

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

SINGAPORE AMERICAN SCHOOL

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## OVERVIEW: MEET SAS



The following case study is an update to a 2016 case study, with a focus on the first two years of the Singapore American School's (SAS) strategic plan implementation. This case study is based on an October 2018 school visit, and summarizes observed progress in 20 dimensions within three categories: academics, care and guidance, and talent development.

This case study is accompanied by a podcast with Superintendent Dr. Chip Kimball, and Deputy Superintendent Dr. Jennifer Sparrow.

**OPEN DATE: 1956** 

**GRADES SERVED: Preschool-12** 

FACULTY MEMBERS: 388

STUDENTS SERVED: 3,970

STUDENT/FACULTY RATIO: 10.6:1

**LOCATION: Singapore** 



"Have 'courage to call into question the practices that have been done for many years' in order to do what's best for students." That is the message Superintendent Dr. Chip Kimball shared with Singapore American School (SAS) faculty at a Welcome Back event two years ago.

When you are an institution with a long history of success, changing your model can be difficult to imagine—especially when what you're doing has proven to be highly successful. And yet, SAS knew they needed to change in order to best serve their students. Their educational model was sound and it had proven results. But they found there were elements missing—not the academics, but unlocking student passion areas and the areas around care.

By now it's well known that SAS faculty members went on a worldwide school tour, and the takeaway for Dr. Kimball, from the over 100 schools visited in seven countries, was that SAS needed to become a school that "exhibited excellence, possibility, and extraordinary care." It is the cross-section of those three elements, according to Dr. Kimball, that would set SAS apart.

SAS was founded over 60 years ago and is a nonprofit independent day school located about 30 minutes north of Singapore's bustling central business district. The school serves nearly 4,000 students on a 36-acre campus. The school is one of high-transition and welcomes nearly 1,000 new students each year. It's the largest American school outside the U.S. and the largest singlecampus international school in the world.

Students at SAS hold passports from more than fifty countries, but over half of them are U.S. citizens (government regulations prevent SAS from serving but only a handful of locals). The school serves families that live in Singapore long term and some that complete short assignments for multinational corporations. While the majority of students hold a U.S. passport, the number has declined over the past few years. According to SAS, "the percentage of SAS students with U.S. passports has fluctuated throughout the school's history, and in recent years has declined from a high of 70% in 2012. Current economic trends are likely affecting the relative numbers of Americans and other foreigners in Singapore and therefore at SAS. At the same time, educational options for American families have increased in the last decade as new international schools have opened and alternative curricula have become more acceptable to U.S. colleges."

About three-quarters of the SAS faculty members are from North America. About the same percentage hold master's or doctorate degrees. International educators are well paid with a good salary, generous health and travel benefits, a housing subsidy, and long vacations. They are able to save a good portion of their salary.

For younger educators, teaching internationally creates a new sense of freedom and an opportunity to see the world. Once a teacher has been teaching internationally for a while, the experience can create an uneasy sense of what Dr. Kimball called "unrooted-ness." For the first few years, many rent out their house in their country of origin assuming they'll return. When they don't, many may purchase a vacation home to visit during the long summer break and a link back to a place to call home.

SAS has a track record of academic success that appeals to parents. In addition to keeping their academic goalposts relevant, SAS provides parenting supports and workshops on timely topics such as managing screen time, managing social media risks, and college planning.

While SAS is a large school with a deep history, it has proven to be flexible and nimble, adapting as needed in order to ensure that students are prepared for the 21st century. The 2020 Strategic Plan, and the push to move beyond what Dr. Kimball calls just the "acquisition of content," includes what SAS refers to as their Desired Student Learning Outcomes (DSLOs): Creativity, Cultural Competence, Character, Collaboration, and Communication. They have consistently demonstrated the ability to adapt and change as required.



As the world's only island state, Singapore is densely populated with close to 8,000 people per square kilometer. The country has a landmass about the size of New York City and two-thirds its population.

In 2017, Singapore's first female president was sworn into office. Halimah Yacob is also the country's first Malay president in 47 years. Three-quarters of the population are ethnic Chinese, but English is the language of government and education and fluency is required of all of Singaporean citizens. Singapore is also facing its own demographic shift, in particular around its aging population. Research from the United Overseas Bank has noted that "in 2018, the share of the population that is 65 years old and older will match that of those younger than 15 years old for the first time." Singapore currently has the oldest population in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and is grappling with policies that ensure that the elderly are taken care of, while also ensuring the continued well-being of the younger population.

The country is known for its stability, security, strict local laws, and position in the global financial market.

## HISTORY: A BIG SCHOOL ON THE MOVE

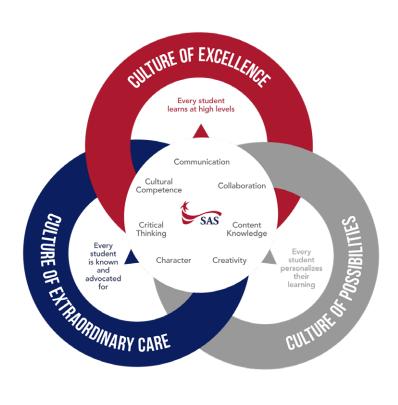
SAS has undergone significant change since Dr. Kimball's arrival in 2012. There was certainly no denying SAS's history of extremely high-quality education and successful graduates, yet the board knew there was more that could be done to positively impact student outcomes.

The SAS transformation has taken place over several years and included budget and personnel changes, capacity building, and worldwide school visits. 85 SAS educators spent four years visiting more than 100 schools in seven countries. In addition to well known U.S. schools like High Tech High in San Diego, Avenues in New York and many of Getting Smart's Schools Worth Visiting, the team found trips to Auckland, New Zealand most relevant given how coherent and progressive the independent Stonefields School and Hobsonville Point Schools were. "It profoundly transformed the thinking of our faculty and leadership," Dr. Kimball said about the trips.

After the SAS faculty saw excellence from around the world, they distilled observed best practices with what they felt was missing from their program, and came up with a series of proposals with over 150 actionable items that eventually turned into the 2020 Strategic Plan: The Five Priorities.

# A STRATEGIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Singapore American School has a robust vision to become a world leader in education, cultivating exceptional thinkers, prepared for the future.



That vision becomes reality each day by being grounded in the Desired Student Learning Outcomes: Communication, Collaboration, Content Knowledge, Creativity, Character, Critical Thinking and Cultural Competence.

With this vision as the northstar, SAS has made tremendous strides towards fulfilling the 2020 strategic plan. It is important to note the SAS journey. In particular, the plan and implementation is an iterative process, especially given that it involved making changes to an already highly-effective system. Middle school Principal Lauren Merbach reflects on the process saying, "some of our ideas were not radical, but they're radical in our context. We've been a solid academic school for a long time and our community has followed a similar path that is very academic."

### SAS 2020 STRATEGIC PLAN SUMMARY

STANDARDS-**BASED APPROACH** 

HIGH IMPACT INSTRUCTIONAL **PRACTICES** 

**PASTORAL** CARE

**SYSTEMS SUPPORTING LEARNING** 

**PROFESSIONAL** LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Valid, reliable, fair assessments target unit outcomes and growth; evidence is gathered for each outcome area (DSLOs); reporting and other systems support standards-based approach.

Regular inquiry; experiential and personalized learning focused on desired outcomes supported by structures and practices.

Culture of extraordinary care supported by advisory, social emotional learning programs, effective transitions, and structures.

With a service excellence lens, P-12 departments collaborate for effective and integrated systems to support student learning.

Focus on learning, committed to improvement, collective answers, structures support intervention and collaboration.

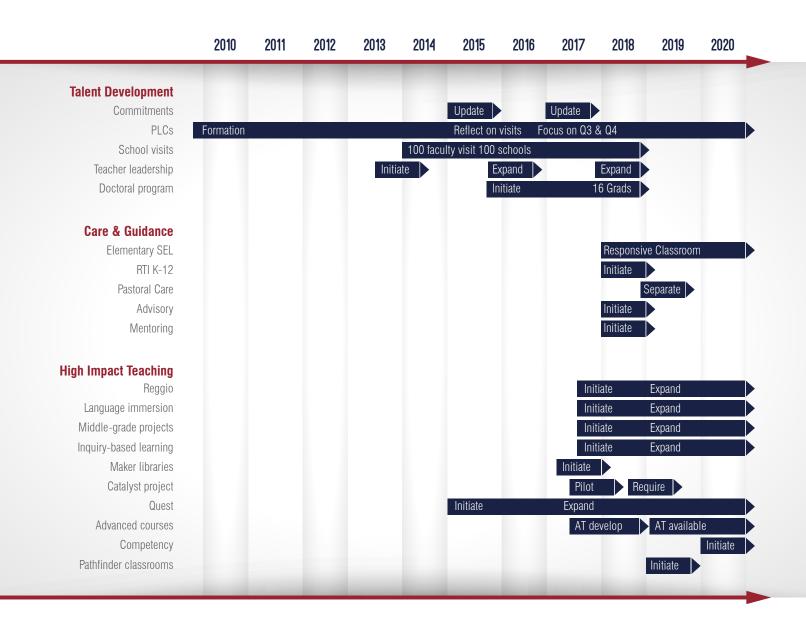
The 2020 plan has expanded the opportunities for personalized learning, and as a result students are being seen as getting more passionate about their learning. Deputy Superintendent, Dr. Jennifer Sparrow notes that "the power of student voice is more evident across the system. Student enthusiasm about their learning has risen and is palpable."

For more on SAS's strategic plan journey watch their 2017 documentary, "Changing Education From The Inside Out."



## SIGNS OF PROGRESS

During a fall 2018 visit, 20 signs of progress were noted and their progression over time is summarized in the timeline. Each of these elements is expanded upon throughout the case study.



## DEVELOPING TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Dr. Kimball is a leader who truly understands that an organization's greatest success will be dependent upon the people who carry out the mission and vision. He explains, "if you do not pay attention to your talent, all of the strategy and all of the programs won't make a difference. And that talent attention needs to be placed throughout the system: teacher talent, leadership talent, (which includes executive and middle-level leadership) and board talent." As such, SAS has a robust talent development program in place.

When looking at system-wide talent, one of the first things that needed to be made clear was employee institutional commitments. In particular, this meant that SAS needed to clearly communicate organizational goals, which could be translated into role clarity. Positional expectations have been updated several times over the past few years, and these revisions have helped inform hiring, development, and appraisal.



Students engaging in a lesson

Along with institutional commitments, SAS has started to identify more middle-level leadership opportunities. Dr. Kimball recognizes that for a school to change, middle-level leadership must be empowered and engaged. Of the 400 teachers at the school, 165 of them have official leadership roles such as Professional Learning Community (PLC) leader, or instructional chair. Dr. Kimball has said, "While the PLC is the fulcrum of change for a classroom, middle level leadership is the fulcrum of change for the school."

SAS's development of its faculty is one of the core functions within the office of professional learning. Under the leadership of Dr. Treena Casey, five instructional coaches and about 50 learning support specialists support the SAS faculty. Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have become one of the cornerstones to the school's success. They have been existence at SAS for over seven years, and Dr. Kimball states they "couldn't do what we're doing today without PLCs."

The PLC work at SAS is based on Rick DuFour's model in which the following questions are answered in every PLC:

- What is it that we want students to know and do?
- How will we know when they know and can do it?
- What do we do when students don't get it?
- What do we do if students have already gotten it?

For PLC success, faculty are given time to meet, have identified PLC leadership who are trained, and PLC work is specifically tied to grade level, subject area, and school wide SMART goals.

Going beyond having teachers respond to these questions, SAS has moved towards what they call "PLC 2.0" where students are engaged in the learning process and their own PLCs. Students are beginning to ask themselves:

- What do I want to know and be able to do?
- How will I demonstrate that I have learned it?
- What will I do when I am stuck and I am no longer learning?
- What will I do when I already know it?

While moving towards the practice of PLC 2.0, getting students actively engaged is incredibly important and challenging work. Recently Dr. Tim Stuart, SAS's former Executive Director of Strategic Programs, wrote a book on this topic titled "Personalized Learning in a PLC at Work: Student Agency Through the Four Critical Questions." The book describes PLC 2.0 and how SAS is making progress.

Aside from PLCs, the SAS faculty have ongoing opportunities for professional growth. One very exciting new opportunity is a partnership with the University of Southern California (USC), for an on-site doctoral program. As part of the program, USC professors periodically come to Singapore to teach on-site and coursework is tailored for the SAS context. Sixteen members of the faculty recently graduated with their EdD, and Dr. Jennifer Sparrow, a recent graduate of the program, stated, "all of the dissertations were on problems of practice at SAS, and potential solutions on how to address them."

# HIGH IMPACT LEARNING FROM PRE-K TO GRADUATION

#### AN EARLY START TO LIFELONG LEARNING

The path towards lifelong learning begins at a young age. At SAS, it begins with three-year old preschool students and four-year old pre-kindergarten students in the Early Learning Center (ELC). The ELC is a hugely successful early learning program with a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach to education. When speaking of its success, Dr. Kimball noted "the program was on verge of closing because of lack of enrollment when providing a more traditional

approach, and now we've added sections and there are waiting lists to get in. This is based on the kind of learning going on in that environment."

Learning through play is encouraged in the ELC, which has six engaging learning hubs for students to explore. Each day from 8:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m, students progress through a daily curriculum which includes Chinese language classes, literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, music, and perceptual motor skills development, all within an environment of inquiry and exploration.



Early Learning Center

#### CHINESE IMMERSION **PROGRAMMING**

With Mandarin Chinese being the most spoken language in the world, it makes sense that SAS would focus on developing a Chinese immersion program starting with its youngest learners. During the 2017-2018 school year, two kindergarten classes launched the full curriculum immersion program with a goal of adding additional grade levels each year through the 2022-2023 school year.

In kindergarten and first grade, students will follow a 75/25 immersion model with 75 percent math, social studies, science and language arts instruction in Chinese and 25 percent Reading Language Arts, art, music and physical education instruction in English. In second and third grade the model shifts to 60/40, and ultimately by fourth and fifth grade the program

What does the Chinese immersion program look like? SAS highlights include:

is dual language.

- Chinese immersion instruction, instead of oncedaily Chinese instruction
- Professional, exemplary world language teaching staff
- Chinese-speaking instructional assistants
- Professional development and classroom training for teachers
- Common SAS curriculum culturally adapted for this program
- Service learning opportunities where students communicate directly in Chinese
- Celebration of Chinese cultural activities where the community becomes the classroom



First grade immersion class

Within the past two years, the elementary school has made other noteworthy modifications to its successful academic program. The first speaks to the commitment to pastoral care. In 2016, SAS adopted Responsive Classroom to promote social and emotional learning. "Every adult has been trained how to talk to children," explained Sparrow. "We stress being safe, responsible, and kind." Dr. Kimball added, "social emotional learning is part of a culture of excellence, possibilities and extraordinary care. When we care for students emotionally, it makes it possible for them to reach their full potential academically."

Response to Intervention (RTI) is another strategy that starts with the kindergarten students and is being deployed school wide. Specifically, at the elementary and middle school levels, RTI is helping teachers arrange students into flexible groups based on where a child is academically and where they will get the best support and experience the most growth. Dr. Sparrow noted while RTI is typically reserved for struggling students—and that it is

being used in that way at SAS-it should be renamed "Response to Learning" to cover extension as well. She stated, "flexible grouping and support strategies help students who are struggling, but it also is for helping students extend their learning so they stay actively engaged and are adequately challenged."

#### FLEXIBLE SPACES

Currently, kindergarten classrooms are part of an action research project regarding the school's physical spaces. Known as Pathfinder Spaces, the model classrooms are being used to inform an evolving large-scale renovation project. The Pathfinder Spaces are investigating how classroom design impacts learning through the use of space, furnishings, and materials. In the kindergarten classrooms, a wall that creates a small intimate meeting space, can be folded away to reveal a variety of learning spaces in a double classroom.

The pursuit of student passion is also being stressed at the elementary school level. Beginning in kindergarten, students are able to participate in more than 100 after-school activities such as athletics, dance, robotics, and art to name a few.



A kindergarten classroom



Student working on a project

#### **NEW APPROACHES TO** MIDDLE SCHOOL LEARNING

The sixth grade is also a part of the Pathfinder Space pilot and is exploring how flexible learning spaces relate to personalized learning. Lauren Mehrbach, the middle school principal, explains how flexible environments support personalized learning, "it's a combination of different structures, instructional strategies, and curricular approaches that allow a child to have access to what they need when they need it, to know what their next steps are in their learning, and to pursue areas of strength and interest." Students are able to participate in class where they feel physically most comfortable—in a chair, on the floor, at tables, or on a yoga balls. They are not bound to one particular seating arrangement or mode of learning.

The push to explore passion areas continues in middle school, and students also begin working on their young professional skills. Twice a year for six weeks, students have time each day to pursue a passion project during an expanded homeroom period. Teachers received training that included completing their own project. Parents receive frequent communication about the academic intent of the program and student outcomes have been tremendous.



Middle school students in a Flexible Learning Space



Middle school students in a Flexible Learning Space

In the Classroom Without Walls program, an off-site program for all middle school students, students "build positive relationships, trust, and cooperation with their peers and teachers by facing unique challenges and experiences outside of the



Watch this video to see how students further explore their passions in the middle school makerspace library.

classroom." This allows them to start developing the skills needed for success in and out of school throughout their lives. In sixth grade, students explore the environment on an overnight trip designed to not only investigate the environment but also get them to go beyond their comfort zone. In seventh grade, students begin collaborating as a team through a set of challenges during a three-day, two-night trip to Indonesia. The team building experiences continue in eighth grade with a four-day, three-night trip back to Indonesia where new challenges are encountered. This trip also encompasses service learning, cultural appreciation, and eco-adventure.

### BUILDING ON THE HIGH SCHOOL REINVENTION

One of the hardest shifts SAS has made is the development of its Advanced Studies program. Advanced studies is an expansive menu of college level courses, both Advanced Placement and SAS developed Advanced Topic courses. This provides students the ability to take a rigorous curriculum that provides a customized pathway based upon their needs and interests. In all, forty advanced studies courses will be offered at SAS.

SAS is a global leader in AP classes and has been for some time. In 2018, over 1800 AP exams were administered with SAS scoring in the 96 percentile against schools worldwide when it comes to AP scores. While this is phenomenal, as the 2016 case study pointed out, SAS was advised by college admissions officers that they were looking for more than just a class schedule full of AP classes and near perfect scores.

The graduating class of 2021 will be the first class limited to taking only seven AP course credits, and are given the opportunity to take Advanced Topic (AT) courses that are being implemented. The combination of AP and AT classes has created one of the most robust and challenging academic programs anywhere.

AT courses are designed to allow students to go deeper in their academic program. Each course is designed around the desired student learning outcomes, not just content, and is vetted and approved by faculty and college representatives. In some cases a course may expand upon an AP course, while in others the course is completely unique from the AP curriculum. For example, Dr. Kimball describes, "we offer an AT Physics course that has computational physics as a portion of that course, which is absent from the AP coursework. In another instance, we offer AT Kinesiology which there is nothing like in the AP curriculum."

However, given SAS's history and their culture of academic excellence, the shift towards limiting AP classes has not been an easy change. As a result, SAS has listened to concerns, continued to do research and garnered support from colleges, and continuously explains the rationale to parents and how the shift ensures the best academic offerings for students.

#### RELEVANT LEARNING OPTIONS: ADVANCED TOPIC COURSES

After defining desired student outcomes, the SAS Center of Innovation developed criteria for Advanced Topic (AT) courses with three objectives:

- 1 Create the opportunity to take collegiate level courses that are projectbased and interdisciplinary.
- 2 Redefine what challenging curriculum looks like and not be bound by the College Board's definition of success. By filling the high level course gap, create the opportunity to demonstrate learning at the highest level (e.g., offering "AT Exercise Physiology" as a part of Physical Education).
- 3 Provide the opportunity to go beyond AP courses. Giving students options to go farther and deeper based on their interests and passions is a major tenet of the resarch and development recommendations (e.g., beyond AP Chinese offer a Chinese Literature and Philosophy course taught in Chinese).

#### AT Development Criteria include:

- Relevant content, skills, and application
- Competency-based rigor (content, skills, and application)
- Desired student learning outcome development (21st century skills)
- Depth over breadth
- Focus on production
- Real world applications
- External validation

Select AT courses now benefit from a new crosscrediting partnership SAS has with Syracuse University called the Project Advance program. The partnership allows qualified students the opportunity to concurrently enroll in Syracuse University courses for university credit. During the 2018–2019 school year, both AT Computational Physics and AT Economics: Globalization are eligible for concurrent enrollment in the Syracuse program.

Beyond the advanced courses, SAS offers high school students other ways to follow their passions and direct their own learning experiences. The Catalyst project is a "cultural, instructional, and course-specific student-directed self-study project where students work with a mentor in a relevant field aimed at a specific and strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound goal."

Some projects last an entire semester (some even last a year or two) and they are truly personalized. Dr. Kimball states that some students do projects that are related to their academic profile, and some do not. It is really up to the student to choose what they will pursue.

SAS also has the Quest program, which is a projectbased learning-focused microschool. Units of study focus on interdisciplinary collaborative ventures and often connect students with industries from engineering to IT to marketing. The program became available for seniors in 2016-2017, and has now expanded as an offering for juniors. Quest, along with the early childhood program renovation, was intended to "bookend the transformation" and shifts that occurred in the academic programming as a result of the strategic plan.

The SAS Interim Semester, providing high school students with a weeklong global program, continues to be a highlight of the year. For a week in February all 1,200 high school students participate in one of 55 interim experiences that range from service work in Vietnam to trekking in Nepal.

High school students are also benefiting from intelligently designed flexible spaces. The library has been transformed into the school's "Center of Innovation" and is now a popular hang out space, with project labs, makerspaces, and spaces for students to meet with Catalyst advisers.

In addition, the humanities classrooms are part of the Pathfinder pilot program. In these classrooms, furniture is modular and walls can be moved to support big integrated units and the individual needs of teachers and students.



Watch this video to see how Lauren turned her love of dance into a Catalyst project which led to her and fellow classmates entering—and winning!—a dance competition in Australia.



High school students in the library

The high school team took a look at pastoral care at the high school level and made several modifications to ensure that students are known and cared for. Students became concerned about discussing life issues such as anxiety, relationship challenges, and depression with their integrated counselor (college and guidance) because they thought those challenges could impact their college recommendations. As a result, SAS separated college counseling and personal/academic counseling to ensure that students have the

support they need without impacting their college applications. The Student Life Center, where Personal and Academic Counseling counselors are housed, is hugely popular and the new counseling approach has been highly successful.

An advisory period was also added for all students to focus on building relationships and talking about non-academic topics that fall within the context of advisory. An advisor will have a group of the same 8-12 students for all four years of high school.



Pathfinder Space in a high school humanities class

High school students now also benefit from mentoring through the high school programming. Dr. Kimball stated that there was a need for students to develop skills such as networking and asking for help when needed, which will benefit them in college and beyond. There are currently three ways students participate in mentoring relationships:

- Service program: the service learning program requires mentoring and also has students serving as mentees.
- Peer support programs: given the transient nature of the school, nearly 1,000 new students arrive each school year. High school students can volunteer to come alongside a new student and help them transition into life at the school.
- Catalyst program: as part of this project, students have to identify and use a mentor and it cannot be a teacher or parent.

#### THE ROAD TO PERSONALIZED LEARNING

In the 2017 school year, SAS began implementing strategies that will ultimately result in a more personalized experience for students. This builds upon the work that was already underway at the school while perfecting inquiry, learning progressions, competencies, and customized pathways.

For inquiry-based learning Trevor MacKenzie's model is being used to guide the work at SAS. Students are encouraged to pursue inquiry-based learning across

the curriculum with a cycle of question, investigate, create, and reflect. As students progress in the system and experience the learning process, they gain more autonomy and personalization over time. Dr. Sparrow advised, "the process starts with teacherdriven prompts and then moves to shared inquiry that is co-constructed. The last step is personalized inquiry, where a student is in the driver seat in terms of content, pacing, and product." While the students take charge of their learning at this phase, there are scaffolds in place to help students be successful even if they need support.

SAS will begin working on more defined and assessable competencies in 2019. Sparrow stated, "the development of competencies will allow us to give teachers the language and understanding of what something like critical thinking [one of the DSLOs] means from a skills perspective, that is broken down from a novice to expert in the continuum." The goal is to make visible what skills mean, which will in turn impact how teachers speak to students, how they give feedback, and how they focus on assessments. Dr. Kimball added that SAS has a vision of personalized learning for students and "the only way to do it is by creating competencies and assessments that are flexible, robust, and consistent—that can be moved in and out of the system so a student can develop a pathway that leads them to their ultimate goal. This provides the basis for which personalized learning may actually be possible."

## CONCLUSION

Singapore American School is a good example of a school that has gone from great to greater, and sometimes will go slow, to go fast. This is the approach used during the research and development journey to ensure the best possible learning experiences for students. The faculty took time to visit other schools and is committed to collaborate in PLCs in order to develop new instructional and relational strategies. This approach has paid off with widespread teacher ownership. The vision is no longer one that resides solely with Dr. Kimball and the administrative team, it is a SAS vision that faculty can believe in because they've seen pieces of it work from exemplars around the world. Furthermore, many have helped build the vision, and they are now working to carry it out every day.

Wide scale change can happen in a variety of ways, and SAS has proven that the strategy of working from the edges, and taking advantage of openings where they exist, has lasting results. Specifically this approach has been impactful with these approaches:

- Building faculty capacity and teacher leadership (eg. 160 teachers are in leadership roles).
- High quality implementation across many dimensions of the 2020 plan.
- Taking an action research approach to facilities

development/renovation—updated spaces and configurations that both illustrate and investigate the future state.

- Bookend features of the student experience in the Reggio inspired Early Learning Center and the Quest program in the high school.
- Holding in tension an impressive commitment to updating a shared understanding of what's best for young people and what parents want for young people.

SAS continually demonstrates that while it is a large and extremely successful school, it has the ability to be agile in order to do what's best for students. The SAS leadership and faculty have proven they will keep their strategic focus at the core of their work. With the progress they have made over the past several years, they will continue to be known as a school which has an exceptional:

CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

CULTURE OF POSSIBILITIES, AND

CULTURE OF EXTRAORDINARY CARE.