ELLERSFORD

SCHOOL FUTURES & TRANSFORMATION

The premium international school in 2035

Value, learning and institutional choice

BOARD FUTURES BRIEF / 01

2027–2035

BOARD DISCUSSION EDITION / NOVEMBER 2026

A successful school is not necessarily a future-ready school.

The board's responsibility is to safeguard what makes an institution valuable while challenging assumptions that may no longer hold.

For premium international schools, the next decade is unlikely to be defined by the replacement of teachers with machines. It will be shaped by a harder question: what constitutes a distinctive, credible and humanly valuable education when technology can perform many tasks that schools once provided exclusively?

The evidence already points in several directions at once. AI can support teachers and well-designed tutoring; it can also enable shortcuts that undermine learning. International school groups are expanding, creating opportunities for investment and shared services while raising questions about institutional identity. Families may continue to value academic pathways, but will also judge the quality of relationships, wellbeing, experiences and preparation for a changing world. [1][2][4] [5]

ELLERSFORD THESIS

The strategic advantage will belong to schools that deliberately redefine educational value, rather than merely digitalise their existing operating model.

Four decisions every board should confront

• Value: What should families be paying a premium for in 2035?

• Learning: Where should technology deepen independent thought—and where should it be deliberately absent?

• Operating model: How should talent, time, partnerships and capital be reorganised around student value?

• Stewardship: What must remain non-negotiable as the institution changes?

This brief is intended to stimulate board deliberation, not to recommend one universal model of schooling. Its scenarios and proposed decisions are illustrative; a school-specific answer requires institutional discovery, financial analysis and local evidence.

Six signals the board should not ignore.

Selected cross-sector indicators—not forecasts for any individual school.

37%	AI use among lower-secondary teachers Reported professional use during 2024 in OECD TALIS evidence. A signal of adoption, not proof of effectiveness. [2]
72%	Academic-integrity concern Lower-secondary teachers concerned that AI can allow students to misrepresent work as their own. [2]
30%	Student digital distraction OECD average: students reporting distraction by digital devices in most or every mathematics lesson in PISA 2022. [3]
15k+	International schools worldwide ISC Research estimates more than 15,000 schools, educating 7.7 million students in 2026. [4]
~40%	International schools in groups ISC Research reports that close to 40% are affiliated with groups, with varied models of centralisation. [5]
39%	Expected skills change by 2030 Employer survey expectation for workers' core skills—not a measured change or a school-specific requirement. [6]

Interpretation: the signals justify strategic investigation, not a technology purchasing programme. Their populations, dates and measures differ; they should not be combined into a single "readiness score".

Six forces. Uneven timing. Competing consequences.

The central strategic task is to understand interactions among forces, rather than adopt each trend independently.

01 / AI and knowledge abundance

Greater access to explanations, drafting, translation and adaptive practice challenges the scarcity of information. Independent reasoning, validation and disciplined learning design become more important, not less. [2]

02 / New evidence about learning

Instructional quality, feedback, cognitive effort and supportive relationships remain central. Technology must demonstrate that it improves learning rather than just the speed of task completion. [2][7]

03 / Workforce reinvention

Teacher time, specialist support, workload, recruitment and leadership capability must be redesigned together. Optimising administrative activity is different from automating educational relationships. [10]

04 / Premium-value pressure

When families can access sophisticated learning tools outside school, the paid proposition must become more explicit: trusted teachers, belonging, rigorous pathways, exceptional experiences and outcomes beyond credentials. This is a strategic hypothesis, not a measured universal parent preference.

05 / Group-scale economics

Portfolio operators can share procurement, expertise, platforms and investment; they must balance consistency with the character and autonomy of individual schools. [5]

06 / Governance, privacy and trust

AI in admissions and certain learning-outcome evaluation uses may meet high-risk categories under EU legislation, depending on scope and context. Safeguarding and oversight must be built into design choices. [9]

What will a family be paying for in 2035?

A useful board exercise is to describe the premium in terms of demonstrable value—not campus features or technology licences.

A premium school in 2035 may offer four tightly connected sources of value. Their relative importance will vary by market, family expectations, curriculum pathway and school identity.

Value dimension	Potential proof of value
Learning depth	Evidence of conceptual understanding, progress, independent work and rigorous credentials.
Human attention	Trusted adult relationships, mentoring, inclusion, belonging, specialist care and family partnership.
Opportunity and experience	Arts, sport, research, languages, service, entrepreneurship and real-world partnerships.
Institutional trust	Clear safeguarding, transparent governance, ethical technology, financial resilience and confidence in outcomes.

Three questions to test the proposition

• If high-quality tutoring became much cheaper, what would parents still be unable to obtain without our school?

• Which promises can we substantiate with evidence, and which depend primarily on reputation or tradition?

• What should we deliberately stop doing to create more time and resources for our distinctive strengths?

BOARD TEST

Imagine explaining your fee to a thoughtful parent in 2035 without mentioning buildings, devices or examination league tables. What would you say?

The right answer may preserve substantial elements of the present model. Future-readiness does not require novelty for its own sake.

Augment thought. Do not outsource it.

The strongest use of technology is likely to be selective, teacher-led and tested against actual learning.

A decision framework for AI-enabled learning

Use with discipline	Avoid by default without compelling evidence
Formative practice, feedback suggestions and teacher-supervised tutoring	Ungoverned AI completion of tasks presented as independent student achievement
Accessible materials and targeted adjustments	Opaque profiling or automated high-stakes decisions about learners
Administrative drafting with human review	Substituting automated interactions for essential care, trust or safeguarding
Teacher-designed simulation and inquiry support	Large deployments without clear hypotheses, consent/privacy assessment or evaluation

The OECD's 2026 Digital Education Outlook distinguishes task performance from learning gains: polished AI-assisted output is not evidence that a pupil has developed understanding. UNESCO and the IB emphasise human agency, privacy, inquiry and educator judgement. [2][7][8]

Assessment implications for the next decade

• Retain external qualifications and comparability where these serve legitimate progression needs.

• Increase confidence in authorship through oral defence, supervised performance, practical demonstrations and process evidence.

• Assess the ability to use technology thoughtfully while preserving evidence of independent foundational knowledge.

CORE PRINCIPLE

The school should be able to explain not only what a student produced, but what the student can understand, defend and do unaided.

The future school is a workforce-design question.

Productivity should be measured in improved educational value—not automatically fewer teachers.

School work is unevenly distributed across high-value teaching, relationship-based support, administrative coordination and compliance. New tools may reduce some repetitive tasks, but genuine gains emerge only when released capacity is deliberately redirected.

A value-based productivity sequence

1 Identify

Map professional time by task, not job title; listen to those doing the work.

2 Test

Pilot changes with baseline measures for staff time, teaching quality, workload and learner experience.

3 Reinvest

Specify which saved hours become feedback, planning, mentoring, targeted support or training.

4 Govern

Review staff confidence, workload equity, safeguarding and unintended consequences before scaling.

Teacher retention is also a strategic capability. OECD TALIS 2024 analysis associates classroom-discipline stress and low professional self-efficacy with intentions to leave teaching. Those patterns do not establish that any single technology can resolve attrition. [10]

Illustrative board business case

INVESTMENT QUESTION

If a programme releases 1,500 staff hours annually, what specific, measurable student benefit will those hours purchase—and what is the fully loaded cost of achieving it?

A defensible investment case should include training, integration, specialist time, recurring licences, supervision, support costs and the opportunity cost of change. Cost reductions may sometimes be necessary, but should never masquerade as educational impact.

Scenario planning for 2035—not prediction.

Two uncertainties: the proven educational value of AI tools, and the willingness of families to sustain high-cost, human-intensive schooling.

A / AUGMENTED ATELIER

AI learning value: high | Premium human demand: sustained

Rich teacher relationships, strong AI-supported individual practice, extensive enrichment and personalised pathways.

Risk: an expensive, complex model that cannot prove educational returns.

B / PLATFORM PREMIUM

AI learning value: high | Premium human demand: pressured

Groups standardise selected services, making learning support affordable while premium schools differentiate through signature experiences.

Risk: commercial efficiency erodes school identity and trust.

C / HUMANIST FLAGSHIP

AI learning value: weak/uneven | Premium human demand: sustained

Families value rigorous screen-light learning, mentoring, culture and authentic experience; technology operates mainly behind the scenes.

Risk: a principled stance becomes resistance to useful innovation.

D / RESILIENT ESSENTIALS

AI learning value: weak/uneven | Premium human demand: pressured

Schools protect high-quality foundations and safeguarding while rationalising facilities, programmes and costs.

Risk: erosion of distinctive premium value or support quality.

ROBUST STRATEGY

Invest in choices that work across several scenarios; reserve large irreversible commitments for when leading indicators justify them.

Seven strategic choices—not seven automatic reforms.

Each choice should be made against institutional purpose, evidence, affordability and student experience.

01 Educational promise

What will we preserve at any cost, and what outcomes will define a valuable education?

02 Technology boundary

Which uses of AI deepen learning, and where should human judgement or screen-free practice dominate?

03 Curriculum and assessment

How do we retain rigorous knowledge while developing reasoning, agency and credible evidence of learning?

04 People architecture

Which capabilities should sit with teachers, specialists, teams, shared services and external partners?

05 Capital allocation

Which investments are reversible pilots, and which lock the institution into an operating model?

06 Group autonomy

What should be common across a group, and what must remain local to a school’s identity and community?

07 Ethical limits

Who has authority to stop an initiative that jeopardises safeguarding, rights, wellbeing or educational integrity?

Each decision should have an owner, decision date, evidence threshold, alternative options and a short explanation that can be communicated to staff and families.

A phased investment logic for 2027–2035.

The sequence below is illustrative and should be adapted to financial position, curriculum, regulatory context and institutional ambition.

Horizon	Illustrative moves
2027–2029 Establish foundations	Build a futures register; map what families value; audit learning, workload and data risk; strengthen AI policy; select small reversible pilots; create baseline measures.
2029–2032 Scale what works	Extend proven practices; reshape professional time and support teams; redesign selected curriculum/assessment experiences; update learning spaces and digital infrastructure only when warranted.
2032–2035 Reconsider the model	Review timetable, learning pathways, campus use, group operating model, partnerships and capital allocation against the latest evidence and changing demand.

Investment gates for every major initiative

- Educational case: a clear learning or student-experience problem and a plausible theory of change.
- Financial case: total cost, opportunity cost, funding sources and downside exposure.
- Ethical case: safeguarding, privacy, accessibility, consent and human oversight.
- Evidence gate: defined measures, evaluation window and conditions for scaling or stopping.

CAPITAL DISCIPLINE

Pilot where uncertainty is high. Standardise where evidence is strong. Preserve options where the future is genuinely unknowable.

A school futures scorecard.

Judge transformation by outcomes and institutional capability—not by the number of initiatives launched.

Dimension	Possible baseline and follow-up measures
Learning	Standardised or moderated progress; independent performance; subject mastery; quality of feedback.
Student life	Belonging, attendance, inclusion, wellbeing, safeguarding confidence and access to support.
People	Teacher retention, workload, professional learning, time spent on direct student value.
Educational value	Parent perception of distinctiveness, quality of experience, pathways and student opportunities.
Institutional resilience	Cash headroom, enrolment and retention, investment delivery, risk and leadership continuity.
Transformation capability	Quality of pilots, adoption with fidelity, evidence quality, decisions made to scale, adapt or stop.

Baseline measures and comparison choices must be agreed before interventions begin. Results should be disaggregated where responsible and lawful; apparent improvements can reflect cohort changes, selection effects or external factors rather than programme impact.

Three stop rules worth adopting

- Stop or redesign if a pilot shows credible harm to wellbeing, safeguarding, equity or learning.
- Pause expansion if benefits cannot be demonstrated or total cost grows beyond the agreed threshold.
- Reassess if staff or student evidence contradicts the intervention's theory of change.

A board agenda for future readiness.

The most valuable first step is a disciplined conversation tied to real decisions and ownership.

Period	Board and executive actions
Days 1–30	Commission a short futures scan; inventory explicit and implicit assumptions about the school's 2035 proposition; hear independently from students, staff and families.
Days 31–60	Develop alternative future options; identify 3–5 material decisions; quantify feasibility and investment envelopes; agree what must not be compromised.
Days 61–90	Approve one or two bounded experiments; define owners, milestones and safeguards; set a board review cadence and measures for each experiment.

Questions for the next governing board meeting

- What will be fundamentally different about the needs of a 2035 student and family?
- Which assumption about our model would be most damaging if it proved false?
- Where is the school already exceptional—and how can we protect that advantage?
- What would we test now if the aim were better student value, not simply faster operations?
- What evidence would persuade us not to pursue a proposed innovation?

THE BOARD'S IMMEDIATE OUTPUT

A signed mandate for exploration: a sponsor, a small evidence budget, a time-bound brief and a requirement to return with choices—not a preselected solution.

Helping schools shape their own future.

This publication illustrates how Ellersford frames strategic choices; it is not a substitute for institution-specific analysis.

Ellersford is being established as an independent school futures and transformation advisory organisation for premium international schools and international education groups. Our work combines foresight, institutional discovery, future design, supported implementation and continuous evaluation.

Futures Framework stage	Indicative board-facing deliverable
Explore	Futures Landscape Brief: relevant forces, uncertainties and evidence quality.
Discover	Institutional Identity & Readiness Baseline: strengths, values, student experiences and capacities.
Envision	Institutional Futures Blueprint: alternatives, preferred vision, roadmap and investment case.
Transform	Implementation charters, pilot evaluations and periodic board steering.
Evolve	Annual Futures & Impact Review and refreshed strategic options.

Ellersford does not prescribe one educational future. The institution retains decision rights, implementation ownership and safeguarding responsibilities. Recommendations must remain proportionate to its identity, community and financial capacity.

AN INVITATION TO LEAD

The future of your school should be a deliberate board choice, not an accidental consequence of technology or market pressure.

BOARD DISCUSSION EDITION / November 2026. This brief is an independent discussion document; it is not commissioned research for a particular school, an investment recommendation, or evidence of completed Ellersford client engagements.

Begin the conversation

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Selected sources & interpretation notes.

References underpin the signals and contextual discussion; scenarios and board recommendations are Ellersford analysis.

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[2] OECD (2026), Digital Education Outlook 2026

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[3] OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Results, Volume II: Learning During - and From - Disruption

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[4] ISC Research (2026), Global International Schools Snapshot

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[7] UNESCO (2023; updated 2026), Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research

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[8] International Baccalaureate (2026), Draft AI Design Principles

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[9] European Commission, AI Act Service Desk: Annex III

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[10] OECD (2025), Results from TALIS 2024: Sustaining the Teaching Profession

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[11] OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Results, Volume II: Belonging and well-being

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Method note: evidence was selected for relevance and source quality as of 6 November 2026. The data refer to different populations and periods; none represents a direct forecast of premium international school demand. Scenarios are deliberately stylised to expose strategic choices. No source should be interpreted as endorsing Ellersford.