



MASTERY
TRANSCRIPT
CONSORTIUM™



Personalizing Learning at Singapore American School Out

CHRIS STURGIS, [LearningEdge](#)



Personalizing Learning at Singapore American School Out

Singapore American School, older than the Republic of Singapore itself, was founded sixty years ago to provide an exemplary American education with an international perspective. In 2013, the SAS board asked, What does it really mean to offer an exemplary American education?, launching a three-year exploration. The result is a vision to develop exceptional thinkers and an approach of personalizing learning to create robust intellectual exploration and application through high interest opportunities. They want students to differentiate themselves through their interests and projects, not just through grades.

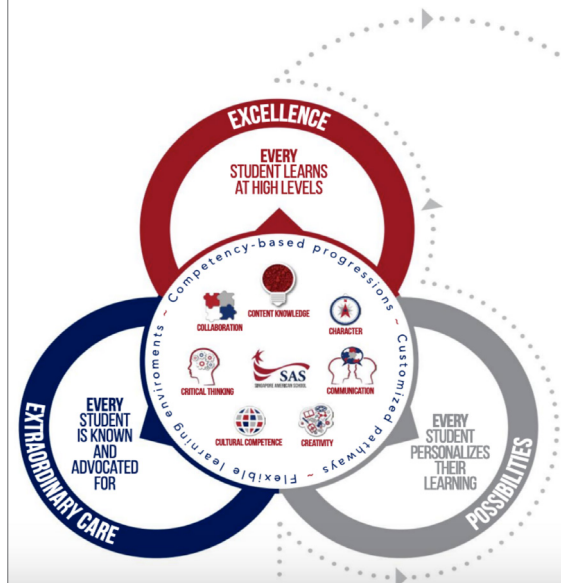
This is what they have learned along the way ... and it is safe to say that the learning will continue.

An Exploration into Schools Around the World

What does it mean to be an exemplary school? To find out, SAS visited over 100 schools in Singapore, China, Finland, New Zealand, and the United States. Not only did they navigate the world, but they also had to navigate the array of educational terminology. Personalized learning was one of the most confusing, with its many different meanings: interest-driven,

student-centered, focused on technology and student agency. They realized that they had to create their own understanding.

At a high school in Finland, they saw up close how schools could be organized to provide students with ownership and choice. They asked why the school had innovated. The principal pointed out the window and said, "See that **Nokia** plant across the way? Once they were a global leader in technology. But they made the mistake of not continuing to innovate. They



didn't keep up with the change." Innovate or die. It's a lesson SAS brought home.

The comprehensive approach at Stonesfield School in Auckland informed their understanding of what is required to personalize learning. Elementary students in that school created pathways where they had voice and choice in their education. Competency-based progressions were used to ensure that students could apply what they were learning and demonstrate their learning. The school also became responsive to students, which required flexible learning environments with space, time, and the deployment of teachers and resources to support students.

In Scarsdale, NY, a public high school serving an upper income community, they moved away from Advanced Placement and were replacing it with homegrown courses they called Advanced Topics. This, too, was a lesson SAS brought home.

They came back with a set of themes that would guide them toward developing their own approach for *personalizing learning*:

- Personalizing as defined by offering students opportunities for deep intellectual exploration in areas of interest
- Creating facilities and classrooms that are designed for learning including co-teaching, flexible seating and resources, and giving students permission to experiment and play

- Investing systematically in relationships
- Developing a graduate profile including learning targets and desired student learning outcomes (DSLO)
- Designing relevant, authentic learning
- Leveraging technology to get more out of learning
- Maximizing connection to global community
- Nurturing a strong and well-defined culture

Darin Fahrney, Chief Academic Officer noted, "It was clear from the site visits that the innovative schools are absolutely unapologetic about who they are and what they stand for. They know that it isn't always popular. But they know it's the right work to be doing."

The school visits made it clear to SAS that they wanted to do more than prepare students for college (99 percent of their students go on to higher education); they wanted to develop exceptional thinkers who are prepared for the future. Fahrney emphasized the point as, "The future isn't a multiple choice test."

The most important outcome of the investigation is that it gave the SAS team permission to think differently. (See the video [Changing Education from the Inside Out.](#))

A Foundation of Collaboration and Standards

With a new vision in hand, SAS began to think about what it would mean to develop exceptional thinkers. However, they weren't starting from scratch. They had two important foundations in place that positioned them for change. First, they had introduced professional learning communities (PLC) a year before they began their exploration. This was a major shift for teachers who were used to "operating as individual contractors." Suddenly they were working in teams. However, it was a critical step. With 4,000 students and 385 teachers,



PLCs were going to be needed to implement the new shared vision.

Second, they had already invested in organizing curriculum, instruction, and assessment around standards throughout the entire school. By having a transparent learning framework in place, greater flexibility was available to teachers and students to use creative ways to learn and demonstrate learning. The PLCs played a critical role in introducing standards-based grading and introducing common assessments. The process was challenging and absolutely essential to the next stage.

Grades have changed as well. The middle and elementary schools did away with grades altogether, using only meeting expectations and near expectations. At the high school, department heads held a study group reading of [Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades](#) by Kevin O'Connor. Taking two to three fixes at a time, they slowly constructed a schoolwide grading policy linked to standards. Behavior grades are separated from academics. Formative assessments can't be more than 15 percent of the grade. They took away minuses — you either hit the standard or you don't. They kept letter grades so the options are A+, A, B+, B, C+, and insufficient. The challenge, of course, is helping parents learn how to use and feel comfortable with standards-based report cards so that one day they'll know exactly what to ask and how to respond.

The professional learning communities are key to creating a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" for every student. It's at the PLCs where teachers discuss the key questions that drive mastery learning:

- What do we want students to know and do?

- How do we know when they know it?
- What do we do if they don't know it?
- What do you do if they already know it?

SAS is moving forward in creating common formative and summative assessments. At the high school level, they use an annual assessment audit to review standards and formative and summative assessments. It's a spot check to help align instruction and assessment with the standards. If there is misalignment, coaching and professional learning is provided to the PLC.

Investing in Relationships

One of the first things SAS did in developing their personalizing learning model was add structures that would enhance relationships. There was already a strong culture of trust. But SAS, like other schools serving high income, well-educated communities, is dealing with the anxiety and mental health issues that come from increased competition for selective colleges. Students start trying to be perfect. They strive to get all As, take the hardest courses, participate in sports and arts, and demonstrate leadership by creating new organizations. School counselor Dr. Jeff Devins has written an article [Destructive Perfectionism](#) on the phenomena. In order to build stronger relationships between adults and students, SAS added advisories to middle and high school. In addition, they organized three houses at the high school "to make a big school feel small."

There have been some bumps along the way. Fahrney explained, "Teachers cringe when you take instructional time and turn it into social-emotional time. Academics are a strong part of the ethos at SAS. We've had to make the connections that emotions influence learning."



Driving Learning with Desired Student Learning Outcomes

What do our students need for the future? What does it mean to be an exceptional thinker?

Having set a new vision, the Singapore American School (SAS) knew what it meant to be an exceptional thinker and how they were going to help students become one.

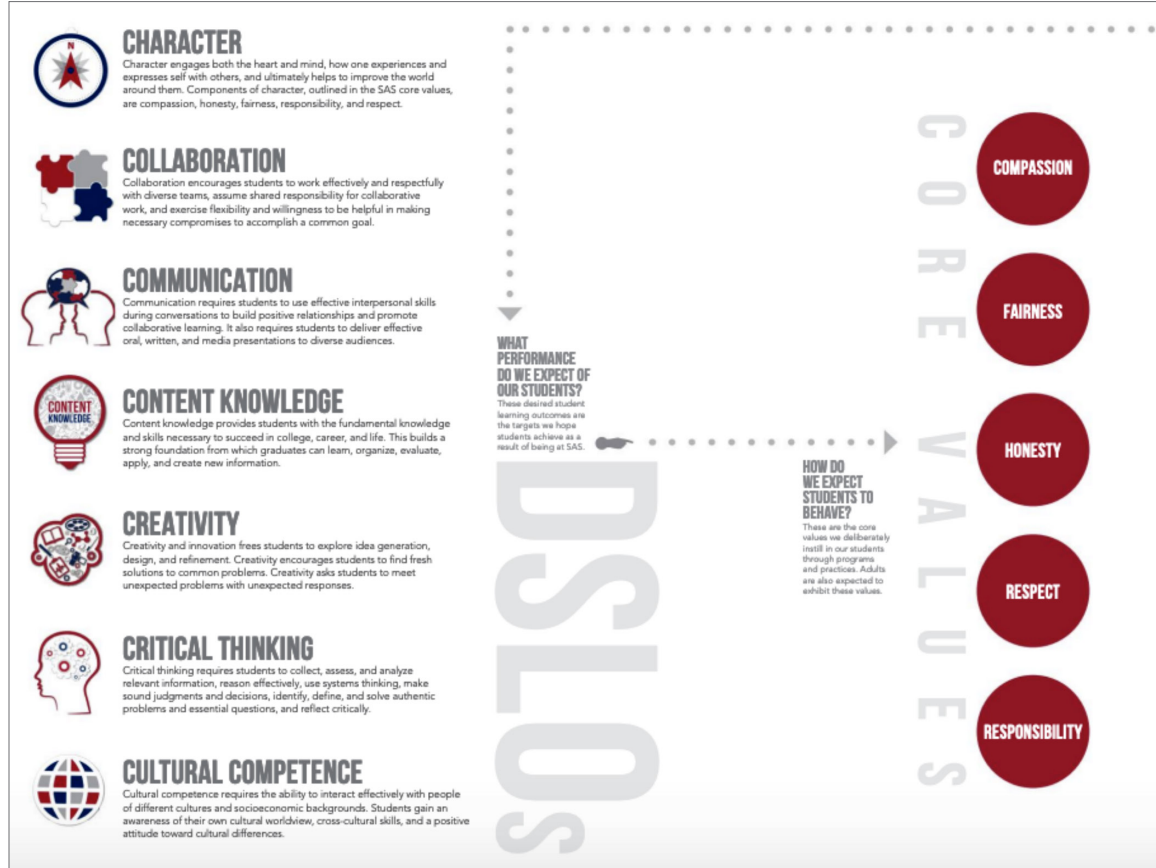
With the help of faculty, board members, parents, and students, SAS started by creating a graduate profile with seven *desired student learning outcomes* (DSLO):

- Character
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Content Knowledge
- Creativity
- Critical Thinking
- Cultural Competence

Character is taught through values called the Eagle Way: compassion, fairness, honesty, respect, and responsibility.

Content continues to play a strong role. It's the application of content in deeper learning that allows students to learn the key concepts and build their academic skills. In addition, 20 percent of their students head to the UK or Australia for college, where scoring high on academic examinations is part of the college admissions process.

The next step was to operationalize the seven DSLOs and academic standards. There's been some trial and error along the way, and SAS's thinking has evolved over the last two years. The first cut produced 70 different competencies that they had intended to replace standards. But it was too complex. It was unwieldy. After a visit to high schools in New Hampshire, they realized that a small set of overarching competencies, within which standards could fit, could create cohesion. At this point, they are working toward mapping the Common Core standards to the academic competencies and creating two competencies for each DSLO that define what they expect students to demonstrate before they graduate.



Looking back, Fahrney's advice is, "Don't overthink the design. If it is too complex, it won't survive when you introduce it to the community. They need to be able to understand it. It also has to be able to be implemented in a sustainable way."

Putting DSLOs into Action

The next step for SAS was to answer the question How do you help students develop the desired student learning outcomes? The DSLOs are the keystone to SAS's personalizing learning approach that seeks to create high interest, intellectually rigorous learning opportunities. Fahrney explained that SAS is "trying to bake the DSLOs into the work we are already doing."

- In elementary school, Genius Hour is dedicated for students to use a design thinking process — question, investigate, create, and reflect — for projects and create their own products.
- In middle school, there is Try Time. Students select topics and problems to explore using the design thinking process. SAS is putting flexible learning environments into place in the middle

school with interdisciplinary teams working with 100 kids.

- At high school, the [Catalyst Project](#) is for juniors and seniors to dive into high interest projects. They can choose any topic through career exploration, service learning, art, or researching an academic topic. Examples of projects are building an exoskeleton suit, creating a cosmetic line, writing a song, and preparing a brief on human trafficking. The grade is based on how well they follow the design thinking process.

From the high school in Scarsdale, SAS brought back the idea of Advanced Topics (AT), which has proven to be controversial. AT courses are academic courses that use the DSLO to create deeper learning experiences with more opportunity for students to pursue areas of interest or projects. AP teachers took up the challenge. They built equivalent course aligned with DSLOs. Instead of an exam, students demonstrate their learning. For example, an AT writing workshop produces a book at the end of the semester made up of the short stories written by students rather than taking an exam on American literature.

Fahrney explained, “Many of the AP courses are so comprehensive that all students do is become familiar with the content. Look at world history. How is anyone supposed to know the entire history of the world? It’s much more important that our students know how to think like a historian.”



They’ve gone as far as to cap the number of AP courses students can take at seven, although students can always take the exams. Advanced Placement has been increasingly problematic for high schools in two ways. First, it is modeled on the traditional education model of one curriculum delivered to all students with a summative examination at the end. No deeper learning. No application. No ownership of the learning. Fahrney said, “Is the AP really the measure of success? Is it cultivating an exceptional thinker when many of the examinations are rote memorization? The answer is no.”

Second, students often pick the courses not out of interest but for the weighted grade as they run to get the highest GPA. Shifting toward Advanced Topics lets some of the

pressure out of the college admissions race. It’s easy to imagine that parents were concerned. Some were encouraging their students to take as many Advanced Placement courses as possible even if it contributed to what the school counselor described in SAS magazine as ‘destructive perfectionism.’ SAS is monitoring students who take AT courses and then the AP exam. There has been no statistical difference. Thus, the cap is remaining in place.

Although the primary goal is to develop exceptional thinkers, one of the benefits of their personalizing learning approach is to help students differentiate themselves in the college admissions race. With so many students producing perfect grades and perfect college admissions scores, something else is needed. Fahrney said, “We have students with perfect scores with parents who are donors to their alma mater, and their child still doesn’t get in. We want our students to be really smart and really interesting.”

The Advanced Topic model is also being used in a full-time interdisciplinary program called [Quest](#), which operates as a school within a school. SAS is considering the value that the Mastery Transcript might bring to students in Quest.

Eventually SAS wants to establish a system that allows them to track the development of the DSLOs. To do that, teachers need to be able to teach, assess, and give productive feedback on each of the DSLOs. Teachers are on their own learning curve. It’s one thing to say that you teach creativity. It’s a whole different thing to be able to assess it consistently.

Mastery Transcript Consortium™ (MTC) is a global network of schools co-designing a new high school transcript that reflects the unique skills, strengths, and interests of each learner — and that supports educators as they deliver personalized, authentic, student-centered learning and prepare students for success in college, career and life.

www.mastery.org