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SAI INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: IN PURSUIT OF ACADEMIC HAPPINESS

Sometimes what we read stays in some abyss of the mind for longer than we realize. It was just another school day and Dr Bijaya Kumar Sahoo was en route to work, after dropping off his two sons at the gates of one of the premier educational institutions in Odisha (India). Alone in the car with just the quiet hum of the engine for company, Dr Sahoo, a Chartered Accountant (CA) of repute, was unexpectedly reminded of a few lines from Abraham Lincoln's letter to his son's headmaster. "Teach him to learn to lose...and also to enjoy winning. Steer him away from envy. If you can, teach him the secret of quiet laughter...teach him it is far more honorable to fail than to cheat...teach him to have faith in his own ideas, even if everyone tells him they are wrong."¹

That day at work, these lines haunted him over and over again. That day was a good two decades ago. What Dr Sahoo was really looking for was not so much the ROI (return on investment) from a financial perspective of the education that students such as his sons were receiving, but more of a "value-based" ROI. He realized where his sense of discomfort was — that school education was being imparted in a rather fragmented manner, where the child's holistic development was left wanting. The "education" as he saw was not just confined to the leaf of a book, but had its genesis in universal learning where the intrinsic values of life were intertwined. And that is why those lines from Lincoln's letter, that Dr Sahoo had probably read in his adolescence, still resonated with him.

What then would holistic education be all about? What innovative pedagogies and shifts in practice are required to build a comprehensive education system? Was education just about making the child academically wiser or was it about happy, motivated children? Dr Sahoo kept coming back to these questions as he revisited his life as a student, the trials and tribulations, the

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http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/themes/5237775378c2726421000002/attachments/original/1386601477/AbeLincoln_LetterToSon.pdf?1386601477#:~:text=Let%20him%20have%20the%20courage,fi ne%20little%20fellow%2C%20my%20son!

desire to look beyond the textbook for transformational education. He wanted his sons and all other students to be future-ready citizens. He perceived a world where education itself would have its happiness quotient. And he pondered if real academics needed critical structural changes. As Dr Sahoo reimagined education that day nearly 20 years ago, he wondered how he could be instrumental in spearheading this change. Some of the questions that kept him awake at night were: What should be the role of teachers in the transformation from a testing-driven approach to a value-driven one? Should the school management play a key role in facilitating this change? If so, how? Was a relook at processes and documentation necessary?

INDIA'S EDUCATION SECTOR

Education, a strategic priority for the Government of India, had evolved over time with the formulation of various national education policies at different points. The Right to Education, as enshrined in the Constitution, had been a fundamental right in India. With more than 1.5 million schools, 8.5 million teachers and more than 250 million students across 28 states and eight Union Territories (UTs),² India's K-12 school system (the collective phrase for primary and secondary education) was one of the biggest in the world. The K-12 system was one that pivoted on teacher-student interaction as well as students' self-educating capabilities.³ India's K-12 system was segmented by ownership, level of education and board of affiliation.

However, a significant percentage of these schools lacked running water and toilets, with one or two classrooms that remained empty most of the time. This could be attributed to poor implementation of policies with regard to the economic and political realities of the country. Even though more students were being enrolled in schools there were high dropout rates over time. The mean years of schooling in India was 5.12 years, which was below the average of other developing countries (7.09 years). As per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2013 only 26% of grade 5 students in India could approach a simple division and only 21% could read a simple paragraph.⁴ This pointed towards the fact that quality of Indian education had remained abysmal. As a result, private schools proliferated with the promise of providing better quality education. Private schools accounted for a fourth of the total number of K-12 schools in the country.⁵

² Unified District Information System for Education Plus

³ <https://studybase.in/blogs/2/k-12-education-system-its-presence-in-india#:~:text=The%20primary%20and%20secondary%20education,pre%2Duniversity%20education%20in%20India.>

⁴ [ASER 2013 - ASER Centre](#)

⁵ <https://ficciarise.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/FICCI-Report-Private-sectors-contribution-to-K-12-education-in-India.pdf>

With the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), the government took a leap of faith by introducing many policy changes, better use of digital infrastructure, sweeping changes in pedagogy, teaching methods, evaluation, and openness to global universities. The NEP stood on the pillars of Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability and Accountability. It emphasized on foundational literacy and numeracy, vocational education starting from Grade 6 and extracurricular activities. It did away with rigid separations between academic streams and introduced flexibility in the medium of instruction. Student assessments were reformed as well with the introduction of the 360-degree Holistic Progress Card. The focus moved to learning outcome-driven student progress. In keeping with UN Social Development Goal (SDG) 4,⁶ the NEP recognized the need for “inclusive” and “lifelong learning” opportunities. It restructured the 10+2 school curricula and pedagogy in a new 5+3+3+4 design. This comprised the Foundational Stage (in two parts – three years of anganwadi/pre-school plus two years in primary school in Grades I to II; covering ages three to eight), Preparatory Stage (Grades III to V, covering ages eight to 11), Middle Stage (Grades VI to VIII, covering ages 11 to 14), and Secondary Stage (Grades IX to XII in two phases - IX and X in the first phase and XI and XII in the second, covering ages 14 to 18). The aim of the new education was not just to be holistic, but also to be integrated, enjoyable, and engaging. It opened up room for critical thinking and reduced the curricula content to enhance essential learning. The bedrock of NEP 2020 was experiential learning at all stages. Schools and teachers were encouraged to incorporate hands-on learning, story-telling-based pedagogy, arts-integrated and sports-integrated education, as shown in **Exhibit 1**.

Of the many things the COVID-19 crisis had upended in the year 2020, a critical one was education. Although the pandemic kept children away from schools, the education technology companies said the NEP had come in the nick of time to facilitate online education and had the potential to transform digitization of education and teachers’ training.⁷ It facilitated a new learning environment via use of emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and gamification techniques. Immersive, blended and adaptive learning became the new normal. Despite the pandemic, the rollout of NEP was scheduled to be on time, with UNESCO too extending its support to the initiative by saying that socio-emotional learning was “very crucial” for the development of students.⁸ India’s Budget 2021 echoed this thought that was postulated by NEP by linking education with employability and entrepreneurial capabilities. After health, the second biggest focus of the budget was education and skill development.

⁶ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/covid-19-nep-fuel-fund-raising-by-education-technology-firms/article32517271.ece>

⁸ https://www.business-standard.com/article/education/unesco-extends-support-in-implementation-of-national-education-policy-121032600063_1.html

BIJAYA KUMAR SAHOO: A TRAILBLAZER'S TRAJECTORY

Sometimes the questions that keep us awake at night are the ones that shape our aspirations. A fervent desire to maximize social welfare in a country constrained with funding, training and skills makes a person more resolute. And, that's probably what happened with Dr Sahoo. It, no doubt, began with the thought about how he could make the education for his sons more holistic, but soon the thought amplified and took the shape of an idea for a new education system. The idea of the institution that would personify this new way of learning was taking shape quietly in his mind from the start of the year 2000, more than two decades before India's New Education Policy 2020 was released. The zest made him give up a prolific career as a CA. He realized in the era of universalization of education, thinking domestic won't cut the bill. Also, he wanted to build the school based on evidences gathered from global educational practices that had induced high learning outcomes. Given models of education in India lacked innovation, Dr Sahoo travelled around the world to research the best of the educational institutions that offered novel, uninterrupted and holistic education. From Singapore, Dubai, China to the US and the UK — Dr Sahoo trotted the globe to unravel the best learning practices and discover the institutions that were doing things differently in this space, as seen in **Exhibit 2**. He had a vision of his own and he wanted to map it to these global practices. He also traveled the length and breadth of India to find such examples.

Dr Sahoo wanted to go beyond the utilitarian perspective of education and wanted to inculcate its humanistic principles at the foundations of his school. He was deeply motivated by the ancient Vedic education prevalent in the country, and believed that true learning happened at the intersection of the mind, body and soul. For this, educational institutions (schools) needed to invest in a child's happiness as a first step. The happiness quotient of a child was, therefore, at the nub of the education system he envisioned. Dr Sahoo trusted it would be an institution that would not only facilitate experiential learning and have a spiritual edge to it, but also one that would be embedded in value-based learning. He firmly believed education was incomplete if life skills were not a part of it. Dr Sahoo explained:

"I felt this would be not just a school, but a learning ground where the student would be trained to face anything in the world. It would be a place to transform children, instill confidence in them and connect them to global dimensions of learning."

The path to holistic learning that he had etched in his mind had a well-calibrated mix of academic and non-academic pursuits. Dr Sahoo's notion of education, therefore, kept 40% room for non-academic activities. After years of research and evaluation of the global education system, it was his conviction that three things could be the gamechanger in building a differentiated educational

institution: (a) The role of parents, (b) positive (happy) education, and (c) a process-driven approach, as shown in **Exhibit 3**.

He wanted to put the state of Odisha on the education map of the world. A chance meeting with the then chief minister of the state on a flight back home gave real body to his vision of an academic institution that could usher in a new model of accessible and uninterrupted learning. What followed were a flurry of activities – from land acquisition, chasing bank credit, getting the school building in place, rushing to China to load 22 containers of materials for school equipment such as windows, tables and chairs – all in a tight timeline of 12 months.

Armed with a degree in Law, a Master’s degree in Business Administration with specialization in Finance and Treasury, a Doctorate in Commerce and years of experience as a CA and a Cost Accountant, Dr Sahoo consciously and firmly walked out of corporate corridors to chase his dream of bringing innovation in learning. His aim: To mold the life of a child in a holistic manner.

And, on a bright sunny morning on April 4, 2008, SAI International School was born.

SAI INTERNATIONAL: WHERE EDUCATION MEETS EMOTION

There was a total of 3,350 private unaided schools across the 30 districts of the state of Odisha,⁹ as of 2014-2015. Of these, 641 were primary, 1,476 upper primary and 1,233 were secondary schools. The space was crowded and yet there was considerable room to create an institution rooted in the ancient Indian value system, where a child’s moral, academic, physical, psychological, emotional as well as spiritual needs could be addressed in a blended manner. And, that is the space on the K-12 turf that Dr Sahoo was keen to tap into with SAI International School. The school was to encourage students to look beyond books, think critically and creatively. There was undivided focus on life skills that would help students not just make informed decisions and communicate them effectively, but also acquire knowledge of self-management. They were taught to deal with other people’s emotions and develop emotional intelligence of their own.

SAI International School, now affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), began its journey with a teacher-student ratio of 3:1 in 2008, that was at 11:1 between 2011 and 2014, and that stood at 13:1 between 2018 and 2020, as seen in **Exhibit 4**. While academic excellence was one part of the focus, the other was about experiential learning by leveraging the power of state-of-the-art laboratories that the school had – for advanced robotics, languages,

⁹ <http://opepa.odisha.gov.in/website/Achievement1.aspx>

mathematics, astronomy and entrepreneurship, apart from the science labs. The idea was to encourage the child to develop better cognitive and motor skills, take a practical approach to learning and acquire expertise in experimentation. SAI International made traditional methods of classroom teaching passé. An MHRD Survey of 2017 showed that in India only 24.3% of teachers depended on project-based or experiential learning to assess students.¹⁰

Apart from the regular curricula, there was a conscious effort to introduce subjects such as SAI Samskara (values) and SAI Happiness. SAI Samskara, offered to students in Grades I to VIII, was about inculcating moral values and helping with cognitive development of the child. SAI Happiness, as the name suggested, helped students find the purpose of life, dwell on matters that helped attain happiness and build a strong character. SAI Global Studies and SAI Netritva (leadership) were some of the other subjects in the curricula. To help SAloneers (as the students were referred to) imbibe leadership qualities, the school made leadership education a part of the main curricula. The leadership program trained the students to fight fear, set priorities, manage time and learn by observing. To give the students a better world view, the SAI Global Studies program imparted knowledge on different economies, cultures and traditions, thereby helping them acquire an in-depth knowledge of the world around us.

The school recognized the need to groom the child in a way that s/he could adapt to the globalized world seamlessly. The Global Immersion Programme (GIP) was a step in the direction. It was intended to provide universal, hands-on learning experience by letting students visit multinational companies such as Facebook, Google, Apple, Microsoft to see how they worked real time. The program also included visits to reputed institutions of the likes of Harvard, NASA, and Stanford.

True to the spirit of holistic learning, SAI International School made sports and other extra-curricular activities as important a part of learning as the academic subjects. From music, visual art, drama, design technology, yoga, meditation, football, basketball, tennis to horse riding – there was a plethora of activities for students to pick and choose from to inure the mind and the body. To acquire true sporting qualifications, the school emphasized on obtaining excellence in both theory and practical aspects of physical education. In 2020, the then Sports Minister of India, Kiren Rijiju had said that sports was also an education and it could not be treated as an optional subject.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/74-indian-teachers-bank-on-homework-to-assess-students-mhrd-survey/articleshow/67365853.cms>

¹¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/more-sports/others/new-education-policy-will-have-sports-as-part-of-curriculum-kiren-rijiju/articleshow/76318749.cms>

SAI school trained its teachers along with the students. Global and local eminent experts were invited to train the faculty members on methods of imparting a holistic education. The topics would range from development of conceptual, intellectual and subject-specific skills, knowledge of generic and transferable skills to helping student acquire motivational values. As part of its educating the educators initiative, the school equipped teachers with the skills to train students to inquire, imagine and invent. Educational workshops, national level training programs as well as scholarships were designed for teachers to refine their skills and to motivate them to deliver high quality teaching in classrooms.

The school straddled value-based, traditional learning on the one hand with technology-based learning on the other. For a smooth and seamless working of various functions, SAI International had integrated technology into its processes. This, they had done in the pre-pandemic era itself. Digital technology and information technology were integrated into the curricula at various levels. The school used Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solutions, Learning Management Systems (LMS), an e-Content Management system as well as a Student Academic Management System (SAMS) to systematically review and devise a research-based school improvement model. With the COVID-19 crisis making physical presence in school for teachers, students and other staff impossible, some of the technology innovations, such as the SAI Cloud School, came in handy.

EMBRACING LEARNING BY DOING

SAI International School was built on the three “Cs” of continuous learning (of both students and teachers), continuous innovation and continuous collaboration. The student was at the heart of the system of education that the school chose to impart. The happiness quotient of the child and their sense of fulfillment in acquiring that education was, therefore, high on the radar – much like the “quiet laughter” that Lincoln had spoken about. The school looked to empower the child more emotionally and ethically than cognitively. Lessons in altruism were not an imagined, but an integral part of their character building. With more than 85% of a child’s brain developing in the formative years, before the age of six, socio-emotional-ethical development was recognized as a pivotal part of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) by the NEP as well.

Embodying SAI International’s notion of continuous learning and holistic development of the child was its 360-degree report card, samples of which are seen in **Exhibits 5 (a) and (b)**, that captured the ethos of combining the creative with the cognitive. The 360-degree report card was not just data driven, but the purpose was also to have a value-based evaluation metric by adding SAI Samskara as part of the curricula. What SAI International introduced in the year 2009, was put in action a decade later by NEP 2020. NEP proposed a 360-degree, multi-dimensional report

that “reflected in great detail the progress as well as the uniqueness of each learner in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.”

Based on a theory of change that neither followed nor glorified silos, SAI International School focused on being the grooming ground for “leaders of tomorrow.” Inspired by the open school models of the US, the school kindled the “innovator” in the students by a process of continuous creative thinking and by encouraging them to take ownership of projects they handled. Adhering to the principles of “learning by doing,” SAI International School created a concept whereby 50% of the school area was dedicated to various labs. The mantra was unequivocal: Learn to lead. The holistic approach, the plethora of academic subject choices calibrated by a dynamic, non-academic curricula was the starting point. The value the school tried to instill was that every student must learn to operate in this globalized world and environment, learn to lead from the front and, eventually, give back to the state of Odisha something of value. Dr Sahoo threw more light on the theory of change he proposed:

“Of the 600 children who passed out of SAI International, at least 100 become entrepreneurs. And, these 100 children can create at least 100 employment opportunities. So, every year my students alone can create 10,000 jobs. We can together be the job creators, rather than be job seekers. Every child is taught to believe that s/he can go abroad if s/he so chooses, imbibe the international models and bring them back home. It will probably take another 10 years to ingrain that in every bloodstream of my institution, but I am sure in the next 10 years I would have created that sort of process where these experiences will converge into the institution. The next set of people who can go and bring these learnings back, is in the making.”

The school built a macro framework of workability and acceptability and then created a rubric of the micro framework on top of that. Skill training – be it with sporting events, quizzes, debates or cultural activities – were fused with behavioral aspects such as developing healthy eating habits, a spiritual bent of mind and showing respect for the elders and the Indian value system. The urge to nurture the young minds led to the creation of the SAI International Residential School (SIRS) that offered a flexible, real-time, interactive and personalized learning environment. The idea was to go beyond the constricted period of eight hours a day and make it a round-the-clock learning experience. The school understood the critical need for social and emotional learning (SEL) that a 24X7 proximity with the students could ensure. It emerged out of the intent to develop an interpersonal bond and communication with the students, help them imbibe empathy and sensitivity, show respect towards the myriad cultures of the world and understand that the contours of education went well beyond employment. And that it was more about empowerment.

UNESCO has recognized SEL as a 21st Century skill that had its origins in emotional intelligence. It said SEL activities were powerful competencies as they had shown to facilitate learning, build emotional resilience, promote pro-social behavior and instill pluralistic thinking.¹² Schools made SEL a part and parcel of the curricula so as to create future-ready citizens, who had mastered skills needed for the future such as interpersonal communication, empathy and decision-making.

While value-based and emotion-based learning were the bedrock of their curricula, SAI International School did not let meritocracy get compromised at the altar of values. Academic excellence remained in sharp focus. Its seamless system of academic monitoring through SAMS, helped the school bag the SKOCH Order-of-Merit Award¹³ 2018 and the SKOCH Smart Education Bronze Award 2018. SAI alumni had left their mark at world's leading institutes such as Georgia University of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Carnegie Mellon University, Nanyang Technological University, amongst others. The school had to its credit several state and regional toppers from Grade XII between the years 2011-2012 and 2019-2020, as seen in **Exhibits 6 (a) and (b)**, many of them securing top ranks in the Indian Institutes of Technology-Joint Entrance Examination (IIT-JEE) exams, the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), Common Law Admission Test (CLAT) and Common Proficiency Test (CPT). In 2020, for instance, SAI International School had two rank holders in IIT-JEE Advanced (Ranks 2nd and 4th) and several SAioneers secured places amongst the Top 50 in NEET.

PARENTS AND TEACHERS: PARTNERS IN HAPPINESS DRIVE

The two key pillars of SAI International School's teaching-learning process were the parents and the teachers. The foundation of the school was strengthened through a perfect blend of a strong partnership among parents, students and teachers. NEP 2020 recognized that for a stimulating learning environment it was important to sensitize teachers as well as parents "to promote each student's holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres." From the very start in 2008 itself, Dr Sahoo knew the buy-in of the parent was of paramount importance. He greatly valued their feedback to infuse transparency and accountability into the school's functioning. And, he implemented each of his vision with the "stakeholder first" mindset. He elaborated on this:

¹² <https://mgiep.unesco.org/article/sel-for-sdgs-why-social-and-emotional-learning-is-necessary-to-achieve-the-sustainable-development-goals>

¹³ Instituted in 2003, SKOCH Award salutes people, projects and institutions that go the extra mile to make India a better nation - <https://award.skoch.in/about-skochaward/>
The SKOCH Group is India's leading think tank dealing with socio-economic issues with a focus on inclusive growth since 1997 - <https://skoch.in/>

“I felt that if we held one hand of the child, the other hand should be held by the parent. They must completely be in sync with us. I had noticed that most schools were afraid of calling in parents. I, on the contrary, think that as it is a school (not a college) the ethos and decision-making is theirs. And, since the decision is taken by the parents, they should be aware of what the institution is doing. When the parent comes to the school, they must feel they are in charge. I believe in taking the parents along. The pivots are the parents and the students.”

The lessons in discipline and social skills were a shared responsibility too, Dr Sahoo believed. To have the parents as equal stakeholders in their initiatives and to weed out any element of surprise, the senior leadership of the school offered group presentations to the parents, apprised them of the processes being followed, the standards for benchmarking students and walked them through the various projects and programs the students would be a part of, right at the start of the academic year. The channel of communication with the parents was in an “always on” mode. The trust this helped build, made it easy for the school to take up fresh initiatives. The aim was to make the parents feel they were the partners, not merely the providers. From an ROI perspective too, this was a win-win for both sides. There was, of course, the financial part of the ROI that the fee structure, as seen in **Exhibit 7**, demonstrated. However, it was the value-based part of the ROI that the school made the parents see the worth of in terms of the holistic package offered – be it the state-of-the-art school infrastructure, the high faculty standards and expertise, the subject choices, the many options for extra-curricular activities and the overall flexibility/range the students could choose from.

One of the initial dilemmas Dr Sahoo faced was: How to build a team that would think like him, speak in his voice and articulate his vision? He knew this was an area he had to invest a lot of time and effort in because the buy-in of the teachers was as critical as the buy-in of the parent. His vision of creating a system of transformational education and an institution that would stand out in the crowd would certainly need teachers and faculty members that would be the fulcrum of that change. For starters, the teachers – the “knowledge enablers and pedagogic guides”¹⁴ - needed to understand that the approach to education in the school would be student centric, rather than teacher centric. Dr Sahoo explained how he accomplished that:

“I made all my teachers think differently. It took me at least two years to convince them about the idea of what SAI International would stand for and to build the entire team. And for that, I had to train them myself so that they could have a bond with the parents and

¹⁴ Education in a Post-COVID World: Nine Ideas for Public Action. International Commission on the Futures of Education. UNESCO.

the students. I also did several rounds of training to see the children are comfortable, the staff and the teachers are also comfortable. I told the teachers how we could add value to the report card, how we could make it different. Parents anyway know the child's marks. So, what value could we add to the report card that they, as class teachers, would feel proud to show to the parent. I wanted them to own this report card."

The teachers were encouraged to take initiatives that could facilitate multi-sensory teaching methods to help students develop tactile and kinetic memories as well as auditory and visual ones. The institution inspired teachers to come up with differential curriculum for different ages, based on the frameworks developed by the eminent American psychologist and educationist, Howard Gardener. His theories proposed that an individual possesses eight different intelligences like Visual-Spatial, Linguistic Verbal, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Logical-Mathematical, Musical, Body-Kinesthetic and Naturalistic. A student might excel in a single domain but can hold strength over other domains as well, as shown in **Exhibit 8**. This helped in developing "T-shaped" learning profiles for students, who would be extremely talented in a particular field but would harbor a horizontal breadth of interests towards multiple disciplines.

The ideation and creation of such exhaustive, value-added curricula and evaluation of the child came with its share of "grumblings" as these required extra hours of work and more heavy lifting. SAI leadership recognized the need for incentive compatibility of all involved stakeholders, especially the teachers, for successful achievement of their goals. Therefore, the school ensured dignity in compensation and profession for its teachers with elevated pay scales. Further, the school organization replicated an inverted pyramid model, which decentralized decision-making to the teachers. NEP 2020, too, has now proposed positive working environments and service conditions as well as continuous professional development for teachers. Several years ago, SAI International School had already incorporated teacher development in practice.

The school ensured continuous learning for the teachers by designing numerous refresher courses and workshops. The senior leadership team, which constituted of the Directors, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, and the Chief Technical Officer, amongst others also received professional development opportunities. They could undertake courses from reputed global institutes such as the Harvard Graduate School of Education, US; the British Council, UK; University of Nottingham, UK; Asian International College, Singapore; TEDA, Singapore, etc. Some of them also received prestigious foreign scholarships such as the Rhodes Scholarship. Regular training programs were conducted by local and global eminent experts on topics ranging from transferable skills, development of conceptual frameworks, intellectual and subject-specific skills, development of motivational values so as to help the teachers impart holistic education.

After years of grooming the teaching staff and creating the next line of leadership in the institution, Dr Sahoo was inspired to do more. He aspired to bring a change in the school education system of the country. His next vision was to create a teacher leadership academy - a center of leadership like the one in Nottingham University. His aim was to introduce refresher courses for school principals, vice-principals, administrators and others in the academia.

PROCESS-DRIVEN APPROACH: A LEAF OUT OF CORPORATE PLAYBOOK

A little more than a decade ago, when Dr Sahoo let go of a corporate life to chase his dream of bringing innovation in education, he left the corridors alright but retained the essential learnings from the corporate world. The worth and value of a process-driven approach, therefore, remained his mantra for setting up the institution. He had fathomed processes were more important than people and should there be ever a need for even the founder himself to move out, it shouldn't bring the institution to a grinding halt. SAI International School symbolized this by putting the processes, documentation and required structures in place. About 80% of the school activities were technology driven as well as data and analytics driven.

For every process created or a step taken, the four "W"s were clearly enunciated. 'Why' was it being done; 'what' would be the outcome of it; 'what' would the process be; and the 'way' it had to be implemented. The school ensured it had the operational excellence to manage the processes and make them work. Ownership, therefore, was a key part of SAI International's process-driven approach. There were clearly defined roles and policies. As a first step in that direction, Dr Sahoo himself trained the senior and middle-level leadership to help them understand how the institution's structure would be. He chose not to bring a trainer from outside because he did not want his philosophy to get lost in translation. To ensure a flawless process-driven environment from the start, it was essential to train the stakeholders and make them take the onus.

A clearly defined academic hierarchy for both SAI International School and SAI Angan, the pre-school, was at the heart of the process-driven approach, as shown in **Exhibit 9**. Inspired by the job selection structures that corporate organizations follow, Dr Sahoo demarcated roles to ensure no one was overburdened with responsibilities. He was very clear in his mind that the principal of the school need not be told to manage finances or deal with the staff and administrative issues. To steer clear of the usual pitfalls in school management, he took three effective steps. One, he demerged academic and administrative responsibilities, creating an administrative head role completely separate from that of the academic head role. Two, he hired a CA as the head of finance for SAI International School. And three, from among the teachers, he hired the person who was best in academics as the principal of the school.

POST-PANDEMIC PIVOTS

The year 2020 disrupted the education sector in a completely unimagined way, with schools across the world shutting down overnight. The sudden and shocking interruption in learning and teaching due to the pandemic was one that humanity had not seen since the Second World War. Like all educational institutions, SAI International School too faced unprecedented disruption. Yet, in this huge catastrophe, it saw an opportunity for “renaissance.” It was a life-changing opportunity to reimagine education. What came in handy at this hour of crisis were the digital tracking and analytics tools that the school already had in place for students, faculty members, processes and assessments. These helped them be nimble in embracing the structural changes in academic processes by leverage the smart schooling technologies and by moving the entire teaching-learning-evaluation system online.

SAI International had always pioneered in the mental and physical well-being of students and staff. The institution supported a dedicated wellness counselor with regular yoga and meditation classes. Amidst the pandemic, as the world struggled to cope up with the “new normal”, SAI realized there was a need to stay more connected with students so that there was no sense of panic among them. Along with academics, the creative and non-academic pursuits too were moved online. Be it music or drama classes, sports and club activities – everything was taken into the virtual sphere. There were e-summer camps too. The school organized alumni talk on weekends to keep the students adequately motivated. They did not lose sight of the fact that the happiness factor in remote learning had be sustained and adhered to more than ever before. The parent-teacher collaboration was also made more frequent.

To help teachers make the switch-over to the virtual world, SAI International created a training platform for them with the required technology. The school also ramped up their technology team to work round-the-clock on facilitating the teachers’ journey in particular and took the classes online with SAI Home School. Dr Sahoo believed that while it had been calamitous from a health perspective, it was able to break the stupor of indulging in routine activities and helped focus on big-ticket changes from the perspective of innovation in learning.

Madhusmita Dash, Head of the Department for English at SAI International Senior Secondary School, explained their journey following the COVID-19 crisis:

“There was a rigorous training for teachers on the IT platforms to be used. The agile nature of the institution, an expert IT team and our robust ERP and SAMS systems helped us make this switch. We learnt to create smart PowerPoint presentations, switched platforms as

and when required and embedded technologies in the teaching-learning processes at a fast clip. We also learnt the use of videos in teaching and made it more demonstrative and interesting for the students. And now, in fact, we find the online classes much easier to handle than the physical ones. As part of the post-pandemic shift, we introduced peer teaching, where one group of children would teach their peers on a given topic. We found that this not only led to a healthy competition, but also led to faster learning.”

SAI International was trying to create a virtual/online school like SAI Home School for the past two years. That process got accelerated due to the pandemic. It could create and make it run in flat six months. It was Dr Sahoo’s fervent desire to take the online school, modelled as an open school, to the remotest areas of Odisha. With a CBSE affiliation in place, he hoped to take the same quality of school education that SAI International offered to the children in the hinterlands at a nominal fee of INR 200 per month. Following the pandemic, SAI International also upgraded the SAI Cloud School, launching a Version 3.0 of it.

Regular townhalls with the Founder and Chairman, Dr Sahoo, was always a part of SAI International life. He had been doing that for the past 10 years. However, what changed were the hours and the frequency of those townhalls. Dr Sahoo felt a critical success factor post the COVID-19 crisis was an increased frequency with which he interacted with both the students and the teachers, allaying their fears in an uncertain environment and boosting their morale. He made himself available for 12 hours of calls to stay better connected. While he could connect with a maximum of 100 teachers in a pre-pandemic world, he could do so with 600 post the pandemic. The longer hours and the deeper, more focused connects worked as a confidence-building mechanism for the institution as a whole.

All teachers acknowledged that the key factors that kept them going were: The Chairman’s words of motivation and appreciation via the townhalls, the freedom to initiate and execute any project of their choice and the opportunity to develop managerial skills.

The UNESCO report on ‘Education in a Post-COVID World’ said education and learning were about human interactions, dialogue and exchange. Education could not be defined and controlled by content and methods built outside of the pedagogical space and outside of the human relationships between teachers and students. The COVID-19 crisis showed us that the right to education needed to be resourceful, flexible and adapted to different contexts and to the needs of changing societies. SAI International School strived to espouse such attributes of teaching and learning throughout the pandemic.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The green shoots of a learning “institution with a difference” had first appeared in 2008, when the world itself was a different place. The SAI International School of 2021 was one that had not only survived a pandemic, but also reinvented itself as it navigated through this storm. There were growth dilemmas that stared SAI International in the face. Having made a mark for itself in the education sector, was it time to scale operations and weigh in on expansion, especially to stave off competition and future vulnerabilities?

The only “expansion” worth a mention in 13 years had been the opening of the SAI residential school. Although there were plans for the first lateral expansion with the launch of SAI International School in Cuttack, Dr Sahoo was determined “to be grounded” in Odisha.

“Expansion is not the solution right now. There has to be a Center of Excellence. If I expand in the name of the brand, the brand gets diluted. Unlike business, education is not a replicable model. In education, it takes years to create and replicate. Education is human resource and the mission and vision of the institution has to be ingrained in that human resource. If I go for an expansion in a few years from now, I will have a team and a leader ready from the current crop I have groomed. It will not take me another 10 years to build that institution. That is why in the past 10 years I went slow on expansion.”

SAI International School, which would get 3,000-4,000 student applications a year, could accommodate only 25% of those and had to reject the remaining 75%. This was an improvement over the 90% rejection rate in the first few years of its inception.

Based out of Bhubaneswar in Odisha, the school needed to conquer another frontier: That of regional diversity. Except for a handful of students who enrolled from Bihar and Jharkhand, there was no national representation of students really. What kind of a regional diversity could SAI International aim to achieve? Would a national expansion help the school build a pan-India presence? Should it be a vertical expansion for the school (in terms of depth of skills or building areas of expertise) or should it grow more horizontally with building new campuses nation-wide? In the next five years, should SAI International create an international presence as well? Thirteen years on, these were some of the questions that were once again keeping Dr Sahoo awake at night.

EXHIBITS

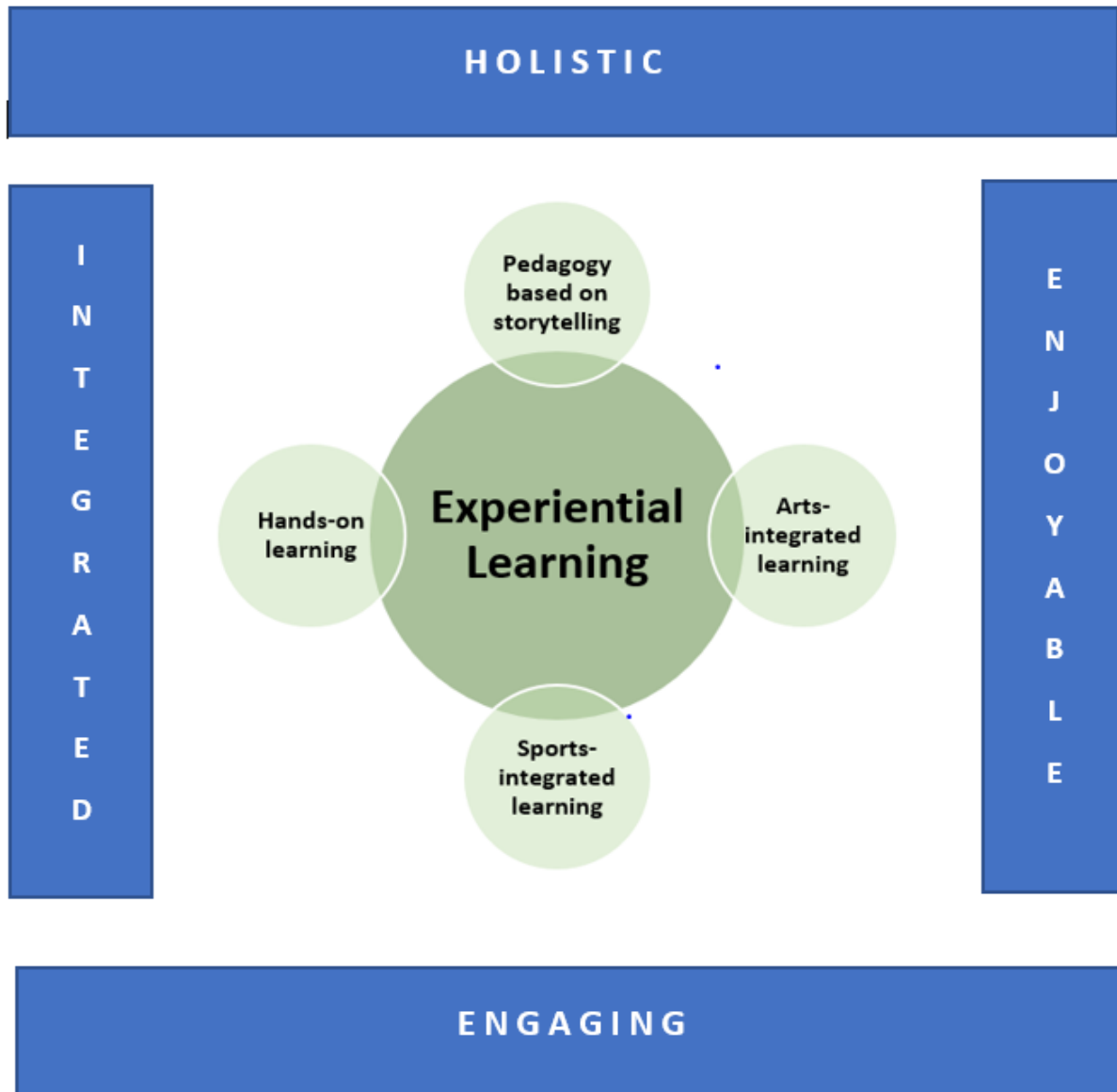


Exhibit 1: Key Tenets of NEP 2020.

Source: https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

The Indian High School-Group	Dubai
Birla Public School – Doha	Qatar
Gombe Junior School	Uganda
PAP Community Foundation	Singapore
Centurion University	Australia
Brooklyn Technical High School- Brooklyn	Brooklyn, New York
The Hockaday School	Dallas, Texas
Chosen Hill School	England
UCDavis - University of California	California, US
The Glasgow Academy	UK
Knowledge Universe	Singapore
Asian International College	Singapore
Singapore Management University	Singapore
National University of Singapore	Singapore
Nanyang Technological University	Singapore
Institute of South Asian Studies	Singapore
Busy Bee	Singapore
SIM Global Education	Singapore
Institute of Business Management	UK
Robert Gordon University	Aberdeen, Scotland
Windsor High School and Sixth Form	UK
Manchester Business School	UK
Central College-Glasgow	Scotland, UK
Greenfield Community School	Dubai
Trinity College	London
Staffordshire University	UK

Queen Margaret University	Edinburgh, UK
University of Edinburg	Edinburg, UK
Webster University	Thailand
London South Bank University	London
The Ridings Federation of Academies	Bristol
George Spencer Academy	Nottingham
Bristol Brunel Academy	Bristol, UK
Bristol Metropolitan Academy	Bristol, UK
John Cabot Academy	Bristol, UK
National College on School leadership	UK
Yate International Academy	South Gloucestershire, UK
Winterbourne International Academy- Bristol	Bristol, UK
UAspire-London	London
University of Exeter- UK	UK
The Red Maid's School- UK	UK
New Castle University-UK	UK
Birmingham University- UK	UK
Scotland Colleges-UK	UK
London Business School –London	London
South Tames College- Scotland	Scotland, UK
Edinburgh Napier University-	UK
University of West of England-	England
Arizona State University- Arizona	Arizona, US
Churchdown Village Infant School- UK	UK
Cass Business School City University London	London
Chosen Hill School	Gloucestershire, UK
University of the Art Harriot Watt University	UK
3DI School	Hyderabad, India
University of Bath	UK
University of Massachusetts	Dartmouth, US

The Queen Katherine School	UK
Fuzhou Foreign Languages School	China
Camden Junior School	UK
Highlands High School	US
Corsham Primary School	UK
Trinity Primary School	UK
Finham School	UK
Fujian Provincial Experimental Kindergarten School	China
Fujian Experimental Kindergarten	China
Xiamen University	China
No.1 Kindergarten of Fuzhou Providence	China
Xiamen No.5 Middle School	China
Fuzhou No. 1 Middle School	China
High School Affiliated to Yunnan Minzu University	China
Yunnan Minzu University and the first e-School	China
Shanghai Minhang Qiangwei School	China

Exhibit 2: Schools Around the World Dr Sahoo Visited.

Source: SAI International School Database.

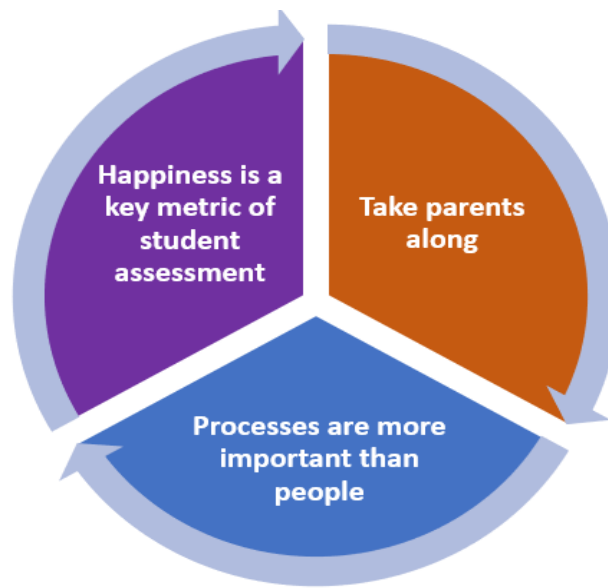


Exhibit 3: Three Key Learnings.

Source: SAI International School.

Year	Teacher	Student	Ratio
2020	369	4719	13:01
2019	362	4700	13:01
2018	344	4430	13:01
2017	337	4132	12:01
2016	319	3938	12:01
2015	301	3553	12:01
2014	264	2936	11:01
2013	218	2443	11:01
2012	186	2132	11:01
2011	160	1704	11:01
2010	137	1275	09:01
2009	125	788	06:01
2008	103	265	03:01

Exhibit 4: Teacher-Student Ratio.

Source: SAI International School Database.



STUDENT SKILLS COMMENTS

English	Performance			Effort		
Parameter	MS	SP	NW	MS	SP	NW
Comprehension	😊			😊		
Activities	😊			😊		
Hand Writing	😊			😊		
Pronunciation	😊			😊		
Vocabulary	😊			😊		
Recitation	😊			😊		
Reading	😊			😊		
Oral Expression	😊			😊		
Grammar		😊		😊		
Spelling	😊			😊		
Picture Composition	😊			😊		

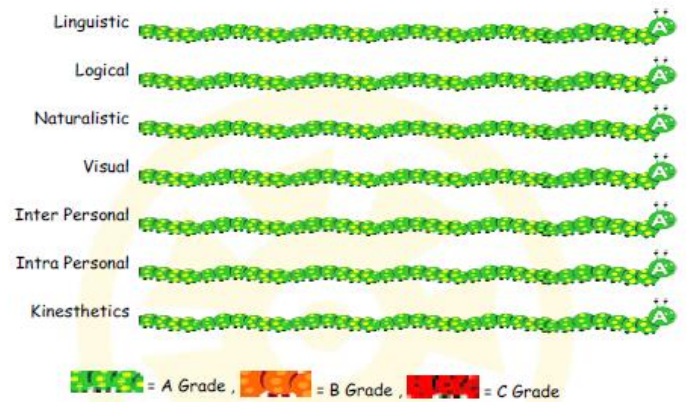


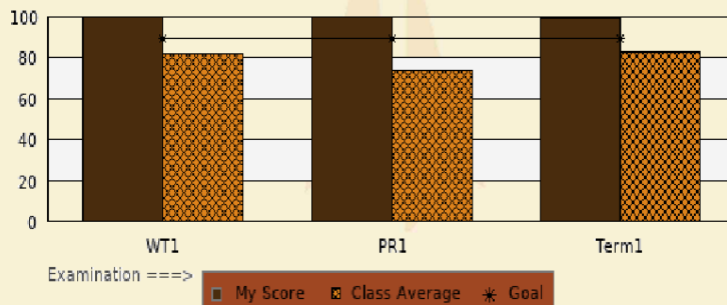
Exhibit 5 (a): The 360-degree Report Card for Kindergarten.

Source: SAI International School.

Physics

Particulars	WT	PREP	Term 1		
Max Marks	25	35	Th(70)	Pr(30)	Total(100)
Marks Obt	25.00	35.00	69.00	30.00	99.00

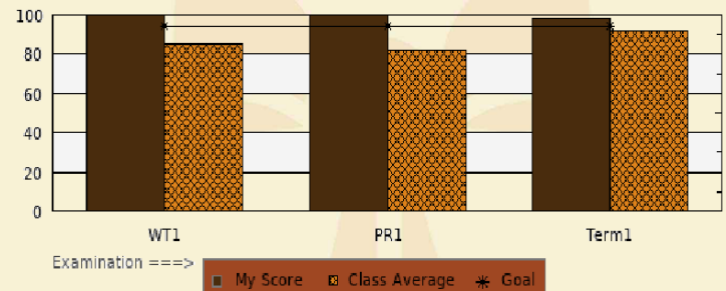
Parameter	Grade	Comment
Reasoning Skills	A	Has an analytical bent of mind along with critical thinking ability of concepts in Electric dipole and Magnetic field based on BSL.
Understanding and use of Scientific Terminologies	A	Has a good command over different scientific terminologies with thorough understanding.
Experimentation and Lab Skill	A	Handles apparatus in a sensible and responsible manner while performing the experiments like Meter Bridge, Figure of merit of Galvanometer etc.
Conceptual Clarity	A	Has outstanding knowledge in the concepts of Electric flux, Drift velocity and problem solving on Kirchhoff's Laws.



Mathematics

Particulars	WT	PREP	Term 1		
Max Marks	25	40	Th(80)	Pr(20)	Total(100)
Marks Obt	25.00	40.00	78.00	20.00	98.00

Parameter	Grade	Comment
Logical Thinking	A	Has excellent logical thinking in Inverse Trigonometric functions & Limits.
Problem Solving	A	Implements solution strategies accurately.
Class Room Performance	A	Solves assigned task very fast with accuracy.
Conceptual Clarity	A	Is conceptually very clear in Limits & Derivatives.



Dance Odissi

Particulars	Term 1		
Max Marks	Th(30)	Pr(70)	Total(100)
Marks Obt	30.00	65.00	95.00

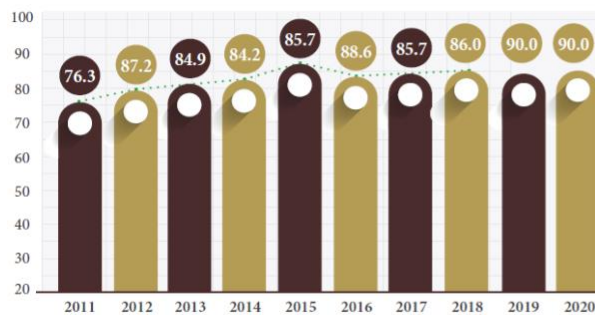
Parameter	Grade	Comment
Rhythm Sense	A	Has an excellent ability to internalize basic rhythm and pulse
Listening Skills	A	A perfect active listener in the class
Sense of Follow Up	A	Practices with patience and completes all assignments.
Performance Skills	A	Is an excellent and enthusiastic performer.
Expression Skills	A	Has impressive and perfect expression skills.

Exhibit 5 (b): The 360-degree Report Card for Grade XII.

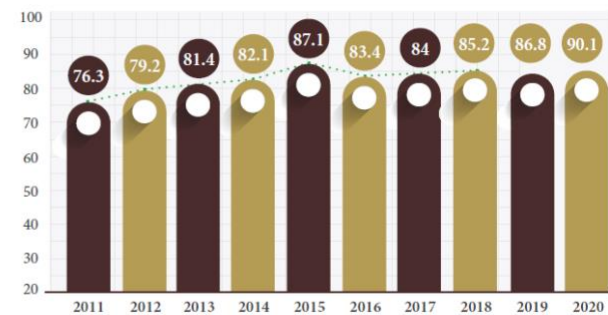
Source: SAI International School.

Regional & State Toppers From Grade XII			
Academic Year	Names	Marks Obtained (in %)	Topped
2011-2012	Risha Bagchi	95.6	Region
2012-2013	Shreya Somani	96	State
2013-2014	Vishal Aditya Sahoo	97.2	State
	Vikram Aditya Sahoo	97	State
2014-2015	Ishani Das	97.4	State
	Raghav Kothari	97.4	State
2015-2016	Sandeep Pattnayak	97.4	State
2016-2017	Soumya Shambhavi	98.4	State
2017-2018	Pranav Manie	98	State
2018-2019	Khusi Gupta	97.8	State
2019-2020	Sanskriti Pattnaik	98.8	State

Exhibit 6 (a): Grade XII Merit Listers.
Source: SAI International School Database.



*School Average of Class X CBSE
Board Exam from 2011 - 2020*



*School Average of Class XII CBSE
Board Exam from 2011 - 2020*

Exhibit 6 (b): School Average of Grades X and XII, 2011-2020.
Source: The Coffee Table Book. SAI International School.

Grade	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
I	66996	75000	77400	82800	82800	85200	85200	85200	99000	99000	102000	97500	106140	113520
II	66996	75000	77400	82800	82800	85200	89400	93900	112200	112200	102000	97500	106140	113520
III	66996	75000	77400	82800	82800	86400	89400	93900	112200	112200	112200	97500	106140	113520
IV	72996	82200	83400	88800	88800	90600	94200	99000	118200	118200	123000	117180	127560	136560
V	72996	82200	83400	88800	88800	92400	94200	99000	118200	118200	123000	117180	127560	136560
VI	72996	82200	83400	88800	88800	92400	94200	99000	118200	118200	135000	117180	127560	136560
VII	72996	82200	83400	88800	88800	92400	97800	102600	119400	123600	135000	117180	127560	136560
VIII	72996	82200	83400	88800	88800	92400	97800	102600	119400	123600	135000	117180	127560	136560
IX	0	84000	95400	99600	99600	102000	105000	109800	130800	130800	143400	138060	150300	160800
X	0	84000	95400	99600	99600	102000	105000	109800	130800	130800	143400	138060	150300	160800
XI	0	96000	107400	114000	114000	102000	107400	113400	119400	131400	155400	136860	149100	160800
XII	0	96000	107400	114000	114000	102000	107400	113400	119400	131400	155400	136860	149100	160800

Exhibit 7: Annual Composite Fees (in INR).

Source: SAI International School Database.

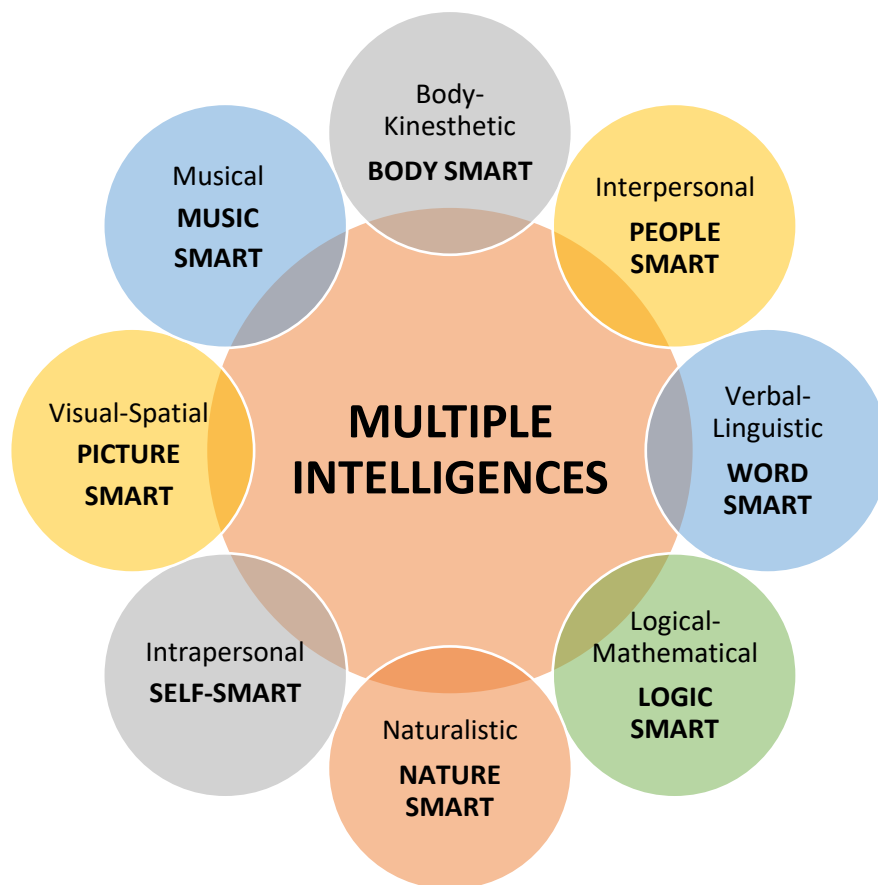


Exhibit 8: A Visual Representation of the Howard Gardener Multiple Intelligence Model

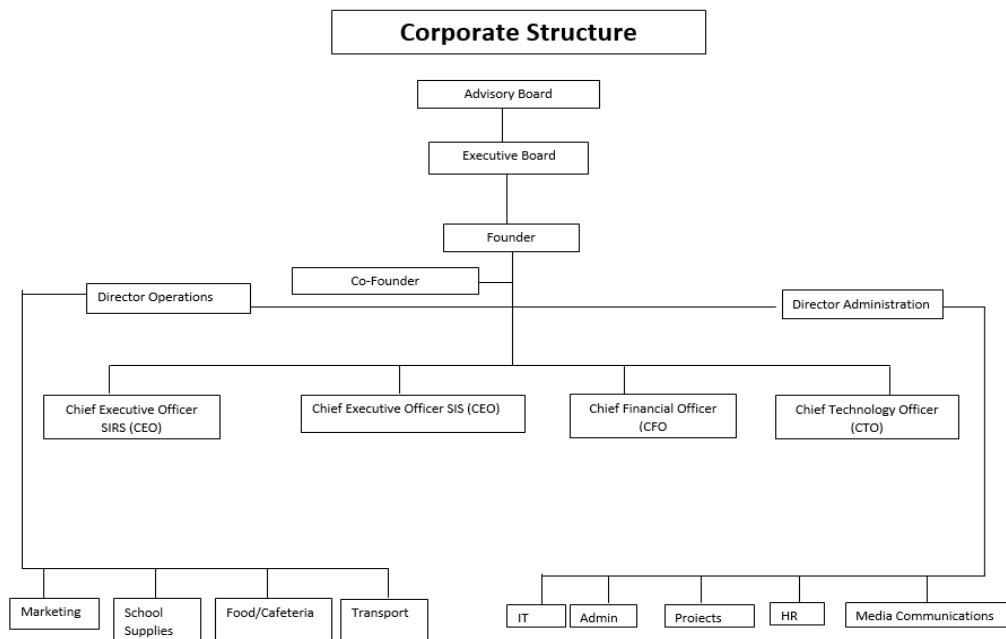
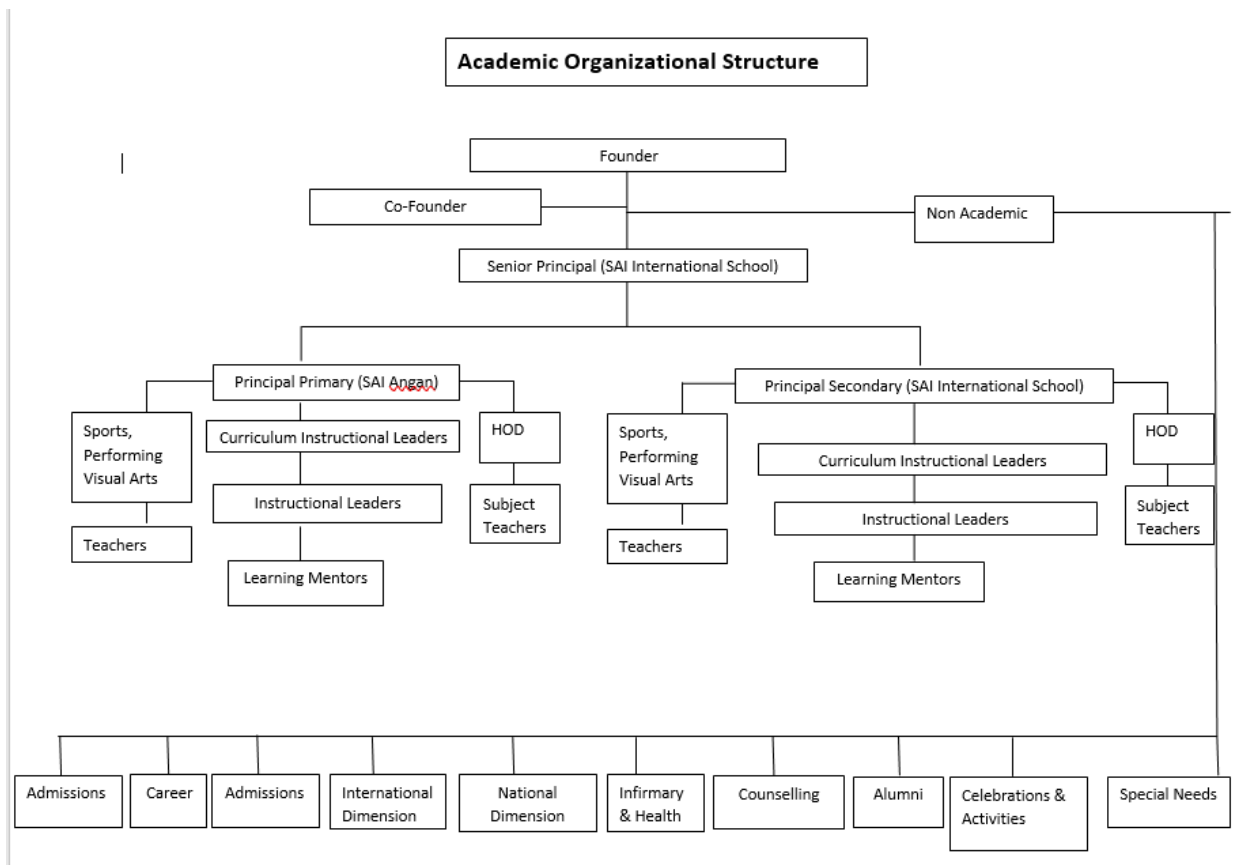


Exhibit 9: Academic and Corporate Organizational Structures.

Source: SAI International School.

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