

Interview with the CEO **20th September, 2006**

Tanglin Trust School's new Chief Executive Officer (CEO), **Steven Andrews**, was recently interviewed by the School's Head Boy, **Faisal Chaudhuri**, and Head Girl, **Eleanor Samuels** about his views on education and his life in Singapore.

Mr. Andrews took over leadership of Tanglin Trust School from mid-August 2006. He gained post graduate qualifications in education from the University of Leicester after working in industry in England, the USA and Japan. He served as Headteacher of the high-achieving Sandringham School from 1988 till 1997 and then commenced a distinguished career in education in central government as a Senior Education Adviser, and in local government as a Deputy Director and most recently Corporate Director of Education. Mr. Andrews spent significant childhood years in Singapore, when his father was on assignment in the country with the British Airforce.

Faisal Chaudhuri was born in the UK in 1988 and lived there for 8 years before moving to Singapore and starting at Tanglin. He enjoys rugby, football and listening to music and hopes to study Politics and Sociology at university.

Eleanor Samuels has been in Singapore and at Tanglin Trust School for the past five years. She was born in the UK in 1989 and has also lived in Japan and Australia. She enjoys swimming, playing the flute and jazz piano and reading. Her favourite subject is English and she hopes to study Law at university.

A transcript of the interview follows.

Q1. How has your family settled in to Tanglin?

They've settled in really well. It's hard not to in Singapore. Singapore is an easy country to be in. It's well organised, friendly, safe and central.

We have also been able to reconnect with Asia from previous times spent travelling. So this has helped too. Interestingly, I think there are similarities between Europe and Asia. Both are densely populated and full of cultural history. It is difficult not to travel 50 miles without finding something fascinating. Being fascinated means you are always learning and that makes settling-in an enjoyable experience.

Q2. You have been CEO since mid-August. What are your impressions of Tanglin?

Tanglin has a very positive environment. It's a remarkable school and has some astonishing achievements. The whole School should have confidence about these achievements because Tanglin truly stands alongside the very best. The three things that stand out for me about Tanglin are:

- The language of Tanglin is all about “we” and not “I”. It’s a very inclusive, trusting School showing faith in people and giving responsibility.
- The students are always smiling and it is remarkable how much this really helps. It is immeasurably more welcoming when people are smiling. It’s a symbolic signaling that says “I’m here, you are not alone, I’m a friend, let’s talk”.
- Tanglin is energy-giving, not energy-taking. The default mode for students in Tanglin is positive – they want to share and add things to the School.

Q3. What attracted you to Singapore and to Tanglin?

Many things attracted me to Tanglin, but I’ll mention just three:

- 1) I spent some of my youth in Singapore and coming here presented a chance to reconnect with my childhood, which always has a magnetic pull.
- 2) It was a chance to revisit Asia, which is a region I have affection for – I lived in Japan after university.
- 3) Most importantly, was the role that I was offered at Tanglin at this point in my career. (Interestingly, I have found careers are something you look *back* on rather than something you are *doing*.) Tanglin presented a unique opportunity. It brought together my experience of school leadership and my political and commercial experience as well. Few jobs, if any, offer the chance to apply such a skill set. This was the most compelling reason.

Q4. What do you miss most about the UK?

At the moment I don’t actually miss much. What I do miss is my house in the mountains in France, which is lovely to be in when the snow is down and it’s minus 20° C. I miss all the things we do there, especially skiing, which I am very keen about. So is my family.

We also have a charming house in Keyhaven, right opposite the Isle of Wight, which I’ll also miss. In time, I suspect it will be the very *English* things that I will miss, such as morning papers, toasted crumpets, log fires and the football results at 5.00 pm. But this is a ‘nostalgic missing’, not real missing. I’ll also miss my friends and my routines, although I think routines can make you slightly conservative and there are new routines to learn and appreciate here. But having said all this, there are far more compelling reasons to stay here than be somewhere else. I will go to my home in the Alps at Christmas though, and ski.

Q5. During your time working as an Education Advisor for the UK’s Secretary of State for Education, what do you feel was the best advice you ever gave?

There are a couple of points to begin with. Firstly, I was not close to David Blunkett when he was

the Secretary of State for Education. As a senior adviser I worked in a team that had important contact and influence. However, I did, and do, know Estelle Morris (Secretary of State in the 2nd Blair administration) well, and we remain in contact and meet for dinner when we can.

Secondly, I was a Senior Education Advisor. Immediately following the 1997 election, in a groundbreaking move, we were told that the Prime Minister wanted five people 'at the top of their game' from the 'outside world' to take up senior positions in the civil service. There was an audit commissioner, a top-level researcher, a senior member of OFSTED, a local government Chief Inspector and me, a Headteacher. We reported to Michael Barber, who went on to be the Prime Minister's Personal Advisor and is now part of an international consultancy collaborating, I understand, with Bill Gates.

The advice that I gave and felt most strongly about was not always popular. The basics really mattered - to the new Blair government. But I believed there was space for more expressive learning as well. I also believed relationships in schools – or any organisation - are key to unlocking motivation for learning and enthusiasm for teaching. At the time the government was focused on the literacy and numeracy scheme, quite rightly because standards were far too low, and this had my full support but I advised success called for more. And more did come later. I was the only Headteacher at the time and wish I had been more robust about what my experience told me was true.

I used to go into meetings as the only one with direct experience of school headship and, whilst the other people were remarkably bright, it was frustrating that they had no experience of schools. I did suggest possible internships at schools for people to grasp the reality of the situation. I did argue for an interest in structures (buildings) as well as standards which interestingly is a programme the government has now invested in with huge capital injections.

I suspect that during my time there I learnt more from them than they did from me. This is not false modesty; it was a powerful learning experience. I learned it is very hard to get change right; it's tough making the right call when a decision can impact on thousands. I think you need both humility and iron-will, having big ideas *and* the ability to achieve them by setting the right tasks. Ambition should not over reach the ability to deliver. I also made some lasting friends, many of whom I still meet with now.

Q6. What is the most difficult decision you have ever made?

The most difficult professional decision was to close two failing schools and merge them together. That was the bravest and hardest thing I've had to do. Personally, though, I have really enjoyed being a father and the whole experience that comes with that. Being a parent involves difficult decisions all the time!

Q7. Which football team do you support?

I support Newcastle because my wife comes from there and I come from everywhere and nowhere. So supporting Newcastle gives me some roots. I am always interested in the results and where the team is going with their game – especially as we have no Shearer any more.

Q8. What do you consider to be non-negotiable in education?

I think you have to enjoy the company of young people and understand schools.

A school is a business. It is in the business of education, but it is not a factory. We are dealing in the hopes and dreams of young people.

I also think it's important to have a deep personal regard for what the individual can become and, as an adult, to have humility in front of real ability and effort. You have to respect the journey young people are making.

Q9. They say you never forget a good teacher. Who is the teacher you will never forget and why?

Without a doubt, Frank Foreman. School was never easy for me and he always believed that I was capable of more. He was a Maths teacher and, whilst Maths was never really my strong subject, he got me to perform at an equally high level as my other subjects in my "O levels". He gave me the opportunity to prove I could get into the top set and really perform. I met him some years later and he is a genuinely nice man and it was a pleasure to get to know him.

Q10. If you were an animal what would you be?

I would be a giraffe because you can have your head in the clouds whilst having your feet firmly on the ground, which is something rarely possible! You would also have fantastic sights to the horizon and be able to see where you're going. Best of all I could have a long outrageous tie!

Q11. What past experiences do you have of travel in the area?

As a child living in Singapore my travel was very localised but, later on, I lived in Japan, and on the way back to the UK, I made my way through much of Asia. I stayed with some friends in Hong Kong and in 1977, I was part of the first organised tour group to go into China. There I witnessed the last stages of "the Peoples' Revolution", complete with uniforms, communes, bicycles and old-fashioned (big and Russian) hotels.

I also travelled through Malaysia, Thailand (where we stayed in atap huts on empty beaches), Indonesia, India and Nepal. Also, when I was younger (16), my father sent me hitch-hiking on military aircraft (starting with his RAF connections) around the world as a character-building experience. I fell in with an American aircrew just out of the Vietnam War and went all over this part of the world in their Strato-cruiser, including visits to places like Australia and New Zealand.

Q12. What is your position on capital punishment, living in Singapore?

I have to listen to the evidence which shows that, even when Britain was hanging people, for example, the worst murders didn't stop. For some people it seems just not to be a deterrent. I also have a Christian pull on me that says it isn't our right to decide who lives and who dies. Some crimes, though, are just beyond my understanding, and have pushed us all, in my view, to the edge of reason -especially when this involves crimes against children.

I like the strict understanding of right and wrong and the security of Singapore. Just before we left the UK a teenager was shot in a drive-by shooting. The UK is much more dangerous than Singapore; this means that children such as students at Tanglin will have to be much more aware of changing conditions outside this relatively safe environment.

Q13. What is your leadership style?

Good leaders, I believe, are characterised by a deep sense of personal humility and an intense will to get things done. I strive to be this good and try to learn from my mistakes and shortcomings. Leadership can be lonely, it is not a popularity contest, and the reward is in getting things right and improving - in this case - learning for students.

Q14. What would you like your legacy to be at Tanglin?

A legacy is not about popularity. At this very early stage there are three things that I would like to leave behind me: firstly, a **shared language** across the school about teaching and learning; secondly, a shared awareness of the power of **believing in young people**; and thirdly, the **positioning of Tanglin to accommodate the future**. But can you ask me again in a few years time...

The Head Boy, **Faisal Chaudhuri**, and Head Girl, **Eleanor Samuels**, then thanked **Mr. Andrews** for participating in the interview. Mr. Andrews congratulated Faisal and Eleanor on how they conducted the interview and said he would see them again soon.