



Business Certification Program™
for Business Officers in Private-Independent Schools

HANDBOOK



Business and Operations at ISM

From the time of its founding, ISM has been writing, advising, and teaching in the critical area of private-independent school business and operations. We combine the best of critical thinking, research, and customized advice to help schools achieve and maintain operational excellence. ISM is active in:

- Monitoring trends in education and carrying out original research;
- Publishing books and articles on finance and operations in our management advisory letter, *Ideas & Perspectives*, and specialized collections such as *The Source* newsletters;
- Leading a wide variety of workshops during our Summer Institute program as well as throughout the year, in addition to conducting Webinars and podcasts on finance and operations topics;
- Conducting finance and operations consultations directly with individual private-independent schools in a variety of areas including strategic planning, business/operations assessments, strategic analyses, management structure analyses, and financial aid;
- Conducting surveys to understand the overall value proposition of the school to help with setting tuition and fees.

ISM Mission Statement

Independent School Management (ISM) is dedicated to the advancement of school management. ISM provides creative strategies by combining extensive research, proven management techniques, and personalized service.

ISM Business Institute Faculty

In addition to ISM Consultants, we bring together distinguished members of the private-independent school business and operations community as faculty members and advisors for our Business and Operations Academy and Business Certification Program (BCP), consultations, and other professional development opportunities.

Faculty members are chosen because of their leadership capacities serving the broad range of independent schools, and are recognized by their peers as exemplary members of the profession. They share, learn, and enhance leading-edge theory and practice in finance and operations. They serve as a model for our collaboration with schools in all areas of private school management.

A Brief History

Starting in 1975 with *Ideas & Perspectives*, an advisory letter for Heads, Trustees, and other key administrators, ISM has grown in direct response to the needs of the independent school community. New services have been added over the years to make ISM the only comprehensive management-support firm for private-independent schools in the United States and abroad.



Business Certification ProgramTM *for Business Officers in Independent Schools*

Independent School Management (ISM), in conjunction with practicing professionals in the field, has developed a certification process specifically for Business Officers in private-independent schools. This process ensures common standards, and inspires and supports professional development throughout the industry. It gives Business Officers a way to progress to higher levels of achievement.

3	Letter from the President
4	Guiding Principles
6	Certification Process Overview
7	Requirements
11	Fees & Renewals
12	FAQ



Dear Private-Independent School Business Leader,

Thank you for your interest in ISM's newest professional growth opportunity designed just for school business leaders—the Business Certification Program. We hope that you will seriously consider earning certification through our program. We are deeply committed to professional growth, and we're eager to support, encourage, and challenge you through this process.

Please read this handbook carefully. We offer three levels of certification for business leaders. By pursuing ISM's Business Certification Program (BCP) credential at any level—Professional, Senior, or Executive—you will assure your School Head and Board that you're well trained to understand the special niche of private-independent schools, and will gain expertise and confidence in your daily tasks. Additionally, you will develop career-long relationships with colleagues throughout North America, which will further benefit your career development.

ISM has been serving independent schools since 1975. We're deeply attuned to specific difference-makers for well-operated independent schools. Our commitment to you is that, as an ISM partner, you will be a well-informed, well-trained school business leader, making you an invaluable partner to your school, your Head, and the Board.

As you read this handbook, I hope you grow excited about our support through a network of professionals furthering the theory and practice of independent school business operations.

Best wishes,



Roxanne S. Higgins, *ISM President*

Guiding Principles

As the private-independent school market continues to grow and develop, we face greater scrutiny by Boards and governmental authorities for standards and excellence. The ISM Business Certification Program has been developed to support business and finance professionals in their diverse and difficult roles so that schools may enjoy stable operations.

ISM exists to train, network, and support finance and operations professionals in private-independent schools.

Business and Operations Mission

As school business leaders:

- We support the mission of our schools.
 - We understand that the culture of private-independent schools must be valued and protected, and work tirelessly to support high-performing faculty and student cultures.
 - We ensure compliance with regulatory and governmental requirements.
-

Actions

Why Do I Do What I Do?

I am passionate about our school's mission, and am compelled to action. I arrive to work every day, not because I need a job, but because I believe I can make a difference within my school community.

How Do I Serve My School?

All business and finance responsibilities follow sound business practices.

I support the School Head and the Board of Trustees with accurate and timely data, financial planning, and asset and risk management. I efficiently and effectively administer financial and operational resources. Doing these well results in my school's ability to operate optimally and to support and enhance programs and services.

All business activities are guided by my school's governance structure and strategic/financial plan.

As a professional, I understand that my role is subordinate to the School Head. The Board of Directors is the legal governing body. Because of our finance and operations responsibilities, my role can be difficult. Therefore I support and enable strategic planning and strategic financial planning to maximize my role and ensure school success.

I support, maintain, and nurture relationships with the school's diverse constituencies.

I know that families enroll in my school and that donors make philanthropic gifts because of their passion about the mission. I develop relationships with both internal and external constituents so that relationships can flourish and so that school's reputation is spotless. I understand how finance and operations are critical to the day-to-day success of the school and strive to serve all constituents.

I ensure compliance with regulatory and governmental requirements.

The CFO is a corporate officer responsible for managing financial risks, financial planning, record keeping, and analysis. I ensure that my school's operations are fiscally sound and comply with all governmental and regulatory requirements.



These Guiding Principles—including the mission, core values, and actions—represent the highest performance standards for all Business and Operations Professionals.

Core Values for Business and Operations Professionals

1. Students come first.

The school's mission must clearly reflect this commitment. Finance and operations professionals are unwavering in their support of this commitment.

2. The school's mission is paramount in our decisions and actions.

The mission statement is not a meaningless set of words. It is values-rich, and we strive to bring it to life.

3. We conduct business and represent our schools in an ethical, honorable, and professional manner.

We understand that, to represent our schools, our relationships matter and we build trust with each personal interaction.

4. We respect, value, and serve each stakeholder in our school community.

We understand and accept that private-independent schools are collegial in nature, and that student and faculty cultures are foundational to build a high-quality and enduring reputation.

5. We are committed to privacy and confidentiality.

We understand that much of the information we deal with is highly confidential, and that the school's reputation could suffer when privacy and confidentiality is breached. We safeguard all data and honor the privacy of all constituents.

6. We are committed to professional growth, industry innovation, emerging issues and opportunities, and the utilization of effective tools to accomplish our work.

Certification Process Overview

The next few pages guide you through the steps for applying for your Business Certification Program credential (BCP). We look forward to supporting you through this process. Let's begin!

Step 1: Identify the level for which you are applying—Professional, Senior, or Executive. Ensure you are eligible (check requirements on the following page) and develop a plan for your professional growth journey.

Step 2: Create a place, electronically or physically, to collect all of your documentation.

Step 3: Print the BCP application or download it from the ISM site isminc.com/BCP

Step 4: Keep your application updated with pertinent information and accomplishments.

Step 5: When you have fulfilled all the requirements, send the completed application with the appropriate application fee by mail to BCP Registrar, 1316 N. Union St., Wilmington, DE 19806 or email your supporting documentation to BCPRegistrar@isminc.com.

Step 6: Watch for email confirmation that we have received your application and documentation. The Registrar will be in contact if there are any issues with your application. This step may take 8–12 weeks.

Step 7: Look forward to confirmation of your certification communication or to set up and carry out the interview.

If you have any questions, email BCPRegistrar@isminc.com. Please keep a copy of the originals of all submitted materials. Submissions will not be returned.



Requirements

7

Designation	Professional BCP-P	Senior BCP-S	Executive BCP-E
Experience <i>Experience requirements for Senior and Executive levels can include previous business/operations experience accepted at a ratio of 2 years to 1 year</i>	3 years business/operations experience in private-independent schools	5 years business/operations experience (Minimum of 3 years in private-independent schools)	10 years business/operations experience (Minimum of 7 years in private-independent schools)
Letter of Recommendation <i>Letter of recommendation from your School Head</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
► Leadership Activities <i>Needs to be stated in your letter of recommendation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning • Budget creation, oversight, and management • Mentoring of a direct report or colleague • Leading a conference presentation or workshop • Publication of articles • Supervising at least two direct reports 	N/A	2 required	3 required
ISM's Guiding Principles	Signed affirmation	Signed affirmation	Signed affirmation
Non-ISM Finance and Operations Conference	N/A	Yes	Yes
ISM Business and Operations Academy	Yes	Yes	Yes
► Professional Action Plan and Reflection <i>Developed at the ISM Business and Operations Academy, applicants must submit the professional action plan along with the reflection—a two-page, single-spaced description of the successes and lessons learned from the plan.</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Credits <i>Through ISM or ISM-approved</i>	N/A	50 credits/5 years (10 ISM credits required)	50 credits/5 years (10 ISM credits required)
► Finance and Operations Conference (non-ISM)	N/A	10 credits (10 credits maximum)	10 credits (10 credits maximum)
► Online Learning	N/A	1 hour = 1 credit	1 hour = 1 credit
► Association Workshops	N/A	1 hour = 1 credit	1 hour = 1 credit
► 1-day Workshop	N/A	10 credits	10 credits
► 3-day Workshop	N/A	30 credits	30 credits
► CEUs	N/A	1 CEU = 5 credits (20 credits maximum)	1 CEU = 5 credits (20 credits maximum)
Volunteerism <i>Participate in volunteer activities performed outside the professional's school (giving back to the community).</i>	N/A	20 hours per year	20 hours per year
Peer Review <i>Core institutional documents submitted for review by your peer. Examples include, but not limited to, employee handbook, accounting policies and procedures handbook, investment policies, financial aid policies, internal controls, safety and health management, risk management plan, etc.</i>	N/A	Yes (2 documents)	Yes (3 documents)
Interview with BCP faculty	N/A	N/A	Yes

Requirements Explained

P Professional Level Requirements **S** Senior Level Requirements **E** Executive Level Requirements

Experience

Professional **P**

Someone new to the profession and to private-independent schools should begin the certification process at the Professional level. Certification at this level requires you to have begun at least your **third academic year as a business and operations officer in private-independent schools**.

Senior **S**

You can move from the Professional level to the Senior, or begin at the Senior level if your experience qualifies you. If you have business and operation experience outside private-independent schools, this counts as part of your experience toward certification at the ratio of two years to one. In any case, you must have begun at least your **fifth academic year as a business and operations officer with a minimum of three years experience in private-independent schools**.

SAMPLE COMBINATIONS OF BUSINESS AND OPERATIONS EXPERIENCES NEEDED TO QUALIFY FOR SENIOR LEVEL
(Three different persons' experiences)

Experience in general setting		Experience in private-independent school (2 yrs. min.)	Total years recognized (5 yrs. min.)
Accrued	Recognized		
4 years in nonprofit accounting	= 2 years	+ 3 years =	5
10 years public school business manager	= 5 years	+ 3 years =	8
2 years CFO	= 1 year	+ 6 years =	7

Executive **E**

You can work your way through Professional and Senior levels, or move directly to the Executive level, dependent on experience. The most significant aspect of this designation is the understanding of the unique position of private-independent schools within the business and operations environment, as represented by your longstanding experience. If you have business experience outside private-independent schools, you can use that as part of your experience toward certification at the ratio of two years to one. You must have begun at least your **fifth academic year as a business and operations officer with a minimum of seven years experience in private-independent schools**.

SAMPLE COMBINATIONS OF BUSINESS AND OPERATIONS EXPERIENCES NEEDED TO QUALIFY FOR EXECUTIVE LEVEL
(Three different persons' experiences)

Experience in general setting		Experience in private-independent school (7 yrs. min.)	Total years recognized (10 yrs. min.)
Accrued	Recognized		
12 years in nonprofit accounting	= 6 years	+ 7 years =	13
18 years public school business manager	= 9 years	+ 7 years =	16
4 years CFO	= 2 year	+ 8 years =	10

Letter of Recommendation **P S E**

The letter of recommendation should have the following characteristics:

- Printed on school letterhead
- Dated
- Signed by the School Head
(not a deputy or with an electronic signature)
- States that you are employed by the school
- States the title of your position and when you were hired
- States ways in which you are a valued member of the school community
- States the leadership activities performed (at least 2 for the Senior level and 5 for the Executive level.)

Leadership Activities **S E**

We reserve the Senior and Executive levels to those professionals who report directly to the School Head. Business professionals who report to anyone other than the School Head can participate at the Professional level. Leadership activities, therefore, pertain to exercising strategic oversight within the school, not a tactical exercise.

Senior and Executive level applicants must demonstrate a minimum of two or three leadership activities. Examples include:

- Strategic planning
- Creating and maintaining a budget
- Mentoring of a direct report or other colleague
- Leading a conference presentation or workshop
- Publication
- Supervising at least two direct reports

The activities must be clearly and fully documented in the Head's letter of recommendation.

Affirmation of ISM's Guiding Principles P S E

This document was developed by current professionals in the field in conversation with ISM. It articulates a definition of professionalism in business and operations within the private-independent school context, and reminds and guides us in our daily practice. You cannot obtain certification without affirming these principles. ISM encourages all practitioners to put these Guiding Principles in their offices where they can be clearly seen by employees of the school, as well as students, parents, and supporters. You do not need to have certification to obtain a copy of this document, and can display it in your office as you fulfill the requirements for certification. It can be downloaded from the ISM website (isminc.com/bcp)

Non-ISM Finance and Operations Conference S E

All candidates must attend at least one finance and operations conference from an ISM-approved provider such as NBOA—National Business Officers Association, PAISBOA—Philadelphia Area Business Officers Association, or MISBO—Mid-South Independent School Business Officers Association.

ISM encourages you to be part of the greater community of professionals, recognizing that exposure to diversity of opinion and expression deepens our experience and our ability to serve our schools exceptionally well.

Conferences we recognize include:

- ▶ NBOA Annual Symposium
- ▶ NBOA Business Institute
- ▶ MISBO/TAIS Business Officer Conference
- ▶ PAISBOA On-Going Knowledge Seminars—Held on the third Wednesday of each month.

Other conferences must be approved prior to credit being granted. General conferences that are not specific to private-independent schools business and operations will not be approved. Contact the registrar at BCPregistrar@isminc.com for pre-approval of conferences from other organizations.

ISM Business and Operations Academy P S E

All candidates are required to attend the ISM Business and Operations Academy before obtaining a BCP credential. Renewal of BCP or progress to higher designations also require attendance. By attending the ISM Business Academy, you will obtain a solid grounding in business and operations theory, and coaching from a practicing professional. At the Academy, you will develop a professional action plan with a mentor.

Professional Action Plan and Reflection

As a result of attending the ISM Business and Operations academy, you will be required to develop an action plan with your small group mentor. This plan, determined by you, will help keep your day-to-work grounded in what matters, and give you reasons to stay connected to your mentor long after the conference ends.

Because we believe reflection is an important part of professional growth, you are required to submit a professional reflection.

Consider the following questions:

- ▶ What questions have my successes and failures provoked?
- ▶ Am I truly learning? What am I truly learning?
(“Truly” in the sense that it has importance for me with great potential for my professional activities, as opposed to merely surface knowledge for its own sake.)
- ▶ As I reflect on my professional activities, how can I incorporate my experiences to improve my performance?
- ▶ What insights did I offer the School Head or my colleagues that surprised me?
- ▶ What insights have been offered to me that have touched me and impacted my performance?
- ▶ Am I connecting my work to my deepest motivations for what I do?

Of course, you may reflect on completely different things. The following steps may also be helpful as you reflect:

1. Describe what happened—the experience, an event, a learning, a discussion, an interaction
2. Consider its importance for you in terms of:
 - ▶ taking action (*what am I going to do?*)
 - ▶ reconsidering actions taken (*is this the best way to go?*)
 - ▶ talking to someone else (*whom else do I trust in this issue?*)
 - ▶ identifying its impact on your own identity (*what would this say about me?*)
 - ▶ considering how you feel (*what emotions do I have around this—why, with what implications?*)
 - ▶ observing trends or patterns about how you respond to issues
 - ▶ determining what meaning you made out of your experience.

Both the Professional Action Plan and Reflection documents must be submitted with your application.

Credits S E

For the Senior and Executive levels, the 50 credits required must include a minimum of 10 credits obtained through ISM. ISM recognizes and deeply respects the contributions made by many professional organizations regarding business and operations. However, to ensure that the distinctive nature of business and operations in private-independent schools is ingrained into professional practice, we require that candidates be exposed to research and study that ISM has undertaken.

For non-ISM credits, please refer to the following list of ISM-approved providers:

- ▶ National Business Officers Association
- ▶ Philadelphia Area Business Officers Association
- ▶ Mid-South Independent School Business Officers Association

Online learning

Online learning must be substantiated. To do so, you will need to identify the sponsoring organization, time and date, title of presentation, length of presentation, and name(s) of presenter(s). Credits will be apportioned in one hour increments.

- ▶ 1 hour = 1 credit ▶ 2 hours = 2 credits
- ▶ 3 hours = 3 credits

Association workshops

Many associations provide significant professional development opportunities. ISM recognizes any association that represents a group of private-independent schools. The following table demonstrates how credits are awarded.

Length of workshop	Credit given
1 hour	1 credit
2 hours	2 credits
Full-day/six hours of instruction/involvement	10 credits

Applicants should contact BCPregistrar@isminc.com for workshops that are between one and three days long to determine the credits given. Typically, 10 credits will be given for each conference lasting a full day. Less than a full day will be based on the table above (one credit per hour).

CEUs

Applicants must provide a copy of the CEU certificate to obtain credit. Each CEU is worth five credits with the maximum at 20 credits.

Volunteerism S E

As exemplary figures, business and operations professionals are required to demonstrate their drive to give back to the greater community by participating in volunteer activities outside their schools. While the required number of documented hours is 20 per year, this is not intended to be a benchmark. Most professionals do far more than this, though circumstances can sometime mitigate against more hours served.

Peer Review S E

Peer review provides evidence of professional competence and achievement. It is not work that is created for the certification process, but rather a collection of materials that represents your daily work. Core institutional documents include, but are not limited to the employee handbook, accounting policies and procedures handbook, investment policies, financial aid policies, internal controls, safety and health management plans, and a risk management plan. These documents should be reviewed by the peer of your choice along with a letter stating that they have reviewed and made recommendations concerning the core institutional documents. This letter should be submitted to ISM with your application. Please include your peer's contact information for verification. Two documents are required at the Senior level and three at the Executive level.

Interview E

This is applicable at the Executive level only. Once all requirements have been completed, you will first be interviewed by an ISM Consultant. Then you will receive a phone call from one of our BCP mentors to discuss your requirements and activities. The intent is to ensure that your depth of leadership and professionalism is appropriate. Once you have earned your certificate, you will be placed on ISM's list of business and operations executives. You may be invited to act as an ISM Adjunct Consultant through workshops, on-site consulting, and writing. The Executive level is an exclusive group of people, reserved for those who are truly engaged at a high level within their schools and the independent school community.

Fees & Renewals

Fees

ISM provides the Business Certification Program as part of its larger service to private-independent schools. The peer evaluation of portfolios is a volunteer activity carried out by business professionals in the field. They are not compensated.

As such, there is only an administrative charge to cover the cost of the Registrar and associated actions. Payment can be made either by the individual or by the school on behalf of the individual. At the Professional level, ISM offers the certification at no cost.

FEES FOR CERTIFICATION AND RENEWALS

Certification level	Application fee	Renewal fee
Professional	No fee	\$250*
Senior	\$300	\$300
Executive	\$425	\$425

***Note:** Application and payment of fees is not a guarantee of certification. If ISM, at its sole discretion, does not provide certification to an individual, there will be no refund of fees. A new application will require fee payment again.*

Renewal

Given the emphasis on continuous professional development and to ensure that business and operations needs are met in a changing environment, ISM certification requires that professionals demonstrate they are staying in touch with developments in the field on a regular basis. Accordingly, certification is valid for a fixed period (five years) before requiring renewal.

Renewing your certificate at the current level assures both you and your school that you are connecting meaningfully with your peers, continuing to upgrade your skills and knowledge, and demonstrating competence at your school.

Renewal is a reaffirmation of the Guiding Principles and a demonstration of your ongoing commitment to growth and renewal.

*Please note, the Professional level is only renewable for those who do not report to a School Head. Any business and operations professional reporting directly to the School Head must advance to the Senior level after five years. Once at the Senior level, the professional may renew or advance the credential at his/her choosing.

FAQ

I am taking a workshop on teamwork. Can this be used as a required credit?

No. The purpose of the BCP is to provide the participants with actual experience in business- and operations-related activities.

I was the Controller at my local hospital at my previous job. Do my years in that position count toward the years of experience needed for the Senior or Executive level?

For every two years you have worked in a business-related position for a non-independent school organization, you will receive one year's credit.

Who are the ISM-approved providers of conferences and workshops?

NBOA, MISBO/TAIS, and PAISBOA are the most prominent ones. Many state and regional associations offer "position-specific" workshops that are also acceptable. If you would like credit for attending a business and operations specific workshop offered by another organization, please contact the ISM Registrar to discuss the conference's or workshop's applicability.

Are there any parameters set on the peer review documents? For example, do I need to cite more than one document?

It depends upon the level for which you are applying. Two documents are required at the Senior level and three for the Executive level.

Who is the "peer" who will review my document(s)?

The core institutional documents need to be reviewed by your business professional peer of your choosing.

Can I submit an application for BCP before I accrue all my required credits?

No. When you have fulfilled all the requirements, send the completed application with the appropriate fee by mail to:

BCP Registrar
1316 N. Union St.
Wilmington, DE 19806
 or email your documents to
BCPregistrar@isminc.com

Who will conduct my interview?

All interviews will be conducted by a member of ISM's Consulting team or by an ISM Adjunct faculty member.

Where will my interview take place?

All interviews will be conducted through Skype or another video/electronic chat program.

If I do not qualify for certification, can I get a refund on the application fee?

No. The application fee covers the administrative costs associated with maintaining your records and certifying the applicability of all documentation.

I am currently certified at the Senior level. I am two years short of the 10 years of experience required for Executive level. Can the credits I have specified for the previous certification be used again to meet the requirements for the new certification?

No. The 90 credits for the Executive level certificate must be newly earned since the granting of the Senior level certificate. Many of the same activities you pursued for your Senior level certification can be repeated.

I was unable to attend a full three-day conference. Can I get partial credit?

No. To gain full benefits of any workshop, you need to attend the entire course. Exceptions may be made, at ISM's discretion, for circumstances outside your control (e.g., transportation problems, illness, major emergency).

How will I be expected to document my volunteer activities?

You can document your volunteer activities by keeping a journal or asking a volunteer supervisor to sign a letter validating your time. In either instance, you will be asked to include a personal reflection about the experience.

Top Reasons

to apply for BCP Certification

Certification puts you on the “cutting edge” of best practices.

It requires continuous studying, training, and maintaining best practices to achieve certification. And re-certifying every five years ensures that you'll stay up-to-date with the latest thinking in the field.

Certification can expand your career opportunities in your field.

It identifies you as an individual who is valuable in your current school and will be valuable to future employers.

Certification prepares you for greater job responsibilities by enhancing your skills.

It reflects your willingness to invest in your own development and prepares you to take on the next level of challenge and advancement in your career.

Certification mirrors achievement.

It is a reflection of your contribution to your school and confirms that you are meeting performance standards requirements.

Certification grants professional credentials.

It is an endorsement of your knowledge and experience by an objective third party, representing the highest performance standards for Business Officers.

Certification enhances your professional portfolio.

The BCP designation seeks to recognize, grow, and develop professionals who stand out as examples of excellence and as leadership.

Certification offers greater recognition from colleagues.

As an BCP-certified professional, expect increased recognition from your peers for gaining greater knowledge in your chosen field.

Certification offers you a knowledgeable circle of contemporaries.

With certification, you join a community of like-minded colleagues committed to their own professional development and continued excellence in the field.



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*Advancing School Leadership—
Enriching the Student Experience.*