

The Quality Journey of Singapore Schools

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Introduction

1. This paper sets out the rationale for the Singapore Ministry of Education's (MOE) adoption of a quality model in its new appraisal system and provides details of this system and its implementation. It concludes by reviewing the success of the overall appraisal system and looks at the experience of one specific school, Anderson Secondary School.

Rationale

2. Education research has shown that standards in schools rise fastest where schools themselves take responsibility for their own improvement. Schools must foster an environment where they continually question their own practices and assumptions so as to improve the quality of education they provide. This mindset of self-appraisal is the primary mechanism that drives quality assurance, namely the capacity of schools to be the best that they can be on a continuing basis.
3. The new appraisal system, namely the School Excellence Model (SEM) is conceptualized with this finding in mind. It puts schools in the driver's seat as agents of change to bring about excellence.
4. Furthermore, for the many MOE initiatives to be effective, schools need to move away from a focus on academic results to one that provides a holistic education to the students. Hence, the SEM

also provides a systemic framework that enables schools to examine their practices not discretely, but as parts contributing to a whole.

The School Excellence Model (SEM)

5. The SEM is a self-assessment model adapted from other quality models used by business organizations. The framework and scoring method were adapted from the business excellence model developed by the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM). This adopted framework offers a clear frame of reference for schools to communicate and motivate staff to superior performance. From the Singapore Quality Award model and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model, the SEM borrowed the idea of areas that the tool should include and the use of indicators in each sub-criterion.

6 The SEM has drawn upon the strengths of different business models as the motivation behind the SEM and such models is the same – that of driving organizations towards excellence.

The Core Values of SEM

7 There are seven fundamental values and principles that underpin the SEM framework. These seven core values underscore the tenet that the development of students is at the heart of all education processes.

- Students First

The future of our nation is linked to the quality of education that we provide for our students today. The goals of developing the character and building the capacity of every student are described in the Desired Outcomes of Education.

- Teachers – the Key

Without quality teachers with sound values and equipped with high pedagogical competence, a school will not be able to bring out the best in students.

- Leading with Purpose

Leaders set the tone for the school by their example. Leaders, who have a strong sense of mission and clear objectives, motivate the people they lead.

- Systems Support

Sustaining excellence requires support structures and appropriate systems that, instead of getting in the way, serve as infrastructure to facilitate the school's desired outcomes.

- Working with Partners

Without partners, a school is a closed system, inward looking and limited in its capacity to improve. A school works more effectively when it has mutually beneficial relationships with its key stakeholders.

- Management by Knowledge

Having the essential knowledge ensures that we operate in reality. Savvy schools are adept at handling, digesting and judiciously using knowledge critical to achieving their objectives.

- Continuous Improvement

School communities must be characterised by a willingness to learn and experiment. Schools must have the courage and tenacity to strive for improvements both big and small.

The Framework of SEM

8. The nine criteria in the SEM fall into two broad categories – the Enablers and the Results (see Figure 1). The Enablers category is concerned with how results are achieved while the Results category is concerned with what the school has achieved or is achieving. Underlying the Enablers is the belief that the way leadership drives strategy, staff management and the management of resources will influence the level of staff, and customer satisfaction and impact on the community. These in turn will ultimately affect the quality of education delivered. The Results category includes staff results, administrative and operational results, partnership with society results and key performance results of students.

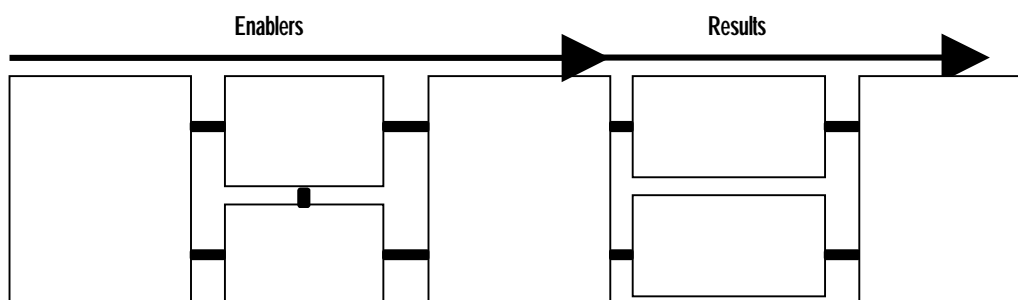


Figure 1 : The SEM Framework

The Implementation of SEM

9. The implementation of SEM requires a tripartite approach: the school doing its on-going self-assessment, Cluster Superintendents of schools facilitating the school improvement process and MOE's validation exercise, using the same SEM instrument, once every 5 years. The MOE validation and review exercise provides the external and wider perspective to a school's self-assessment.

10. For schools to embrace self-assessment using a model adapted from business requires a change of mindset. To help Principals change mindsets, they were involved in developing the success indicators in the instrument. A multi-pronged communication plan was implemented to obtain "buy-in" from schools.

11. Improvement was made to the SEM instrument and the SEM Scoring System (SEMSS) after field tests in 38 schools in 1999. All schools were then trained in the use of SEM and SEMSS in 2000 and fine-tuning was made based on feedback from schools. In addition, from 2001, SEM report writing and training workshops are conducted for schools that are scheduled for External Validation (EV).

The External Validation Process

12. Once every 5 years, schools undergo an external validation exercise in which a team of external assessors visit the school for 3 days to gather information on its processes and results. The assessors work from the school's own self-appraisal report in which is captured the strengths and areas for improvement

13. Before the school visit, the assessors carry out a desktop evaluation using the school report. They then meet to discuss key issues which they want to further explore. On site, the assessors interview the staff, groups of students, stakeholders and the school's partners. They also carry out extensive document checks. At the end of the 3 days, they meet again to discuss their findings and to assign scores to the different criteria.

14. The outcome of the process is a report which gives the school information on the assessors' views of its strengths, areas of improvement and scores. The feedback report is a crucial component of the self-appraisal process as it acts as a catalyst for action. It provides helpful information to trigger relevant improvement initiatives.

15. The EV is a rigorous and structured approach to school improvement. It is an assessment based on facts and individual perception. It is a means to help a school achieve consistency of direction and consensus on what needs to be done.

16. The process of external validation is labour intensive with each team comprising at least 4 persons. Several training workshops for assessors are also conducted each year since 2001 to build a pool of assessors. To increase the overall partnership and involvement of the private sector, assessors are drawn from key personnel and officers from the private sector, the Polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education as well as schools and MOE HQ.

The Success of SEM

17. School personnel welcome the attention given to processes rather than merely to results. Principals have not only found the model to be a useful tool for carrying out self-appraisal, but also in re-orientating the outlook of their teachers to view education in a more holistic and inter-connected way. From a year 2000 survey conducted on 376 users in schools which participated in the field tests, 93% responded that the SEM instrument was comprehensive and useful and 100% were in full agreement with its underlying principles.

18. Feedback is gathered from key personnel of schools through a survey at the end of each EV cycle. From the 2001 surveys, on the average, 96% of the externally validated schools were satisfied with the entire EV process and noted its significant departure from the previous appraisal mode. The survey respondents also indicated that they were

assured that EV was a learning process that would lead to further school improvement when the gaps were closed.

19 All the assessors involved in EV last year found the experience enriching and the site visit a useful channel to glean information about a school, its pupils and teachers. There was mutual learning between assessors from both the government and private sectors as different views and perspectives on issues were shared. Those from MOE HQ also appreciated the opportunity to ‘touch base’ with schools while those from external organizations were enriched by a better understanding of the Education System.

20 In 2001, partnership with the Standards, Productivity, Innovation and Growth Board (SPRING) resulted in the assessment of schools for the first time for a national quality award, the Singapore Quality Class (SQC). Five schools which had undergone validation by MOE applied for the SQC assessment and were successful. This was an important milestone achievement for schools in Singapore. The SQC provides a benchmark for schools to compare their performance against that of business organizations.

21 This year, another 5 schools were awarded the SQC. Of these, 3 schools underwent the EV in 2001 but fell slightly short of the requirement for the SQC then. However, the culture of continuous improvement that is integral to the SEM led them to further improve on their processes and close the gaps identified by the EV assessors. It is thus another testimony of the success of the SEM when these 3 schools were awarded the SQC this year.

The Quality Assurance Experience of Anderson Secondary School

22 One of the schools that achieved the SQC award this year is Anderson Secondary School, a top ranked neighbourhood school in Singapore. It was amongst the first batch of schools to undergo the EV in 2001 after being trained on the use of the SEM.

23 Staff at Anderson Secondary did not start using the SEM framework and appraisal approach from cold. They were already very open and accustomed to business excellence models, having

already attained the People Developer Standard¹ in August 2000 for having put in place robust systems to develop their staff members. Hence the "buy-in" from staff for SEM was not an issue. However, there were still obstacles to be overcome.

Difficulties Encountered

- 24 The Heads of Department of the school were assigned as Criterion Owners. Using the SEM framework, they were tasked to gather evidences and data to do a holistic self-appraisal of the different aspects of the school. Initially, this was not easy because evidences and data were not readily available. Before the implementation of SEM, documentation of processes and results was not greatly emphasized. This was especially so in non-academic areas. The school overcame this by re-organizing its filing system to align with the SEM criteria and identifying key data to be collected.
- 25 Members of the School Management Committee who were responsible for the different key processes in the school also had to develop performance indicators so that processes could be evaluated and the extent of the success measured. This proved to be difficult, especially in non-quantifiable areas such as students' character, staff morale and student morale. Proxy indicators such as the number of hours of community service done by students; student transfer rates and staff transfer / resignation rates etc. were used to measure these intangible qualities.
- 26 The SEM required appropriate targets to be set and comparison with other schools or organizations to be made. While schools are traditionally strong in setting targets for students' academic and co-curricular activity achievements, it was not so easy to set targets for other non-academic areas. The school tried to overcome this by examining its own guiding principles and reviewing its own goals in order to set meaningful targets in all areas.
- 27 If setting targets was difficult, comparing results against other schools was even tougher. Data from other schools were either not readily available or they were not compatible. This was

¹ The People Developer Standard is given by the Singapore Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board to recognize organizations that have sound systems to support the learning and development of staff members.

particularly so in non-academic areas where different schools used different proxies to measure non-quantifiable areas. This is still an issue that the school is grappling with.

28 Some staff members were apprehensive of the SEM because of the massive documentation that SEM seemed to require. Just before the EV, they were also concerned about their performances at interviews with the SEM assessors. They were worried that they might let the school down if they could not respond well at the interviews and gave the wrong impression that processes were not in place when they actually were. Indeed, for the EV in 2001, the school was given a score that was lower than the score which the school had given itself. The school's reflection on this was that amongst other things, they were inexperienced in presenting their processes and failed to articulate established policies. However, the school embraced the learning experience positively and took steps to close the gaps identified. The school was therefore pleased when a year later, they were assessed favourably for the prestigious SQC award.

Benefits Derived

29 Despite some of these difficulties encountered, the journey towards excellence through the SEM had certainly benefited Anderson Secondary School in many ways. Firstly, while many good processes were already in place, the SEM further heightened everyone's consciousness of these processes and their interconnectedness. It has also helped make existing systems and processes more explicit and less dependent on individuals.

30 With the use of the SEM, all staff members now have a "common language" to discuss school excellence. SEM phrases like "targets", "comparisons", "Areas for Improvement", "Assessment & Review" etc. are widely used and understood. This certainly helps to drive the quality assurance process in the school.

30 While the school has always been very student-centered, the SEM brings that further to the fore. There are now more structured feedback sessions with students, more conscious efforts to take in their inputs in designing programmes and documentation of their inputs for evaluation purposes.

31 Since the EV in 2001, the school has also increased the involvement of parents with the set-up of the Parent Support Group this year, laying down explicit policies for partnership with

stakeholders, community involvement etc. There is also a very concerted effort now to not just do post-mortem on activities but to conduct assessment and review of key processes and check for alignment with school vision and goals. This has led to many improvements made to existing practices.

32 The recent achievement of the SQC for Anderson Secondary is another big boost to the school. This nationwide recognition and affirmation of the good systems and results of the school has raised the profile of the school to an even higher level.

Conclusion

33 The implementation of SEM in all our schools has effectively engaged our teachers to achieve the desired outcomes of education for every child within the limits of our resources. In addition, it also ensures that schools develop and maintain links with their stakeholders, especially the parents and community. Besides being a tool to drive self-initiated changes as can be seen in the case of Anderson Secondary School, it raises the professionalism of our school leadership and teachers and increases their capacity to transform our schools into world-class organizations.