

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP IN UZBEKISTAN'S PRESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This paper examines the governance and leadership model of Uzbekistan's Presidential Schools, launched in 2019 to educate gifted students. The study highlights merit-based admissions, integration of national and Cambridge curricula, professional teacher training, and digital innovation. Comparative insights from Finland, Singapore, Kazakhstan, and the U.S. show both opportunities and challenges. The findings suggest Presidential Schools serve as pilot institutions for broader education reform, promoting autonomy, accountability, and innovation.

Keywords: Presidential Schools, governance, gifted education, autonomy, innovation, Uzbekistan.

Аннотация.

В статье рассматривается модель управления Президентских школ Узбекистана, созданных в 2019 году для обучения одарённых детей. Анализируются меритократический отбор, сочетание национальной и кембриджской программ, подготовка педагогов и внедрение цифровых технологий. Сравнительный анализ (Финляндия, Сингапур, Казахстан, США) показывает возможности и риски. Сделан вывод, что Президентские школы выступают пилотными центрами реформ, обеспечивая автономию, подотчётность и инновации.

Ключевые слова: Президентские школы, управление, одарённые дети, автономия, инновации, Узбекистан.

Introduction

Since 2019, Uzbekistan has introduced **Presidential Schools** as elite boarding institutions to identify and educate gifted students aged 11–18. These schools reflect the state's ambition to prepare a new generation of globally competitive leaders while uplifting the entire education system. They operate under a specialized agency (PIIMA), enjoy greater **autonomy**, and integrate **national curricula with Cambridge international standards**.

The initiative embodies key theoretical and policy ideas: **gifted education theory** (Renzulli, Tannenbaum), **progressive pedagogy** (John Dewey), **New Public Management** (autonomy, accountability), and **systems thinking** (using elite schools as pilots for wider reform). Comparable models exist globally, such as Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS),

Singapore's NUS High School, U.S. magnet schools, and Finland's high-autonomy system.

This article analyzes the governance and leadership model of Uzbekistan's Presidential Schools, focusing on structure, principles, and reform strategies, and situates them within international and theoretical frameworks.

Methods

This study applies a **qualitative document analysis** and **comparative education method**. Sources include:

- Government decrees establishing Presidential Schools (PD-4199, 2019);
- Official reports of PIIMA (the Agency for Specialized Schools);
- Cambridge Partnership for Education case studies;
- Scholarly literature on gifted education, school-based management, and educational leadership;
- Comparative cases (Kazakhstan, Singapore, U.S., Finland).

A **thematic analysis** identified six core themes: (1) governance structure, (2) admissions, (3) curriculum, (4) teacher and leadership development, (5) innovation and digitalization, (6) systemic impact. These were then examined through gifted education and NPM frameworks.

Results

Governance Structure

Presidential Schools are managed by **PIIMA**, an agency reporting to the Cabinet of Ministers. Unlike regular schools, they are not controlled by local authorities, giving them **institutional autonomy** while ensuring accountability through national standards. Principals are competitively selected and trained in modern management, embodying **transformational leadership** roles.

Admissions and Equity

Admission is strictly **merit-based**, using Cambridge-designed exams in multiple languages (Uzbek, English, Karakalpak). In 2019, 28,500 students competed for 480 seats, reflecting high demand. The aim is to democratize access to quality education, though competition is intense.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The schools combine the **Uzbek curriculum** (for humanities and national subjects) with **Cambridge IGCSE and A-level programs** in STEM. Instruction emphasizes **project-based**,

inquiry-driven, and bilingual learning. Students engage in leadership training, debates, and civic activities, merging **global skills with national identity**.

Teachers and Leadership

Faculty are recruited through open competition, with many holding international credentials. Continuous professional development is mandated, with Cambridge and other partners training teachers in student-centered pedagogy. Principals undergo management certification, reflecting a **professionalization of school leadership**.

Innovations and Digitalization

Presidential Schools introduced **STEAM programs, digital learning platforms, and e-assessment systems**, which have since been extended to hundreds of mainstream schools. They are testing grounds for new methods (robotics, AI labs, coding), embodying **innovation diffusion** strategies.

Systemic Role

Outcomes include 100% university admission of graduates and top grades in Cambridge exams (68% A*–B). Importantly, **new curricula and assessment practices are being transferred** to regular schools, showing systemic spillover effects.

Discussion

The Presidential Schools illustrate how elite gifted institutions can function as **catalysts for wider educational reform**.

- **Gifted Education Theory:** By offering enriched environments and advanced curricula, the schools reflect Renzulli's model (ability + creativity + commitment). Dewey's progressive ideals are evident in experiential, inquiry-based learning.
- **NPM and Autonomy:** Like Kazakhstan's NIS, Uzbekistan has created an agency to grant schools autonomy while ensuring accountability. This mirrors charter/trust models internationally.
- **Systems Thinking:** Rather than isolating elites, reforms aim to **diffuse innovation** – curricula, textbooks, assessments – across the system.
- **Comparative Insights:**
 - Kazakhstan: NIS demonstrates the power of state-supported elite schools but also the challenge of equity.
 - Singapore: NUS High shows the value of early talent pipelines and curricular freedom.
 - U.S. magnets: highlight diversity and access issues that Uzbekistan must watch.
 - Finland: offers a contrasting equity-driven approach; Uzbekistan must balance

excellence with fairness.

Challenges remain: sustaining funding, avoiding elitism, and ensuring equitable access for rural and disadvantaged students. Yet early outcomes (Olympiad medals, global university admissions, teacher upskilling) show strong promise.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan's Presidential Schools represent a bold governance and leadership experiment. Their model combines **meritocracy, autonomy, innovation, and international collaboration** to nurture future leaders. While still young, they are already influencing the national system through teacher training, assessment reform, and curriculum development.

The case underscores that targeted investment in gifted education, if coupled with systemic diffusion, can drive **national educational transformation**. Future success will depend on maintaining equity, strengthening teacher capacity, and embedding innovations nationwide.

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