

**E** DUCATING and shaping the minds of children and youth surely rank among the most purposeful of corporate missions. The KinderWorld International Group is adding yet one more dimension – sustainability.

Stefan Tan, son of KinderWorld founder and chairman Ricky Tan, took on the role of chief sustainability officer for the group in 2020. He is also executive director for business development.

"I believe sustainability will be a big thing ... For us, as an education company, it's not just a CSR (corporate social responsibility) activity."

"Sustainable development is important to help us stay resilient especially for a business that has expanded to numerous locations and conducts cross-border operations. With our future plans to be present in even more countries, this becomes an even more important consideration," he says.

For KinderWorld, the largest international school operator in Vietnam, the commitment entails not just green certification for schools and infrastructure, but the integration of sustainability elements into the curriculum, among others.

As background, KinderWorld traces its roots to Singapore, where Carol Tan, Mr Tan's mother and the group's executive director, started with a single childcare centre in 1986. At that time, Mrs Tan was a kindergarten teacher and the elder Mr Tan was a flight engineer with Singapore Airlines. By the 1990s, the company had begun to look outwards.

Around 2000, it made a determined push into Vietnam, starting with rented locations. By 2010, it had begun to invest in land and buildings. Today,

it is the largest owner/operator of foreign owned international schools in Vietnam with an estimated investment by KinderWorld and related entities of close to S\$120 million over the past two decades. The land on which its campuses sit spans around 20.78 hectares, of which 7.43 hectares is owned by the group.

Its network comprises 16 campuses in eight major cities, where it runs a through-train programme from kindergarten to pre-university. It has more than 600 teachers and roughly 3,800 students.

It operates through three brand names: KinderWorld International Kindergarten, Singapore International School and Singapore Vietnam International School. There are three major programmes – the International Programme, Integrated Programme and the Premium Vietnamese Education Programme, all of which offer various pathways to educational qualifications.

The Singapore International Schools, for instance, offer the International Programme from Year 1 to 12, with curriculum content and skills promoted by the Singapore educational system and international curricula. Students sit for the Primary Exams, the Cambridge IGCSE, the Cambridge AS/A Levels and/or complete the NCC Education Level 3 International Foundation Diploma for Higher Education Studies.

A Singapore curriculum renowned for academic rigour is part of KinderWorld's unique draw. Says Mr Tan: "We're the only one in Vietnam to offer a Singapore curriculum. Every other international school has a Western curriculum ... Vietnamese parents are very pro-academics. At the same time, for many who can afford it, their goal is to send their children to international universities."

**M** R Tan says his commitment to sustainability was shaped in graduate school. He started out with a desire to work in the hospitality industry, and he obtained a Bachelor of Business in International Hotel Management in Australia. This was followed by a graduate diploma in innovation and entrepreneurship from the University of Adelaide, and a Masters of Science in Tourism Management from New York University in 2017.

While he joined the group formally in 2018, he had been exposed to the business, at times joining his parents in exploratory missions in countries such as China and Kazakhstan.

"I was heavily influenced by sustainability. As you know, the hospitality industry has a big carbon footprint from its use of single-use plastics and tourism, among others. Vietnam is a developing country and will definitely head in the direction of sustainability."

He adds: "Sustainability, though a new concept, is gaining traction among parents.

# SUSTAINABILITY TAKES CENTRE STAGE IN EDUCATION

by Genevieve Cua

KinderWorld, the largest international school operator in Vietnam, is integrating such elements into its curriculum



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

"Sustainability, though a new concept, is gaining traction among parents. Parents care about the long-term sustainability of the school, in terms of its history and reputation, and future development plan."

Stefan Tan, chief sustainability officer at KinderWorld International Group



## LEARNING IN PROGRESS

1) KinderWorld runs a through-train programme 2) Students taking part in gardening activities 3) The land on which its campuses sit spans around 20.78 hectares 4) The group aims to continue to create different educational pathways for students

"Sustainability focuses on the preservation of nature, life support, and community while pursuing economic gains for individuals and society. Business families – with their long-term orientation and roots in local communities – naturally operate with sustainability principles in mind. These principles should be incorporated into every aspect of the business – from corporate governance and management, to physical spaces, operational processes, and products and services."

Dr Kenneth Goh, Assistant Professor of Strategic Management (Education), Interim Academic Director, Business Families Institute @ Singapore Management University

This column profiles business families and how they approach issues of governance and stewardship. They support the Business Families Institute's mission. SMU established BFI in 2012, in response to the growing needs of business families in Asia. It encourages business families to Think Generations, Think Growth, Think Giving and Think Global.

Parents care about the long-term sustainability of the school, in terms of its history and reputation, and future development plan. This helps them to ensure their child will be well taken care of in terms of education over the next six to 12 years of their lives.

"As parents nowadays hope that their children grow up to become global citizens, they also hope their kids receive an education on sustainability in an environment that champions the necessary character."

**M** R Tan says the group expects to incorporate three pillars of sustainable development – environmental responsibility, social responsibility and governance into every aspect of strategy and operations.

In terms of buildings and infrastructure, the group is seeking a US standard called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), which is more stringent than the Vietnam LOTUS standard. The relevant LEED standard will apply to new buildings, and existing ones will be upgraded progressively.

"We believe sustainability is fundamental to our operations and part of our DNA as a Singaporean company. Also, the technology incorporated into the buildings can be used to showcase to the students the possibility of comfortable living conditions while being green ... We're currently studying the technical capability of Vietnamese designers as well as the technology available in Vietnam to align with LEED's requirements."

So-called "super" or large schools will incorporate elements of sustainability and green architecture. These include maximisation of outdoor and green space for students, recycled rainwater and high efficiency electrical equipment. Buildings, for instance, will be orientated at angles to minimise energy consumption.

In the curriculum, the group partners Outward Bound Vietnam to instill the spirit of community service and environmental awareness. Its programmes include a three-day Leave No Trace course to raise awareness and encourage sustainable outdoor ethics.

**T** HE course principles include proper waste disposal, minimising campfire impacts and respect for wildlife. Both students and staff undergo such training to nurture bonding and leadership qualities.

Students are also encouraged to participate in programmes that build the spirit of community service and environmental awareness. The RISE Programme, for instance, aims to build a global community of future leaders, connecting youth with a network of peers, learning resources and mentoring opportunities.

The schools' STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculum also seeks to integrate sustainability principles. Students are also encouraged to organise their own activities in support of environmental causes. In 2019, the Bin It recycling project by Year 7 International was shortlisted from almost 300 entries in the Global Leaders Global Goals Competition, and was awarded a commendation in the category of impact.

KinderWorld, which temporarily shelved an initial public offering in Singapore in 2019, continues to cast its net wider, even as it sets out to further entrench itself in Vietnam. Says Mr Tan: "Our focus is to expand and invest in other Asean countries. Other areas of focus will be in the Greater Bay Area (Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau) and Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan."

It is open to various modes of expansion, including strategic alliances, joint ventures, acquisitions, and franchises that would "complement current and future businesses and be aligned with our longer term interests". In the pipeline is expansion into preschool franchising. In this respect it has established a franchisee selection and recruitment process, and also created a structured framework to train and support its franchisees.

It also aims to continue to create different educational pathways for students to attain their university qualification, so as to be able to tap a broad base of local and international students. These efforts include new partnerships with third party organisations to add value to, and enhance the educational offerings.

In these efforts, the integration of sustainability principles will surely enhance its standing not just as a partner and investor but also as a trusted educator for young minds. **11**

