



Inside ISBA: Looking forward and back with David Woodgate



As David Woodgate retires from his 10-year tenure as ISBA's chief executive, we ask him to reflect on his career and what ISBA's future holds.

Looking back over the past 10 years at ISBA, what have been the most memorable milestones?

We've weathered some extraordinary challenges. GDPR felt like a huge issue when it emerged, but in hindsight it was relatively minor compared with what followed. We've had COVID, the Teachers' Pension Scheme debate, VAT on school fees and a hostile political environment, mergers and acquisitions across the sector and constant change within independent education itself.

One of the most rewarding things has been seeing ISBA grow into an organisation that is now at the forefront of the business side of independent education. We work closely with the Independent Schools Council, and we are helping to shape and inform conversations rather than simply responding to them.

The breadth and quality of services we provide to members has also grown significantly. Members now benefit from services that simply didn't exist before, including bursar recruitment and a much more developed interim management offering.

Seeing that progress has been rewarding in itself, but receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award at this year's AGBIS Annual Conference was a particularly special moment because it gave me the opportunity to reflect on everything ISBA has achieved over the past decade. There is always more to do, of course. Once you set the bar high, people quite rightly expect you to keep raising it. But when I look back, I see an organisation that has matured enormously and is in a strong position for the future.

As I contemplate retirement, I have to say I am particularly pleased that in my last six months or so at the association, I have been able to bring to fruition the proposed merger with AGBIS, which is something I have had in my mind for some years. Bringing together the business side of independent schools with governance in one combined professional association can only be for the greater good of the sector. 🤝



What was your career before ISBA?

As a child, I liked the idea of joining the Navy. When I was four years old, I announced that I expected to start as an admiral. I'm a Plymouth boy, so I grew up by the sea with the naval base on the doorstep. My dad had served in the Navy during the war, so it was always part of my upbringing. However, I actually went on to study French, Russian and law at university before doing a postgraduate qualification to become a barrister. I was called to the Bar in 1982, and then I moved into the City and spent 20 years in banking. I rounded off my business education with an MBA and a postgraduate certificate in charity finance, management and governance.

By around 2000, I was getting itchy feet. I decided to take a year off and travel around the world, but then a friend, who was on the board of an educational charity, asked if I would do some pro bono consultancy. The project turned into a six-month turnaround role, but then six months became six years as the permanent CEO.

I never got my year off, but I have no regrets. It turned out to be a great move because it introduced me to an entirely new sector: not-for-profit organisations, charities and professional associations. Now, 26 years later, I'm retiring from my third chief executive role in a professional association.

How did you end up at ISBA?

My role before ISBA involved things like flying to Melbourne for 36 hours for a board meeting and then flying straight back. This was 2015, before Zoom, so it was simply how things were done.

I was also a governor at an ISBA member school – and it was the bursar who sent me the job application with a note: 'Did you know that my professional association is looking for a new chief executive?' I was interested in governance, education and the idea of putting something back, so the role sounded exciting to me. However, the application deadline was in two days' time and I was in Melbourne – about to get a flight home. I ended up writing the application on the plane.

During the first interview, I said: "What I'm about to say will either get me the job or will mean I'll never hear from you again."

What I said, in essence, was that the profession of bursar struck me as a little tired and rather stereotypical at that point. It was still largely seen as a world of middle-aged men who had reached a certain rank in the military, with very few women in the profession at the time. There was also a sense of, 'this is how we do things around here.'

But what I said was precisely what they were looking for. The chair recognised that there was a need for renewal and was looking for a fresh pair of eyes from outside the sector.

Your final ISBA Annual Conference took place in May.

What is it about the event that makes it so valuable?

The overwhelming value of the conference is bringing people together. The opportunity to network, exchange ideas and understand different perspectives from more than 1,000 different professionals involved in the sector – including school leaders, specialist advisers, suppliers, bankers, lawyers and many others – is invaluable.

You simply can't replicate that experience on a webinar or a one-day course. At the conference, people can talk openly to colleagues facing similar challenges. One bursar might share something that worked brilliantly in their school, while another can explain what didn't work and why.

I also think bursars are often particularly good at investing in professional development for their staff and schools, but sometimes less good at prioritising their own development. The professional and personal development sessions at the conference are outstanding. The quality of speakers and content would cost a great deal commercially, but members have access to all of it as part of the conference experience.

I also enjoy attending the sessions myself because I still learn things. We should all be doing that, whatever stage of our careers we're at.

Why is ISBA so valuable to the independent schools sector?

At its heart, ISBA's value lies in providing readily accessible, actionable, reliable and professional advice and guidance. Because we work with around 1,300 schools, we can spot emerging challenges, share insight and help members navigate issues more effectively. Often, reassurance is just as valuable as the answer itself. Governors and school leaders frequently want confidence that they are on the right track – and ISBA can provide that.

One of the strengths of the Advice & Guidance team is that they don't simply answer the question that has been asked; they often answer the question that **should** have been asked. Because they have such a broad view across the sector, they can identify related issues, share insights from other schools and help members think through the wider implications of a decision.

How can schools get the most out of their membership?

Some schools see ISBA as an insurance policy: we are there if something goes wrong and they need advice quickly. That is entirely valid and it is an important part of what we do, but I think schools get the greatest value when they engage with the full breadth of membership – not just when a problem arises. We have a fantastic recruitment service, for example, but I still speak to bursars who do not realise this. Some schools will go elsewhere and pay significantly more, simply because they were unaware of what was available through their membership.

Don't wait until there is a crisis. Make use of the Advice & Guidance team, the online resources, regional meetings, conferences, networking opportunities and professional development. If you are not engaging with those, you are missing out on a significant part of the value of membership.

As you hand over to Catherine Spencer, what do you think she will bring to ISBA?

Catherine will bring exactly what every organisation needs from time to time: a fresh pair of eyes. I have always believed that chief executives, headteachers and similar leadership roles have a natural shelf life of around 10 years. Organisations benefit from renewal.



Catherine will build on the good things that have already been achieved over the past decade and will also bring her own perspective and priorities. Any successful leader should always be willing to challenge existing assumptions and ask whether there is a better way of doing things.

She's also arriving at a particularly important moment as the organisation completes its merger with AGBIS. That gives her the opportunity to bring together the business and governance strands into a single, cohesive charitable organisation that serves the needs of members even more effectively.

What final advice would you give to schools as they prepare for the future?

The schools that will thrive are the ones that are prepared to evolve. Schools need to rethink how they operate, explore new business models and find different ways to remain sustainable in a changing environment. Some schools will undoubtedly feel under pressure, but I have always been a great believer that out of adversity comes opportunity. I am sure ISBA will continue to help schools grasp opportunities.

When I look at schools that struggle or fail, a failure of governance is often at the heart of the problem. That's why strong governance and strategic leadership are so important. Schools need to put themselves in the strongest possible position to respond to challenges and take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

There is no single model for success. The key is understanding your market, understanding your strengths and being prepared to adapt.

For bursars and school leaders, my message is a simple one: stay strong, stay resilient and keep looking ahead. Seize opportunities! The sector has faced enormous challenges in recent years, but time and again schools have shown an impressive ability to adapt and tremendous resilience.

Many schools are actually performing better than they feared they would. That should give everyone confidence. There are challenges ahead, certainly, but there are also opportunities for those willing to embrace change and think strategically about the future.

What are your plans for retirement?

Travel is high on the list. I've done some unusual and wonderful trips over the years, but there are still many adventures left.

I'm also being inundated with interesting opportunities, both paid and voluntary. I'm looking at some consultancy and advisory work and will probably take on a few more governorships. The challenge will be making sure I don't fill the diary too quickly! I want to give myself some time to pause, reflect and think carefully about what I really want to do next. Governorships are particularly rewarding because they are about giving something back. Supporting education remains important to me, and I know I won't be inactive. ➡

📌 *Travel beckons for David before he's tempted to take on more work*



The 2026 Summer issue of The Bursar's Review will be available for members print and digitally from mid-July. Article topics include AI-powered financial fraud, rethinking debt in a changed market, the governance of satellite schools abroad, and the operational realities of working in a school group.

Contact: membership@thisba.org.uk for more details.