School Accreditation Team Gives SAS Rave Reviews and Validates its SAS Self-Study Report

For five days on April 6-10 of 2008, ten international educators conducted a thorough school accreditation process associated with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in review of Singapore American School’s operations and plans for continuous improvement. At the end of the five days, the WASC Visiting Team gave SAS commendations in numerous areas and also validated the SAS self-study findings and recommendations for continuous improvement.

Dr. John Sugiyama, Co-Chair of the WASC Visiting Team, publicly stated that the SAS self-study was one of the most comprehensive self-studies he’s read during a professional association with WASC that spans more than 35 years. According to SAS Superintendent Dr. Brent Mutsch, “In a number of ways the conclusion of the WASC visit represents the ‘end of the beginning’ for now both the challenging and satisfying work of moving SAS to be an ever more learning focused organization begins in a manner that is consistent with the Strategic Plan. The 2008-2013 Strategic Plan will serve as the road map for our work in a number of areas in the years ahead.”

Areas of School-wide Commendation and Recommendation from the WASC Visiting Team

Process Commendations -- the WASC Visiting Team commends the leadership and staff of SAS for:
- Following the intent of Focus on Learning by actively engaging in the six year cycle to review annual goals and the school-wide action plan;
- Engaging a high level of stakeholder involvement with well-defined communication feedback systems;
- Insuring a very tight alignment between the vision, mission, “Vital Few”, Desired Student Learning Outcomes, and five-year Strategic Plan;
- Developing a process to assess the program and its impact on students with teams formed to insure horizontal and vertical articulation;
- Developing an action plan that integrates elements of the vision with the critical areas for follow-up identified in the self-study process;
- Identifying an accountability system for monitoring the accomplishment of the action plan that is clear and straightforward.
- Designing and executing an exemplary model self-study process that has resulted in the development of a five year strategic plan that will serve well the students attending SAS.

Chapter I (Student/Community Profile) Recommendation:
- The school/community profile contains only a small amount of student performance data. Teacher-created assessments and emerging common assessment results are not reported. External assessments are limited to ITBS, AP, and SAT. Disaggregated results were absent. However, it is anticipated that as the curriculum work progresses and the school-wide assessment system is further developed, more comprehensive data will become available.

Chapter II (School Purpose and Desired Student Learning Outcomes) Commendations:
- The SAS “Focus on Learning” is a very impressive framework that clearly describes what the school is about in many different ways. The fact that there was broad-based stakeholder
involvement in the development of the framework will help to insure that the entire school community embraces SAS’s “Focus on Learning”.

- Embracing a process to review, revise, and develop a comprehensive framework that encompasses vision, mission, core values and desired student learning outcomes that clearly states valued components of learning at Singapore American School.

- Identifying a strategic goal to “develop a school community (i.e., students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, Board) that understands the direction and vision of the school, and is unified and collaborative in its focus and support for student learning as it relates to academic excellence, as well as for the social, emotional, and physical well-being of the student.”

- Clearly and consciously incorporating many aspects of the “Focus on Learning” framework in the:
  a. Assessment of the school’s program compared against the WASC criteria,
  b. Development of the strategic goals and objectives in the school-wide action plan,
  c. Review and revision of curricular courses of study in the six-year curriculum review cycle,
  d. Ongoing development of classroom learning units across all divisions and subject areas and the future review of graduation expectations for SAS students in relation to the DSLO’s.

**Chapter II (School Purpose and Desired Student Learning Outcomes) Recommendations:**

1. Continue to develop understanding and practice around the “Focus on Learning”
   a. Whereas the “Vital Few” and DSLO’s have specific indicators that help to describe what they look like when implemented/accomplished, what does the vision look like when accomplished? What are the indicators of success?
   b. In order to move toward achieving the school’s vision, what are the implications for professional development at all levels in the organization including the Board, administrative leadership team, teaching staff, support staff, and other key stakeholders. Within the school organization, how do the responsibilities of the Board, administration, teaching staff, and support staff have to change in order to support the school’s “Focus on Learning?”

2. Administration and staff continue the dialogue around how assessment can inform instruction:
   a. What does an effective formative and summative assessment system look like?
   b. What kinds of data do we need to collect in order to know where our students are performing on the curriculum standards and DSLO’s?
   c. What are our student performance growth needs and what growth targets should be established? This question assumes a need to shift to a student performance or results-based system where student performance data is analyzed and used to identify student learning needs and growth targets.

**Chapter III (Progress Report for 2002-2008) Commendations:**

1. Substantial progress has been made on all recommendations outlined in the 2002 Visiting Committee report and the 2005 Mid-term Visiting Committee report.

2. Work on curriculum development has continued at a fast pace and resulted in products that teachers routinely use.

3. The development of a vision (through a broad-based stakeholder involvement) that is clearly driving the school’s action plan and overall school improvement efforts has encouraged a clear focus on improved student learning.
4. The emerging culture of learning focused collaboration has encouraged greater coherence in learning content and teaching methods within grade levels and departments.

Chapter III (Progress Report) Recommendations:
1. Given the important advances made in the written curriculum, examine additional approaches for ensuring alignment with the taught curriculum and its delivery using best instructional practices.
2. Among the many differentiated learning opportunities for teachers, seek to identify those that most consistently lead to improved student learning.
3. Consider additional means to assess the success of efforts to give SAS a “small school” climate.

Chapter IVA (Organization for Student Learning) Commendations:
1. The school’s multi-year strategic plan, supported by the Board of Governors, will continue to improve student learning.
2. Communication of a clear statement of purpose is evident throughout programs and curricular components of the school.
3. The development of an appropriately rigorous standards-based American curriculum.
4. The school provides a safe and healthy environment through the systems and resources currently in place.
5. The school leadership and staff are qualified for their assignment responsibilities and are active in ongoing professional development focused on improving student learning.

Chapter IVA (Organization for Student Learning) Recommendations:
1. Define the Desired Student Learning Outcomes as part of the school curriculum and determine how these are assessed and reported on for all students.
2. Review policies and procedures to ensure the careful management of new initiatives within the school.
3. Design and implement a process that systematically reviews and potentially revises Board policies on an annual basis.

Chapter IVB (Curriculum and Instruction) Commendations:
1. SAS offers a rigorous standards-based curriculum.
2. The school provides a caring environment conducive to learning.
3. Numerous learning opportunities are presented for students.
4. Generous teaching resources are readily available to support teaching and learning.
5. Teachers are dedicated and committed to reaching all students.
6. Professional development opportunities are promoted and supported throughout the school.
7. Teachers utilize a variety of teaching strategies, learning activities, and assessment practices.

Chapter IVB (Curriculum and Instruction) Recommendations:
1. Continue to emphasize the development of assessment practices, including the careful analysis of student learning results.
2. Articulate and map the DSLO’s onto the existing curriculum.
3. Develop consistent and quality unit plans, and house them in an accessible, central location for the purposes of curriculum transparency and analysis.
4. Continue to create essential agreements among teachers to ensure similar learning experiences for students.

Chapter IVC (Support for Personal and Academic Growth) Commendations:
1. A wide variety of curricular and extra-curricular programs, services, and opportunities exists across all divisions.
2. There is an intentional focus on the extraordinary care of every child at SAS.
3. Students feel a strong sense of connectedness to SAS; they are proud to be Eagles!
4. SAS has a committed and caring staff.
5. Attention is given to the needs of every child.
6. SAS provides a high ratio of special services for students.
7. Parents are actively involved in many aspects of school life.
8. Home-school communication is regular, purposeful, and informative.

Chapter IVC (Support for Personal and Academic Growth) Recommendations:
1. Coordination of special services school-wide would support transitions between divisions and ensure equitable allocation of resources.
2. Student data needs to be systematically gathered, analyzed, and utilized to better inform special services.

Chapter IVD (Resource Management and Development) Commendations:
1. The school has successfully adjusted to massive enrollment increases while maintaining high learning standards.
2. The school has smoothly functioning, efficient systems for allocating resources and balancing revenues and expenditures.
3. Learning programs are well-resourced in regard to facilities, instructional materials, and instructional staffing.
4. The finance department has an abiding and successful commitment to continuous improvement.

Chapter IVD (Resource Management and Development) Recommendations:
1. Facing significant and unavoidable financial challenges in a number of areas, the Board and administration should actively pursue means to increase income streams associated with both capital and operating budgets.
2. The administration with faculty involvement should identify approaches that will accelerate the seamless integration of technology to improve learning.

Chapter IVE (School-wide Areas of Strength) Commendations:
1. SAS has established its intentions to “focus on learning” through the development of a Vision, Mission, Core Values, “Vital Few,” and School Curriculum and Desired Student Learning Outcomes. The establishment of a vision (with broad-based stakeholder involvement) that is clearly driving the school’s action plan and overall school improvement efforts will ensure that there is a clear focus on student learning.
2. SAS presently has the capacity and will to achieve its vision. Within the area of capacity, SAS has a committed Board, visionary and capable leaders, talented and committed staff, strong parent
support and involvement, receptive and responsive students, excellent facilities and financial resources.
3. The focus of the staff and administration on improving student learning as the primary goal for the ongoing work in all school initiatives currently in progress.
4. The new Superintendent with support from the Board of Governors initiated the visioning process and empowered its administrative leadership team and staff to collaboratively develop its plan of action (strategic plan).
5. The school has smoothly functioning, efficient systems for allocating resources and balancing revenues and expenditures.
6. The school has established a curriculum review cycle that will ensure that the curriculum will be standards-based and learning-focused.
7. The self-study process was ambitious and well-organized, yielding comprehensive results focused on learning that enabled development of an equally powerful strategic plan.
8. The school has a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment characterized by high levels of student engagement, well-resourced and organized classrooms, and caring and supportive adults.
9. Strong connections and positive supportive relationships between staff and students at SAS support student success.
10. Talented and committed teacher provide a high quality educational experience to SAS students, including rich curricular and co-curricular programs.
11. Parent involvement in all divisions and in diverse ways positively influences learning and students’ school experiences. The PTA and other parent groups are vibrant organizations that provide value-added services to the school for the benefit of students.

Chapter IVF (School-wide Areas for Follow-up) Recommendations:
The Visiting Team found the strategic plan to be thorough and well-aligned with the self-study findings. The following school-wide areas for follow-up are already evident to varying degrees in the strategic plan. The team identified no additional areas during the visit. Consequently, the following points represent areas that deserve added emphasis and/or more rapid implementation.
1. Continue with the curriculum review and development process that will result in the establishment of:
   a. Curriculum units,
   b. Common assessments and standards-based assessments,
   c. Identification of how the DSLO’s are embedded in the curricular units of study.
The results of this work will provide for a more specific analysis of the impact of the actual student program on student learning with respect to the curricular program and the DSLO’s.
2. As a comprehensive assessment model is developed and implemented, a shift be made to analyze student performance data as the basis for identifying areas for focus, establishing student performance growth targets, designing instructional strategies (powerful teaching and learning strategies, best practices, etc.) and re-assessing the impact of classroom practice on student learning.
3. The school should develop assessment measures (in addition to common curriculum assessments, standardized testing results, and other teacher-developed achievement data) that specifically identify student performance on benchmark standards and expectations. The
analysis of this data will inform instruction and provide a specific focus on students’ learning needs.
4. Administrators and lead teachers need professional development opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills as they transition into learning-focused leadership.
5. Facing significant and unavoidable financial challenges in a number of areas, the Board and administration should actively pursue means to increase income streams associated with both capital and operating budgets.
6. The administration with significant faculty involvement should identify approaches that will accelerate the seamless integration of technology to improve learning.

Chapter V (School-wide Action Plan):
The WASC Visiting Team affirmed the six areas for continuous improvement as recommended by SAS from its self-study analysis:
1. Develop a school community (i.e., students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, Board) that understands the direction and vision of the school, and is unified and collaborative in its focus and support for student learning as it relates to academic excellence, as well as for the social, emotional, and physical well-being of the student.
2. Clarify the use and assessment of cross-curricular expectations in subject areas (i.e., Desired Student Learning Outcomes, Core Values, Information Literacy Standards, Technology Standards, Communication Skills – writing, presenting).
3. Determine the types of data that will be used to show:
   a. Continuous improvement on division and school levels,
   b. Progress of the school’s Strategic Plan,
   c. Benchmarking with other exemplary schools in the world.
4. Enhance high standards of consistent classroom practice within curriculum unit development, instruction, assessment, and resources to ensure that each student is “appropriately challenged” (i.e., differentiated instruction).
5. Clarify the student expectations, assessments, and data that will be commonly used in subject areas (horizontally and vertically) to show student progress.
6. Establish organizational direction and coherence as they relate to the various functions of the school (i.e., Mission/Vision, Student Learning, Finance, Development/Advancement, Communications, Alumni Relations, Human Resources, Technology, Board Governance, Woodlands Campus, Expansion) to support student learning.

The six critical areas for follow-up are further defined by eleven objectives in the school’s strategic plan (these appear in Chapter V of the school’s online school accreditation posting of its full Self-Study Report for full school and community viewing). For each objective, there are one or more indicators of progress, rationale for the objective, and an action plan matrix that defines the action steps, person(s) responsible, resources needed, timeline, evidence of accomplishment and communication of progress made. Action steps are clearly outlined. Specifically, the work identified in objective #2 – Student Learning will have a direct impact on improving student performance. The focus on Student Learning includes the following indicators of progress:

- Establishing high standards of classroom unit development across grade levels and courses that are connected to a quality school-wide curriculum;
- Enhancing instructional methodologies to support a school-wide focus on learning and results;
- Enhancing approaches to quality assessment that inform instruction and show student progress.
Existing Factors that Will Support School Improvement

1. The establishment of a formal school-wide subject-wide curriculum review process five years ago that has led to the adoption of an articulated common curriculum for all subject areas across all grade levels;
2. The new superintendent of schools who with support from the Board of Governors initiated a visioning process in November of 2007 that led to development of a vision that includes a vision statement, mission statement, core values, school curriculum and Desired Student Learning Outcomes, and the stated “Vital Few” focus on Academic Rigor, Professional Excellence, and Extraordinary Care for the Welfare of Each Child.
3. The vision forms the foundation of the school’s clearly stated intention to “focus on learning” and will drive the school’s strategic plan (school-wide action plan).
4. The administration leadership team for providing leadership that is focused on insuring that the vision drives the school’s improvement efforts.
5. The teaching and support staff for their commitment to improving student learning by enthusiastically participating in committees and other processes designed to achieve the vision through work on curriculum and instructional issues.
6. The ability to allocate resources to support school improvement initiatives such as professional development, and the approval of curriculum coordinator and assessment coordinator positions to support the work in curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment.
7. Fiscal resources are also adequate to maintain the outstanding school facilities that are conducive to student learning.
8. A rich history of excellence dating back over 50 years which sets the standards and expectation of maintaining Singapore American School’s reputation as one of the top international schools in the world.

Impediments to School Improvement that the School Will Need to Overcome in Order to Accomplish Action Plan Goals

1. There are not any significant impediments to school improvement that are readily obvious. At the same time, the work outlined by the SAS school-wide action plan is ambitious and will require sustained effort over a long period of time. In addition, there is a need for the Board to consider revenue enhancing strategies in order that the plan can be adequately resourced.
2. It is vitally important that the organization, particularly the Board and administrative leadership, “stay the course” and keep the focus on learning by carefully evaluating new initiatives to insure that they are consistent with and support the vision and action plan steps. It is critical that the Board protect the staff and administration from diversions that take their focus away from the strategic plan. The Board will need to monitor its interests by not creating new initiatives that are not directly related to the implementation of the strategic plan.
3. It is important to periodically step away from the intense focus of the school improvement efforts to celebrate successes. There is a well-known adage that “small successes lead to big successes.” It is important to remind each other of this so that those directly involved in the implementation of the action plan are not compelled to achieve ultimate success in one giant step.
Closing Statement

SAS has a rich and successful history that spans over 50 years and places it among the top international schools in the world. The success of its students past and present is beyond question. Therefore SAS is to be commended for choosing to systematically examine itself to determine how it can improve the quality of education provided to its students when there is not an external provocation for change. The vision initiative has resulted in the development of a five-year strategic plan that clearly places student learning at the center of the school’s focus.

The school’s leadership is wise in their realization that in order to maintain the school’s respected position within the international schools community, it must re-evaluate and, if necessary, re-define its mission and vision. In November of 2007, under the leadership of the new superintendent of schools, Dr. Brent Mutsch, 36 individuals representing key SAS stakeholder groups began a journey to identify a new direction for SAS.

Clearly, beginning such a journey, there are risks for those vested in the school’s future. It requires openness to new ideas that stretch the boundaries of the current paradigm. It requires tolerance when considering different points of view. And it requires a strong internal sense of conviction that undertaking such a journey is critical if SAS is to achieve its vision to inspire in all students a passion for learning, encourage emotional and intellectual vitality, and empower students with the confidence and courage to contribute to the global community and to achieve their dreams.

Once the new course of action is defined, all stakeholders in the SAS community will need to reflect on how they can unequivocally support the vision. The Board must resist the temptation to react to stakeholder demands that will divert the work of the staff and administration away from the vision and strategic plan. It will require that the administration be held accountable to provide leadership consistent with the components of the vision and that they hold staff accountable for working with students consistent with the vision and strategic plan. It requires that staff, teaching and support, commit their energies beyond the boundaries of their defined roles and open themselves to question their own practice. Lastly, it requires that parents understand that important decisions regarding the school’s direction may not always be those that directly benefit their own children but is necessary in order that the quality of education provided to the next generation and generations of children to follow will be second to none.

If all stakeholders understand and commit to this course of action, it is likely that SAS will achieve its mission and vision. We, the WASC Visiting Committee, believe that the SAS community possesses the capacity and commitment to achieve its vision and we wish everyone involved in this process a rewarding and successful journey.