Governor Mifflin School District (GMSD) is located in a small suburb adjacent to the city of Reading in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Considered to be a larger suburban school district in the state, GMSD has a total student population of approximately 4,100 students dispersed throughout six school buildings.¹ One high school in the district houses grades 9-12, one middle school houses grades 7-8, one intermediate school houses grades K-4, with the district’s PreK program also housed in Cumru Elementary School.² Overall, the district reports a 45% Free and Reduced Lunch Program eligibility rate, while the racial distribution of the student body is 68% White or Caucasian, 21% Hispanic, and 6% African American, with an additional 4-5% of students reporting as Two or More Races, Asian, or Other.

In order to meet the demands of today’s learners and to prepare them for their future, GMSD school leaders have committed to a vision of connecting every student to the world beyond the classroom or school. Achieving this vision means providing learners (and teachers) with the tools and resources to break down the walls of the classroom. The school district has already begun moving away from some of the long-standing educational practices, changing fundamental operational structures in the way that their systems work to create a customized learning model that truly places students at the center of their educational experience.

Connecting to the World
In recent years, the Governor Mifflin School District has been focused on providing learning opportunities for students that open doors beyond the classroom. While other schools talk about their “1 to 1” student-to-device initiatives, leaders at GMSD such as the district’s Director of Teaching and Learning, Lisa Hess, have a different perspective. “Here, we are ‘1 to World,’” she said. The school district has implemented a one-to-one Chromebook distribution across all grades K-12; Hess explained that giving students such access can expand the opportunities for students and teachers alike. Through their “1:World” effort, the district aims to “enrich and engage learning experiences for students, to prepare students for the ever-changing job market, and to reach all students by providing a more personalized learning experience.”³

The district’s work to leverage computing devices, digital curriculum, and varied learning modalities for students has paid off in an increase of choice available for learners and families alike. GMSD offers students three primary learning modalities: traditional classroom instruction (with technology-enhanced experiences), formal blended learning opportunities, and fully online opportunities.

The Quest for Student-Centered Learning
Building upon their existing success, GMSD school leaders have continued to push hard to make the educational experience even more truly student-centered. As they worked to refine their vision of how they could build on their existing structures, yet put students more firmly in the driver’s seat, GMSD leadership looked for examples of how other schools were tackling the issue. High School Associate Principal, Tony Alvarez, noted that GMSD teams visited other school districts in Pennsylvania who are effectively implementing customized learning as well as studying what other progressive schools are doing outside of Pennsylvania. Alvarez said, “The book Inevitable by [Charles] Schwahn and [Beatrice] McGarvey inspired the concept of customized learning here at our school, and Students at the Center guided our course

² https://www.governormifflinsd.org/
³ https://sites.google.com/a/gostangs.org/mrs-hess/1-world-pilot-program
development.” Specifically, the aspects of student voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery related to the curriculum and the associated learning experiences are continuously being woven into the design and delivery of the school district’s courses.

As GMSD administrators and teachers continued to shape their own unique vision of customized learning, the name of the program gradually evolved into what is now called the “Student-Centered Learning Experience” or as most in the district call it, “SCLE.” The administrators and teachers leading the development of the SCLE program recognized early in the process that even though they have seen several great student-centered learning models in action in other school districts, they knew that their student-centered learning program needed to be customized to meet the needs of GMSD students. As one teacher stated, “The unique aspect about our journey is that we have taken an idea that we [first] learned about at a conference and tailored it to meet the needs of the current students in which we serve.”

Launching the SCLE Pilot Program
After approximately one year of thoughtful conversations with the district’s school board, leadership, and many of the high school teachers, the district launched their SCLE pilot at the start of the 2018-19 school year. This inaugural year included nearly 50 tenth grade students, 17 teachers, and a team of high school administrators and support staff, all of whom made the commitment to work collaboratively together to grow and shape the program. Currently, high school teachers and administrators meet every Monday as a reflection time to dialog and assess the successes and challenges in order to be able to adjust the program quickly. Alvarez added, “We are right where we need to be in terms of our growth. Because it is smaller group, we have the ability to react [to challenges] pretty quickly, and so we do. This particular group [in this first year of the program] are pioneers.”

So far, the collaborative approach to the design and implementation of SCLE has resulted in high levels of satisfaction for students and teachers alike. Teachers within the SCLE program employ a mix of approaches including traditional instruction, blended learning, and self-directed online learning depending on what an individual student needs or wants. Teachers and students embrace the concept of anytime, anywhere learning, which has resulted in students becoming more self-directed and developing a greater degree of agency in their learning. With the availability of computing devices introduced through the “1:World” initiative, teachers have also developed courses that include digital learning experiences and competency-based learning progressions. These courses are developed “in-house,” primarily using open education resources (OER), which enables more self-directed student learning and places teachers in the role of “learning architect” of the student experience, customizing based on the needs and interests of each student.

According to one high school administrator, “The students involved in the SCLE are really stepping up!” With guidance from assigned teacher advisors, students quickly recognized that this model of student-centered learning requires a different mindset in order to be successful. One student explained that higher degrees of self-discipline are needed to be successful in the SCLE. She elaborated, “It is possible for you to procrastinate too much where you fall behind [in your work]. You need to have the mindset to get the work done, even if you don’t feel like working sometimes.” Despite the greater levels of responsibility for ownership over their learning, students understand the value of being given the opportunity to learn within the SCLE. “I like to come to school now. I don’t feel anxious about school anymore because I can control more things,” reported one student. Another student commented, “You have to be willing to do the work and be responsible for yourself. You can’t walk into this thing thinking it is going to be easy… [but] the challenge is worth it!”

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6 Ibid.
School Operations: Breaking the Traditional Model

Shifting to a truly student-centered learning environment that encourages self-pacing and competency-based learning progressions often conflicts with existing school operations and structures. Clearly, this initial group of students and teachers involved in the SCLE has broken away from the constraints of the schedules and pacing of the traditional GMSD education program. School leaders and teachers continuously work together to fit this new learning model into an existing traditional structure.

One of GMSD’s greatest challenges to implementing SCLE within an existing traditional school model was adjusting teacher and student schedules. For example, they found that providing higher levels of autonomy and self-directed learning required that the students no longer be locked into short 45-minute class periods. Additionally, when moving to a competency-based model, course enrollments could not continue to be based on seat time driven by the traditional academic calendar; instead, course enrollments had to be based on the progress of students toward the demonstration of content and skill mastery. The GMSD implementation team, in collaboration with students, successfully navigated this challenge by recruiting a core group of committed teachers whose schedules were carefully developed to support the program. Re-thinking the schedules of students was less of a challenge, but there was still a level of creativity needed to realize the benefits of the program.

Moving forward, more challenges are anticipated. As one of the GMSD high school administrators commented, “As the SCLE expands next year and the year after that, there will be a need for more and more teachers to become involved in the program, which will eventually impact schedules to a greater degree.” School leaders recognize that growing a new model of learning within an existing structure will become increasingly difficult as the model continues to break down traditional systems.

As student learning was being designed to be more self-directed and not constrained by a traditional bell schedule, GMSD teachers and administrators recognized that some existing learning spaces within the high school would need to be modified to accommodate both students and teachers. While many traditional classrooms remained structurally intact (with the exception of new furniture and equipment to facilitate individual and small group work), the implementation team devised a plan to convert an existing classroom to be a “learning commons” for students to work independently in a socially oriented learning space. Teachers and leaders repurposed what is now commonly known within the high school as “Room 210” as such a space. In this space, students are able to work independently or with their friends on projects and assignments. For some students, this room serves as a place to just relax and take a short break from school work. Regardless of how students choose to use “Room 210,” they are grateful to be there. “I feel like Room 210 is a privilege” claimed one student. Another student reported, “This program [and Room 210] makes me want to come to school more.”

“Room 210” is not the only informal learning space where the SCLE students can be found during the school day. Students may also be discovered sitting in the hallway or in available unused classrooms. It is the general philosophy of the teachers and administrators that learning can occur wherever the students want it to occur, so students in the SCLE program are trusted to act responsibly and move to a learning space that works for them. As the SCLE expands over the next few years to include more and more students, the creative structuring of student schedules as well as the redesign of learning spaces will also need to expand.

The Pathway to Program Expansion

The current SCLE program at Governor Mifflin School District is limited to approximately 50 tenth grade students. School leaders intended to keep the group small during its first year in order to work through the anticipated challenges and growing pains typically associated with implementing such a disruptive learn
ing model in their district. Highly encouraged and energized by the response thus far, GMSD intends to expand the program during the 2019-20 school year to include ninth and eleventh grade students with the intention that all Governor Mifflin students will have the option to be a part of the SCLE throughout their entire high school career.