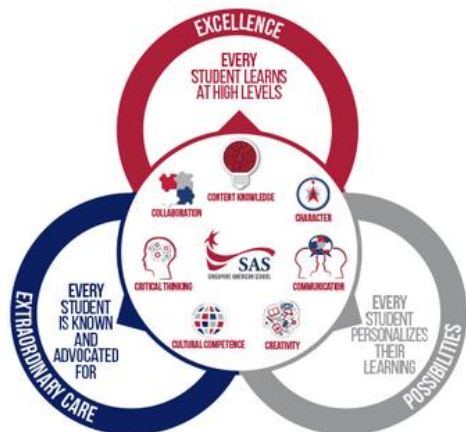


Leading Change from the Inside Out: Singapore American School's R&D Journey

By Timothy S. Stuart, Mona M. Stuart & Chip Kimball

01/05/2017



Over the last four years, Singapore American School teachers and administrators visited more than one hundred of the most forward-thinking and innovative schools across four continents. These visits challenged many of our ideas about what education could and should become.

We visited schools that were both progressive in design and excellent in outcome. We found that innovation alone is not the secret sauce of teaching and learning. In fact, some schools, while very innovative, left us searching for high levels of measurable learning. Interestingly, the most successful innovative schools had structures to ensure that each student learned at high levels in personalized ways. They benchmarked innovation against proven results.

We identified two clear distinctions that were common among the schools that were both innovative and excellent for learning.

First, teachers took collective responsibility for learning, actively collaborated, used clear learning targets, provided timely feedback, differentiated learning through intervention and acceleration strategies, and used high-impact instructional strategies.

Second, teachers developed partnerships with students in the learning process. Students had voice in what they learned and could produce a plan for their learning that included how they would demonstrate their proficiency. Teachers provided highly personalized learning structures and gave students agency over their learning.

How Disruptive? Continuous Improvement and Disruptive Innovation

SAS needed to make a decision. Do we throw off the shackles of tradition and expectation in order to innovate wildly? Do we sacrifice the careful work of continuous improvement for unbounded innovation? It is important for international schools to find the balance between these two change processes, but also to give educators genuine permission to run in new directions. However, if disruptive innovation kills our disciplined improvement, we run the risk of having no substance underneath our new innovative veneer. International schools need to find ways to create disruptive change and revolutionize education by building upon the key structures that made them great in the first place.

We threw off some shackles, but chose to keep some core tenets that serve the present and the future. Essential to us are Professional Learning Communities as our foundational collaborative structure and as an institutional commitment; a way to keep us honest about student learning and educator growth.

The R&D Process

Four years ago we established a comprehensive research and development process to achieve Singapore American School's vision to be "a world leader in education, cultivating exceptional thinkers, prepared for the future." We designed a four-stage process, which was our effort to manage the transformation thoughtfully and systematically, and to ensure maximum success and sustainability of new programs.

Stage 1 – Research

The research stage gave teachers and administrators an entire year to dive deep into the educational literature, by reading everything from John Dewey to John Hattie, and to visit schools on the cutting edge of teaching and learning. We visited over 100 schools in seven countries and interviewed over 100 college admissions officers.

The primary objective during this stage was simply to learn and reflect upon our learning. The second objective was to create a sense of urgency for teachers and administrators. The third objective was to clarify "Who do we want to be as a school?", "What kind of learning do we want to provide for our students?", and "What do we want to be known for?"

At the end of a lot of soul-searching, our school leadership team identified three "cultures" we aspired to embody: A Culture of Excellence, A Culture of Extraordinary Care, and A Culture of Possibilities. Many of the highest-performing schools in the world can claim one or two of these cultures, but only a handful can claim to embrace all three. These have become the SAS Strategic Anchors and it is the cross section of these three that we believe embodies the effective school of the future.

Stage 2 – Development

This stage gave our Development Teams a year-long opportunity to devise school reform recommendations. Locked in a windowless room, we put everything on the table, willing to sacrifice the sacred cows and asked the hard questions. “If we were to design a new school today, what would it look like?” and “What can we implement that would positively and dramatically impact student learning in our school?”

Stage 3 – Capacity Building

Once a set of recommendations had been created by the Development Teams, it was imperative to carve out time so each initiative could be implemented effectively and teachers could be equipped to lead and participate. The capacity building stage allowed each team to implement plans with fidelity and excellence. This stage included professional development, pilots and prototypes, and new course development.

Stage 4 – Strategic Plan & Implementation

As we built capacity, SAS entered into the strategic plan and implementation phase. This process required us to prioritize the initiatives for roll-out over a five-year timeframe. We needed to gauge our school’s capacity to implement change, giving consideration to several factors, including school-wide alignment, the importance of each initiative, and the dangers of “too much change.”

The power of a well-crafted strategic plan is to help the organization focus on the areas of importance, asking what will yield the highest return on a school’s investment. It is in the implementation of the plan where change gets real.

Closing Thoughts

Change in international schools is complex. It requires foresight, strategy, patience, and above all courage—courage to do what we know is right for the students we serve.

Our hope is that our journey will spark a sense of urgency and hope for international schools; give schools new reasons to explore change; and provide a simple, research-based, and reliable construct to return agency to students and maintain standards for learning at high levels.

Timothy S. Stuart is Executive Director of Strategic Programs at SAS. He is editor and co-author of Global Perspectives: Professional Learning Communities at Work in International Schools (2016).

Chip Kimball is Superintendent of SAS, the catalyst and keeper of its vision, and a contributing author to Global Perspectives.

Mona Stuart is Director of Admissions at SAS whose role is not only to fill the school with an optimal learning community, but also to help fulfill its vision.