and system resilience. Zhang and Huang (2025) similarly find that leadership and parental involvement are strongly connected to educational outcomes. These are not arguments against parent partnership. There are arguments for a structured partnership. McIntosh and Hayden (2022), writing specifically about international schools, show that parental engagement in this sector often departs from conventional assumptions and is shaped by the specific logics of international education, including aspirations, mobility, and school choice. Such findings are highly relevant because international schools frequently operate in environments where parents are not passive recipients of school decisions but active interpreters and negotiators of them.

The problem, therefore, is not engagement per se. The problem is the conversion of engagement into leverage over judgments that should remain educationally independent. Rahimi et al. (2024) demonstrate that academic integrity challenges are often entangled with student engagement, support structures, and broader pressures rather than simple moral failure. In school assessment contexts, Khan and Mulani (2020) go further by warning that forms of contract cheating and parent over-involvement can emerge well before higher education, raising difficult questions about the values schools actually teach through their assessment practices. Evidence from secondary education research also suggests that fee-charging or high-competition school sectors can experience stronger grade inflation incentives (Nata et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2025). Even when individual schools act professionally, the structural risk remains: if strong outcomes are central to recruitment, retention, and reputation, then pressures on integrity intensify.

The literature on shadow education and contract cheating makes this point more concrete. Private supplementary tutoring is a substantial feature of many educational systems and can support learning when it is transparent and developmental, but it can also blur the boundary between legitimate support and unauthorized production of assessed work (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Khan & Mulani, 2020). In international curricula such as the IB Diploma Programme, A Levels, Advanced Placement, and other university-facing pathways, the stakes attached to predicted grades, coursework, portfolios, and recommendations can make students and families more vulnerable to essay mills, ghostwriting, over-coaching, and undisclosed AI-assisted production.

Institutional theory adds a further explanation through the concept of decoupling: organizations may adopt formal policies that display legitimacy while everyday practice follows a different logic (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Applied to schools, decoupling occurs when the handbook promises consistent academic-integrity enforcement, but sanctions are softened privately, difficult cases are not documented, teachers are discouraged from reporting, or exceptions are made for influential families.





This is precisely why a governance framework is required: integrity depends not only on policy wording but also on whether leaders make the policy operational under pressure.

Practitioner and accreditation guidance support this governance framing. CIS international accreditation emphasizes school development and improvement through a framework informed by international-school practice; NEASC describes foundation standards as compliance-oriented structures and systems without which a safe, effective, and sustainable learning community cannot exist; and COBIS guidance treats governance as central to students and school strategic direction. These sources do not substitute for peer-reviewed research, but they connect the article's framework to the operational reality of international-school accountability (Council of British International Schools, n.d.; Council of International Schools, n.d.; New England Association of Schools and Colleges, n.d.).

AI has added a new layer to these older problems. UNESCO (2023) explicitly calls for a human-centred approach to generative AI in education and highlights the need for policy, capacity building, and regulation. The IB has responded by updating its academic integrity guidance and clarifying expectations around ethical AI use in learning and assessment (IB, 2026a, 2026b). OECD (2026) similarly stresses that GenAI can support learning only when guided by sound pedagogy; otherwise, students may improve performance outputs without commensurate learning. Research on academic integrity in the age of AI shows that even authentic assessment is not automatically secure if the assessment remains primarily product-based and asynchronously completed (Kofinas et al., 2025). Peterson (2025) therefore argues for transparent reporting structures and clearer institutional responses to AI-related misconduct across school and university settings.

Taken together, the literature suggests three conclusions. First, academic integrity is best understood as an organizational quality sustained through leadership and trust. Second, international schools face distinctive integrity risks because market conditions and parental expectations can place unusual pressure on judgments about student performance. Third, AI has weakened the reliability of traditional product-based indicators of authenticity, making leadership and policy coherence more important than before.

Conceptual Framework

International schools occupy a distinctive governance space. They often combine global curricula, cross-border university pathways, multilingual and multicultural student bodies, and private or semi-private financial models. These features are not inherently problematic. In many cases, they allow schools to innovate, personalize learning, and offer rich international-minded education. Yet from an integrity perspective, they create a specific pattern of vulnerability: high aspirations, high fees, and high visibility can produce a subtle but persistent expectation that outcomes must be protected.

The first pressure pathway is reputational. International schools frequently market academic results, university destinations, and externally benchmarked pathways as indicators of quality. This is understandable in a competitive sector, but it creates a risk that poor outcomes are interpreted less as data for improvement and more as threats to brand value. Under such conditions, schools may drift toward defensive practices - soft moderation, pressure to avoid formal misconduct findings, reluctance to record repeated offences, or a preference for quiet resolution over transparent process. None of these practices requires bad intent. Many are rationalized as compassionate, pragmatic, or commercially necessary. Yet together they degrade the credibility of standards.

The second pressure pathway is relational. In strong schools, families are partners in learning. In pressured schools, however, the language of partnership can slide into the language of customer entitlement. McIntosh and Hayden (2022) show that parental engagement in international schools already operates through unusual power dynamics. When parents understand school systems well, pay substantial fees, and position themselves as legitimate co-interpreters of academic standards, leaders must work harder to preserve role clarity. Without clear boundaries, teachers may experience continuous informal bargaining over deadlines, grades, predicted scores, special consideration, or consequences for misconduct. Over time, this does not merely exhaust staff. It changes what staff believes is realistically defensible.





The third pressure pathway is pedagogical. Schools under performance pressure can become more vulnerable to assessment designs that reward polished outputs without preserving enough evidence of the learning process. This problem is older than AI, but AI has magnified it. Product-only assessment, especially when completed asynchronously and digitally, now provides weaker evidence of authentic performance than it did a few years ago (Kofinas et al., 2025; OECD, 2026). If schools continue to certify learning based on polished final products while neglecting draft development, oral defence, process logs, in-class checkpoints, or supervised reflection, then integrity becomes increasingly difficult to verify. The result is an unstable system in which teachers are expected to guarantee authenticity without being given assessment structures that make authenticity visible.

The fourth pressure pathway is procedural inconsistency. Trust in schools is damaged when similar cases are handled differently across departments, year groups, or programs. Demir (2015) and Balyer (2017) both underscore that trust depends on perceptions of justice, consistency, and honesty. In international schools, this challenge can be heightened by the coexistence of different curricula, transnational policy frameworks, and culturally varied expectations about academic support. If one department treats AI misuse as a teachable first offence, another treats it as serious malpractice, and leadership communicates vaguely to avoid conflict, then the school effectively teaches procedural uncertainty. Students learn that outcomes may depend less on principle than on timing, teacher tolerance, or parental influence.

For these reasons, academic integrity in international schools should be analysed through what may be called an integrity risk chain. Market and reputational pressures shape stakeholder expectations; stakeholder expectations influence leadership behaviour and teacher discretion; leadership behaviour and discretion shape assessment credibility; and assessment credibility shapes trust in the institution. When trust declines, schools often respond with more policy language and more surveillance. But neither is sufficient on its own. Policies that staff cannot defend and surveillance systems that over-promise detection may actually deepen mistrust.

The integrity-risk chain can be specified more precisely as a six-level governance sequence: board or ownership incentives; senior leadership decision-making; middle-leadership mediation; teacher reporting and grading discretion; assessment evidence; and institutional trust. Pressure does not usually move through this chain as a single explicit command. It often appears as subtle anticipation: leaders anticipate parent reaction, coordinators anticipate senior leadership preferences, teachers anticipate whether reporting will be supported, and students anticipate whether sanctions are likely to be consistent.

Table 1. Integrity-Risk Chain in International Schools

Level	Typical pressure	Integrity risk	Required governance control
Board/ownership	Fee income, brand protection, enrolment targets, accreditation anxiety	Academic standards become subordinated to reputation or retention	Board-approved non-negotiables; annual integrity report; external review
Senior leadership	Avoiding disputes, complaints, legal escalation, or public embarrassment	Misconduct cases are minimized, softened, or resolved informally	Documented decision pathways; case panels; appeal protocols
Middle leadership	Being squeezed between teachers, parents, senior leaders, and exam requirements	Coordinators self-censor, dilute teacher concerns, or discourage formal reporting.	Role protection; written escalation routes; calibrated case examples
Teachers	Fear of non-renewal, conflict, reputational	Under-reporting, inconsistent sanctions,	Safe-reporting mechanism; psychological safety;





Level	Typical pressure	Integrity risk	Required governance control
	blame, or lack of support	and grading compromise	leadership follow-through
Assessment system	Polished final products, external tutoring, AI assistance, asynchronous production	Weak evidence of independent learning	Controlled conditions; process logs; oral defence; AI reflection logs
Institutional trust	Rumours, perceived favoritism, and inconsistent communication	Loss of confidence in grades, reports, and qualifications	Transparent reporting; moderation; accreditation-linked review

Defensive practices must also be understood through psychological safety. Teachers in international schools may work on renewable contracts and may worry that reporting misconduct, resisting grade pressure, or challenging a family with influence could damage their standing. Even without direct intimidation, the fear of non-renewal can lead to self-censorship. This is why integrity governance cannot depend solely on individual courage; it must include safe reporting, documented escalation, and visible protection of professional judgment (Edmondson, 1999).

The parent-school relationship is also becoming more formalized and, in some contexts, more legalistic. Parents may bring external tutors, consultants, lawyers, or pedagogical experts into disputes about deadlines, accommodations, grading, or sanctions. Schools should not treat this as hostility by default, but they must prevent external pressure from turning academic standards into negotiable services. A transparent appeals process is therefore not only procedural; it is protective because it gives families a legitimate channel while preserving the independence of academic judgment.

A more durable response is to relocate academic integrity within whole-school governance. This means treating it as part of quality assurance, accreditation readiness, curriculum implementation, staff induction, parent communication, and leadership accountability. Such a view is consistent with the journal's concern for educational leadership, policy, comparative and international education, and quality assurance. More importantly, it reflects the practical reality of international schools, where decisions about integrity are rarely isolated incidents. They are recurring tests of whether the school will prioritize educational credibility over short-term convenience.

Methodology

This article uses a critical integrative review design. It is not an empirical study involving participants, survey instruments, interviews, or experimental intervention. Its unit of analysis is the relationship among published scholarship, policy guidance, and sector reporting relevant to academic integrity in international school governance.

The literature search and selection process focused mainly on sources published between 2012 and 2026, with older foundational works retained where they provided necessary theoretical grounding. The review prioritized peer-reviewed academic literature and authoritative policy or sector documents addressing academic integrity, organizational trust, educational governance, stakeholder theory, international schooling, contract cheating, shadow education, grade inflation, assessment design, and generative AI. Sources were excluded when they were purely anecdotal, unrelated to school-level governance, limited only to plagiarism-detection technology, or insufficiently transferable to international school contexts.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, sources were grouped into thematic categories: integrity values, stakeholder incentives, institutional trust, assessment authenticity, AI governance, and quality assurance. Second, conceptual relationships among these categories were compared to identify recurring pressure points and gaps. Third, these relationships were synthesized into an integrity-risk-chain framework intended to guide interpretation, leadership practice, and future empirical research.





The method is appropriate because the reviewers requested a stronger conceptual and theoretical framework rather than statistical testing of a new data set.

Results

The integrative review produced four main results. First, academic integrity becomes stronger when schools frame it as a positive institutional culture rather than a narrow misconduct-control system. Second, fee dependence and market competition can create conflicts between educational judgment and retention-oriented pressure. Third, the most vulnerable point in the system is often middle leadership, because coordinators and department heads translate board expectations, senior leadership decisions, parent demands, curriculum requirements, and teacher concerns into daily case decisions. Fourth, generative AI has weakened confidence in product-only assessment and increased the importance of process evidence, supervised production, oral explanation, and AI disclosure.

The results also show that integrity risk is cumulative. Pressure rarely moves directly from parents or owners to grades. It normally travels through a chain of governance decisions, informal signals, teacher expectations, assessment design, and reporting practices. For this reason, schools that rely only on policy statements or plagiarism detection tools are unlikely to protect integrity consistently.

Table 2 summarizes the main pressure sources identified by the review and links each pressure to the integrity risk, leadership response, and trust effect that emerged from the synthesis.

Table 2. Integrity Pressures in International Schools and Leadership Responses

Pressure Source	Typical Integrity Risk	Leadership Response	Trust Effect
Fee dependence and market competition	Pressure to protect results, reduce formal misconduct findings, or avoid reputational harm	Clear non-negotiables, board-approved integrity policy, annual audit of cases and outcomes	Higher confidence in fairness and institutional credibility
Parent expectations and customer-style demands	Informal bargaining over grades, deadlines, accommodations, or sanctions	Parent compact, transparent appeals process, communication protocols, and role clarity	Partnership without role confusion
Product-based assessment in the AI era	Weak evidence of authentic learning, hidden outsourcing, and unverifiable authorship	Process checkpoints, oral defence, supervised tasks, and disclosure norms for AI use	Greater confidence that certified outcomes reflect learning
Cross-program inconsistency	Uneven sanctions across departments, unclear thresholds for misconduct	Staff calibration, common definitions, documented decision trees, and moderation records	Procedural consistency and reduced staff cynicism
Leadership opacity	Rumours, perceived favoritism, avoidance of difficult decisions	Visible leadership, regular reporting, case review panels, and protected teacher judgment	Trust in leadership and stronger policy legitimacy





Discussion

The practical question is what leaders should do differently. A strong integrity culture in international schools rests on five connected leadership tasks.

First, leaders need policy coherence. Many schools have academic integrity statements, but fewer have operationally precise policies. A coherent integrity policy defines forms of misconduct, explains proportional consequences, distinguishes between developmental and high-stakes responses, clarifies the role of AI tools, and links integrity to teaching and assessment rather than only to discipline. Just as importantly, the policy must align across programmes and divisions. If the school offers more than one curriculum, the integrity expectations should be translated into locally consistent procedures rather than left as parallel systems that staff interpret differently.

Second, leaders need assessment redesign. Kofinas et al. (2025), UNESCO (2023), and the OECD (2026) all imply that reliance on polished end products is becoming increasingly fragile. In schools, this means that academic integrity cannot be protected only by detection software, declarations of authenticity, or retrospective investigation. It must be built into task design. Stronger tasks are staged, dialogic, and evidentiary. They include proposal checkpoints, monitored drafting, viva-style oral explanations, source justification, process reflection, and moments of in-class production. The purpose is not to make learning punitive but to make learning visible. Good assessment design reduces both false accusations and undetected misconduct because it produces richer evidence of student thinking.

For high-stakes summative evidence, controlled conditions should become the default standard wherever curriculum rules permit it. This does not mean that every task must be completed in silence under examination conditions. It means that important claims about independent learning should be supported by in-class production, supervised checkpoints, teacher-observed drafting, oral defence, or live problem-solving. These design features shift integrity protection from retrospective suspicion to prospective evidence-building.

Third, leaders need a disciplined parent partnership. Families should be brought into the integrity culture early and positively. Parent communication should explain not only what students are prohibited from doing but also why schools protect independent student work. In international schools, this is crucial because many parents are highly invested and often accustomed to intensive educational support. Schools should therefore specify where support ends and interference begins. Reviewing a planner, asking reflective questions, or helping a student manage time is different from rewriting, translating substantive content without disclosure, sourcing answers, or coordinating unauthorized tutoring for assessed work. When expectations are explained early, consistently, and respectfully, schools are less likely to face conflict later.

Fourth, leaders need staff calibration and protection. Teachers are the frontline interpreters of integrity, but they can only act credibly if they feel professionally protected. This requires training in academic integrity, examples of borderline cases, guidance on AI-related concerns, moderation structures, and consistent follow-through from leadership when difficult cases arise. It also requires leaders to resist a culture of informal exception-making. Every unprincipled exception teaches the staff a lesson about the real hierarchy of values in the organization. Over time, what staff remembers is not the policy document but the pattern of leadership behavior.

Middle leaders require specific protection because they are often the pressure point in the system. Department heads, programme coordinators, examination officers, and pastoral leaders translate policy into case decisions. They need clear authority to document concerns, escalate cases, refuse informal grade changes, and request senior-level support when family or commercial pressure threatens academic judgment.

Fifth, leaders need transparent AI governance. The most damaging school response to AI is either denial or overreaction. Denial leaves staff unsupported. Overreaction produces surveillance-heavy approaches that may be pedagogically weak and legally or ethically questionable. A better response is to define acceptable and unacceptable uses, teach students how to disclose assistance, redesign vulnerable assessments, and ensure that any investigation of misuse follows due process. The IB's current guidance is useful here because it frames academic integrity positively and expects schools to



teach ethical use rather than merely prohibit tools (IB, 2026a, 2026b). That stance is educationally stronger and more sustainable.

AI governance should be operationalized through AI reflection logs. Where AI use is permitted, students should record the tools used, the prompts entered, the type of assistance received, the changes made to their thinking or writing, and the parts of the final work that remain independently produced. The log should not be a bureaucratic appendix; it should be part of the assessment evidence. This makes disclosure teachable, auditable, and developmentally useful.

More broadly, leaders should treat academic integrity as one of the school's core trust infrastructures. In the same way that safeguarding, child protection, or examination security cannot be improvised, integrity cannot rely on personal heroics or teacher vigilance alone. It requires governance routines. Schools should review misconduct data annually, map points of pressure, evaluate whether sanctions are applied consistently, and ask whether their assessment architecture still provides credible evidence of learning. Such review processes should sit within school improvement planning, not outside it. Where schools seek external accreditation or market themselves through quality assurance language, this is especially important. A school cannot credibly claim excellence while allowing ambiguity about whether its outcomes are authentic.

The leadership challenge, then, is not simply to be strict. It is to be clear, consistent, educational, and trusted. International schools that achieve this are more likely to retain staff confidence, withstand parent pressure without hostility, and preserve the credibility of the qualifications and reports they issue. Those that do not may still appear high-performing for a time, but their internal trust will gradually erode. Once staff begins to believe that standards are negotiable, institutional recovery becomes far more difficult.

Knowledge Contribution

This article contributes a governance-based model of academic integrity for fee-paying international schools. Its central contribution is the integrity-risk-chain framework, which shows how market and stakeholder pressure can move through institutional layers before appearing as a classroom-level assessment compromise.

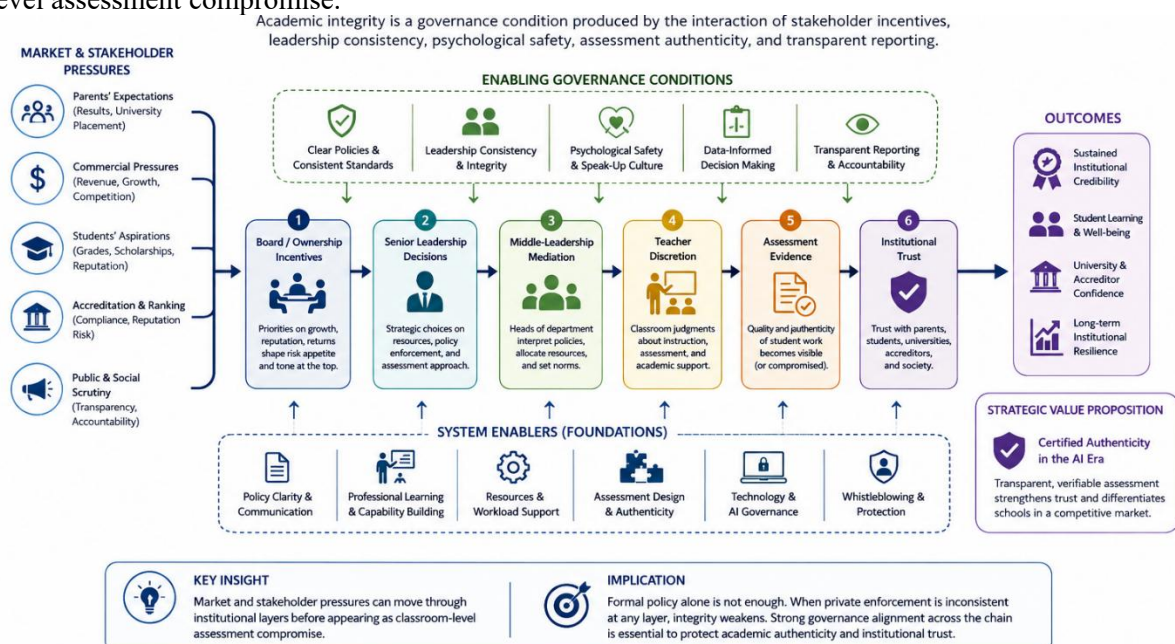


Figure 1. Integrity Governance Chain



The framework clarifies that academic integrity is not only a student virtue or a disciplinary procedure. It is a governance condition produced by the interaction of stakeholder incentives, leadership consistency, psychological safety, assessment authenticity, and transparent reporting. This explains why formal policy may fail when private enforcement is inconsistent, and why certified authenticity is becoming a strategic value proposition for international schools in the AI era.

Recommendation

The following recommendations translate the conceptual findings into practical application by specifying what to do, with whom, how, and with what expected result.

- Adopt a single whole-school academic integrity framework across programmes, departments, and divisions, with explicit AI-use provisions, common definitions, documented decision pathways, and board-level approval.
- Create a safe-reporting mechanism for teachers and middle leaders who experience pressure to change grades, soften sanctions, hide misconduct, or avoid formal documentation.
- Redesign vulnerable assessments so that authenticity is demonstrated through process evidence, controlled conditions, supervised checkpoints, oral explanation, AI reflection logs, and developmental process marks where curriculum rules permit.
- Create a parent integrity compact that defines legitimate support, impermissible assistance, formal channels for concern, and the limits of external tutoring, editing, translation, and AI support.
- Train and calibrate teachers, coordinators, and leaders using common case studies, moderation routines, decision trees, and an annual review of borderline integrity cases.
- Prepare an Annual Academic Integrity Report for senior leadership and the Board of Governors, comparable in seriousness to safeguarding, examination security, or financial assurance reporting.
- Invite accreditation bodies and curriculum organizations to examine integrity governance during inspection or authorization cycles, not only policy existence, but also evidence of consistent implementation.

Table 3. Practical Application of the Integrity Governance Framework

Reviewer-required application element	Operational answer in the revised framework
What to do	Adopt a whole-school integrity framework, safe-reporting route, controlled assessment model, AI reflection log, parent compact, and annual integrity audit.
With whom	Board or owners, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, students, parents, examination officers, tutors where relevant, and accreditation or curriculum bodies.
How	Use board-approved non-negotiables, documented decision trees, staff calibration, supervised checkpoints, oral defence, developmental process evidence, transparent appeals, and annual reporting.
Expected result	Reduced policy-practice decoupling, stronger teacher psychological safety, clearer parent boundaries, more authentic assessment evidence, and higher institutional trust.
Anticipated challenges	Parent resistance, workload, fear of complaints or contract consequences, inconsistent curriculum rules, and over-reliance on detection software.
Future development	Empirical studies should compare for-profit and non-profit international schools, mature and





Reviewer-required application element	Operational answer in the revised framework
	emerging markets, and schools with different accreditation histories to test the integrity-risk-chain framework.

Future research should test this framework empirically. Comparative case studies could examine whether integrity governance differs between for-profit and non-profit international schools, between mature and emerging markets, or between schools with different accreditation histories. Survey research could also test whether teacher perceptions of psychological safety predict willingness to report academic-integrity concerns.

Conclusion

Academic integrity in international schools should no longer be treated as a marginal concern confined to plagiarism cases or examination malpractice. The literature reviewed in this article shows that integrity is sustained through culture, trust, leadership, and governance. In fee-paying and high-aspiration school environments, stakeholder expectations can support learning, but they can also create pressure that distorts assessment, weakens sanctions, and normalizes exceptions. Generative AI has further exposed the limits of assessment systems that rely too heavily on final products as evidence of learning.

The main contribution of this article is to reposition academic integrity as a strategic condition of institutional trust. In international schools, this matters because the value of the school's judgments - grades, reports, references, and qualifications - depends on whether families, universities, teachers, and students believe those judgments are fair and authentic. Once that trust is weakened, policy rhetoric alone cannot restore it.

The article has shown that integrity risk emerges through a chain: board and market incentives influence senior leadership decisions; senior leadership decisions shape middle-leadership mediation; middle-leadership mediation affects teacher discretion; teacher discretion affects the quality of assessment evidence; and assessment evidence determines whether institutional trust is deserved. This is the conceptual contribution of the article and the basis for the proposed framework.

Educational leaders, therefore, need to protect integrity through coherent policy, stronger assessment design, disciplined stakeholder engagement, visible procedural consistency, and transparent AI governance. These are not peripheral leadership tasks. They are central to the credibility of international schooling itself. Protecting academic integrity is ultimately about protecting the meaning of learning, the fairness of assessment, and the trust on which educational institutions depend.

In an AI-rich educational environment, certified authenticity becomes one of the most important value propositions of an international school. Schools that can demonstrate that their grades, reports, references, and qualifications are based on authentic student learning will be better positioned to protect trust with families, universities, accreditors, and staff. Schools that cannot demonstrate this may retain short-term market confidence, but their credibility will remain fragile.

Accreditation and curriculum bodies should therefore examine evidence of integrity governance, including case records, reporting routes, assessment design, appeals, and AI disclosure practices, rather than accepting the presence of an academic-integrity policy as sufficient proof of institutional integrity.

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