



# How do IB World Schools safeguard students?

## Introduction

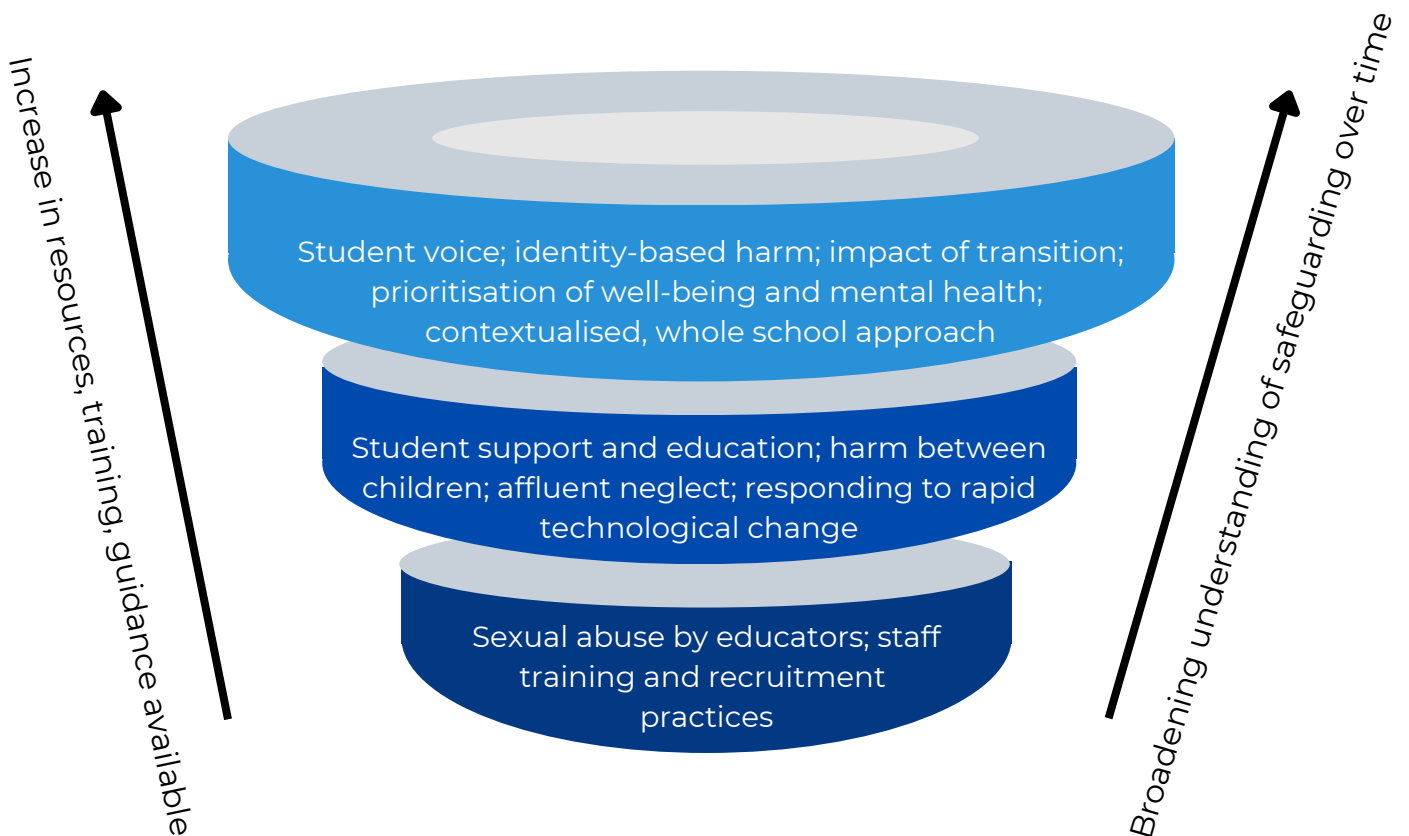
In spring 2023, research was undertaken in three IB World Schools located on different continents with the aim of exploring the forms of harm experienced by international school students, the challenges of safeguarding faced by the schools, and the factors and practices that practitioners and students consider to support effective safeguarding.

## Methodology

A comparative case study was carried out with data collected from middle and high school student focus groups and interviews with practitioners with responsibility for safeguarding (counsellors, safeguarding leads and principals). Part of a larger PhD research project, the study sought to illuminate the current landscape of safeguarding in international schools.

## Context of the study

The term safeguarding encompasses the protection of children's health, well-being and human rights. International school safeguarding initially focused on the prevention of sexual abuse of children but, in recent years, has broadened to include other forms of harm such as harm between children, affluent neglect and online harm, as well as whole school approaches to prevention and response.



The above model is a conceptualisation of how international school safeguarding has evolved since 2014, when it was revealed that a serial child abuser had worked in multiple international schools over a 40-year period, initiating a collaborative effort by the international school community to strengthen safeguarding practices. The model is based on practitioner and academic literature and the professional experiences of the researcher.

## Findings

### 1. Harm perceptions differ between adult and student participants

Identity-based harm, including racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and misogyny, and the difficulties of being part of a diverse, globally mobile community, were prevalent in the student data. Suicide and self-harm were identified by adults as posing a significant risk to students, especially since the pandemic. Online harm was a concern for both adult and student participants.

### 2. Online harm between students in the same school blurs traditional school boundaries of time and space

Students did not describe interactions with peers in the online space as separate to their real-life interactions. Students did not see the terms 'online harm' or 'online safety' as applying to online interactions between their school peers. The adult participants, meanwhile, were challenged by how to respond to issues occurring outside of school, including online, but which impact student safety and wellbeing in school.

### 3. Schools have developed culturally-responsive strategies for addressing physical discipline

Practitioners described strategies for responding to harm in the home in countries where physical discipline is culturally and/or legally acceptable. These involve working in partnership with families to educate and support parents to use different approaches to discipline aligned to the school's values.

### 4. Safeguarding structures and a team approach support safeguarding, but students may not understand why this is necessary

Shared decision making and clear reporting/response protocols were valued by practitioners in the three schools. A team approach was seen to strengthen safeguarding practices and avoid placing the decision-making burden on just one individual. Meanwhile, students expressed concern their private information would be shared with a safeguarding team, rather than just the individual counsellor they confided in.

### 5. Counsellors play an important role in safeguarding, but there is stigma around students using them for support

The role of the counsellor was highly valued by the student and adult participants. Students expressed reluctance to go to the counsellor, though, for fear of stigma (e.g. rumours about why they visited the counsellor), losing control of the issue, confidentiality/privacy concerns, or because they felt they didn't know them. Students said they are reluctant to break a friend's confidence even if they are worried about them.

### 6. A safeguarding curriculum is vital for protecting students, but time, content and/or delivery may not meet student needs

Both students and practitioners agreed that teaching students about safeguarding and well-being in the curriculum was important. There was agreement that the current approach is inadequate, although for different reasons, with students feeling the content and methods of delivery were not meeting their needs, and adults feeling they do not have the time to effectively deliver a safeguarding curriculum.

### 7. External organisations and networks are important resources

Practitioners referenced international school accrediting bodies, external agencies, training providers and regional networks, as being useful sources of guidance, support and external validation. Experiences with external agencies such as child protective services were variable but building relationships with them, as well as other local networks, was seen as important for strengthening safeguarding practices.

## Concluding comments

The inclusion of student perspectives in safeguarding may help schools to better understand, identify, prevent and respond to harm in international schools. A gap emerged in practitioner and student perceptions of identity-based harm and the impact of global mobility, both of which would benefit from further exploration. Future considerations for the IB include a harmonisation of terminology to support schools' understanding of the connections between safeguarding and well-being, and greater integration of safeguarding within the IB programmes.