

Subject: Distance Learning Update
Sent: February 20, 2020



Dear SAS Families,

It is hard to believe that Distance Learning @ SAS began just over two weeks ago, on February 4th. We are proud of our 2,800 students who continue to adjust to the transition from their regular classroom experience to an online education. We are grateful to our 400+ faculty who continue to work tirelessly to provide online interactions that reflect ambitious learning outcomes and progressive online practices. Finally, we are thankful to our thousands of parents who support their children, our students, at all grade levels, reflecting the spirit of a true learning community.

In their divisional Schoology announcements, our principals have kept you informed of the ongoing improvements we are making to our Distance Learning Plan. I invite you to continue to pay close attention to what is communicated to you via these announcements, as well as our weekly A Look Ahead notice. Nonetheless, as mentioned in my first communication on February 5, I will from time to time seize the opportunity to provide a schoolwide update, and will do so in a more systematic manner in the weeks to come. Today, I want to share the refinements you can expect in the coming days and weeks, as well as insight into the work happening behind the scenes to measure the efficacy of our plan.

When we launched Distance Learning @ SAS, it was assumed that the duration of this plan would span nine instructional days. Even with this assumption, we designed our plan within an adaptive framework to allow for continuous iteration and improvement, balancing expediency and quality. We are now aware that Distance Learning will extend longer than initially anticipated. We are prepared and equipped to navigate this reality while remaining true to our commitment to put the quality of the student learning experience first. Each step we take requires careful planning to ensure that quality of experience, both on a technological and pedagogical front.

Here are some of the visible steps we are taking to further improve the student learning experience to meet our students' needs in these times of campus closure:

- The behind-the-scenes divisional guidelines and expectations for faculty are regularly adjusted as needed by our leadership team to reflect what we

learn from the data we gather, including feedback we receive from students and parents. As an example, in elementary school, the quality of feedback was improved and personalized through the systematic use of audio and video feedback by all faculty. In our secondary schools, the course structure in Schoology was adjusted and clarified in week 2 and the expectation set for all faculty to follow that structure, so that students experience a greater consistency from class to class. We will continue to adjust on an almost daily basis to ensure we remain true to the adaptive nature of our plan.

- After the success of a recent pilot in middle school and high school examining technologies for synchronized engagement, we are starting to expand such opportunities at all levels. I know our students are as eager as our teachers to reconnect in the context of a virtual environment.
 - In elementary school, we will use next week to pilot introducing regular class check-ins to help students connect socially with their teacher and each other.
 - In middle school, we have identified a few key subject areas to offer several synchronous interactions between faculty and students.
 - In high school, we plan to use our video-conferencing platform to schedule office hours and targeted teaching opportunities. We will also initiate or continue one-on-one interactions between counselors and/or college counselors and students. For example, Junior interviews with college counselors started being held online this week, following our virtual Junior Family College Night. In all divisions, it will take time and a few iterations to find the ideal weekly schedule of interactions.
 - Note that we operate within a context of high technological constraints and a population spread over close to 24 time zones. We will continue to be guided by the principles of best practice in online education that recommend to balance asynchronous materials for content with some degree of face-to-face synchronous interactions for processing and the human connection it provides. It is my hope though, and also my request to our Academic Leadership Team, that we find stability and the right balance within the next two weeks. Please look for specifics on how your students will engage in synchronous activities in the coming weeks in the principals' divisional updates.
- Our faculty will continue to systematically improve and enrich the instructional design of lesson plans and materials to better meet the standards of Distance Learning. Our goal is not just to try to substitute for the classroom experience but to augment, modify, and redefine what we offer to make it easier for students to engage in their learning. As an example, we guide our faculty in using a larger number of shorter videos at key points of a lesson to break down the steps of learning and offer student scaffold in their learning. What we are learning right now will translate well into what we will be doing in the coming months and years on campus at Shanghai American School. Our faculty will come out of this experience better equipped and with a stronger skillset to differentiate and use technology tools in service of onsite education.
- We are developing a Distance Learning Assessment Policy that will take effect in the near future. This guiding document for our faculty will ensure two important points:

- (a) that assessments are adapted to meet the standards of a high-quality online education and how we monitor and measure student progress in this specific context, and
 - (b) that students experience consistency from class to class and grade level to grade level in this area.
- We are constantly engaged with the International Baccalaureate Organization and the College Board to advocate for our high school students who are scheduled to take exams this year. We obtained a change in deadlines for some IB internal assessments initially due in March and are in conversation with the AP to explore the potential use of late testing windows. This remains an area of ongoing focus and labor for our High School leadership, our IB and AP coordinators, as well as our College Counselors. I also refer you to a [recent communication of our Directors of College Counseling](#) on this topic.

Finally, I want to share our approach to measuring the efficacy of our Distance Learning Plan. SAS is a brick and mortar school that had to turn into a Distance Learning institution almost overnight. In the transportation industry, it might be the equivalent of asking an airline company to shift, in a matter of days, to providing train transportation to its clients in times of airspace closure. We know that there will be challenges along the way and we do not claim everything we do is or will be perfect, nor will what we do meet everyone's needs and expectations upon first iteration. But constantly measuring our efficacy and taking steps toward improvement matter to us. Here is an insight on how we do this:

Our digital learning platforms—Seesaw, Schoology, Office 365, Level Chinese—provide tremendous data on student engagement. Metrics like usage, login frequency, and degree of engagement (discussion posts made, assessments and assignments completed, etc.) help us to understand the degree to which the learning platforms are being used. It's important to note that these data points serve as quantitative measures of engagement, and do not in themselves measure quality of learning, so they must be supplemented by additional inquiry to enable us to better understand the progress of our Distance Learning Plan. Therefore, each division is gathering qualitative feedback from students and teachers to help us understand how the plan is impacting student and teacher experiences, and to provide data on what improvements we might make going forward. We also benefit from the flow of parent feedback provided to leaders by email or direct interactions via the PTSA. Finally, the countless hours spent by principals, vice-principals, associate directors and instructional coaches reviewing Schoology and Seesaw postings are a form of data collection that provide the most important opportunity for intervention. For example, this approach has allowed us to better prioritize the curriculum and ensure that all students are targeting the same content and are hitting the same learning objectives.

In closing, I wish to reiterate my faith in our students' ability to rise to the challenge of moving to a different kind of learning, as well as my trust in the dedication and professionalism of our faculty and leadership. In extraordinary times, it is important to focus on the variables we can control rather than on the ones we cannot. This situation has been imposed on every member of our community and will disproportionately impact some more than others. As a school and as a community, what we are experiencing right now will and is already allowing us to grow, learn,

and elevate our standing to continue to deliver the world-class education that is and has always been our goal at Shanghai American School.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any input and comments related to this communication and our Distance Learning Plan.

Sincerely,

Emmanuel Bonin
Chief Academic Officer / Deputy Head of School