

# Explo Elevate

## An Innovation Journey: Catholic Memorial School

When a school embarks on the road to reimagining itself, it embarks on a journey that is filled with exciting potential and, at the same time, fraught with obstacles. Innovation journeys are seldom straightforward or of short duration. They are more akin to climbing a mountain range rather than one mountain. EXPLO Elevate looks to identify schools that have found success at this work because their stories can be instructive for others. Here we will take a look at Catholic Memorial School, an all-boys Catholic day school in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, serving students in grades 7-12.

This report was based on 20 interviews with the president, board members, former and current teachers and administrators, support staff, students, and parents. EXPLO Elevate is grateful for the generous time and open and reflective conversations with these individuals.







## About the Author

David Torcoletti is a senior consultant at EXPLO Elevate. He began his career in education as a teacher, house parent, and coach at Northfield Mount Hermon School where he also served as a house head, Dean of Students and School Dean. From there, he moved to Milton Academy where he taught in the art department and was Dean of Students. He has consulted for independent schools, presented at numerous conferences, and coached independent school administrators.

## The Imperative: Innovate or Die

*After speaking with almost every administrator at Catholic Memorial (CM), one gets the impression of unalloyed excitement and deep fatigue.*

The transition that started seven years ago with the search for a new President continues now into the sixth year of Dr. Peter Folan's stewardship. "Continues" is the operative word because while everyone feels they have shifted into a new, better gear, one where ideas have form, and form has influence and effect, the journey still has miles to go.

A board member who was present during the search for the new President related that the feeling amongst most board members during the search period was "Innovate or Die." This board member, as well as others, could see that the school had become a "tired old Catholic school," with little to distinguish itself in the market. Many teachers tried hard and cared deeply for the boys, but the teaching style of "stand and deliver" with boys sitting at seats memorizing their lessons was inspiring no one.

The school had been a well-respected neighborhood Catholic school. It was especially loved by the part of town — West Roxbury — that sent its sons there for 62 years. But CM has always been what everyone interviewed called "under-resourced." Catholic school enrollment has been falling for a variety of reasons and the result is a fierce competition between schools for a smaller pool of students. Being "under-resourced" under these conditions felt like the first step toward a precipice that would eventually lead to oblivion.

So, survival was clearly a prime motivator at Catholic Memorial, but it was not the only one. Questions such as, "What is best for the boys?", "How do boys really learn?", and "How can we help them become good men?" did not seem like marketing talk or strategy. Almost every person with responsibility for the academic program (for either students or teachers) brought up those questions, and seemed to be using them as a kind of North Star, the answers being a destination towards which to aim the beloved old boat.

## The Making of a School Leader

**Peter Folan has a presence. He is a former college wrestler who is big in stature but nimble as he walks. His voice is loud and clear, but the way he talks invites conversation — he doesn't pontificate, and he doesn't pretend he knows all the answers. It is an attractive mix of confidence and humility.**

After graduating from college, Peter got his first teaching job at a boys boarding school in Connecticut. There, he had to do everything — teach, coach and live in the dorms. He was also hired to be the head wrestling coach, but no one told the former head coach about the change. The wrestling program had fallen on hard times, and he found himself thinking deeply about what was missing and what might help revive it. He attacked the program with good questions and a hardy dose of sweat equity by redesigning the former head coach's practices. Peter saw the running of practice the same way he saw the classroom, except it was even more exciting with even more immediate results. He sought out the most important student-athlete on the team, the captain, and asked him to buy in to the changes — to be a force for change and improvement. The captain responded, and within a short time, the team, after some dismal records, posted a winning season (14-6) and beat the New England Champions in a dual meet.

The prior head coach, now assistant coach, felt displaced, but Peter said he worked hard to handle that relationship with empathy, looking at it as an opportunity for both to grow. Peter found that early experience with change formative.



Peter Folan  
President  
Catholic Memorial School

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**It would have been a shame to waste a perfectly good crisis.”**

— Mickey Corso, Theology Department Chair

## Peter kept asking questions about the “why?”

### “Why this book, at this stage of the semester, to what end?”

Peter then went to the Belmont Public Schools to teach. Though parts of the job were rewarding, he didn't feel he knew the students deeply, and didn't like that the relationship with them ended most days at 2:25 p.m. Peter found himself ready to leave education and to work in another field. While considering that change, he was offered another job at an independent boys day school in the Boston area and was handed responsibility for the middle school English program.

As he had done with the wrestling program earlier in his career, Peter saw that that the English curriculum was more than a little stale. The anthologies that they were using were the same they had used when he was a kid. Peter kept asking questions about the “why?": “Why this book, at this stage of the semester, to what end?”

The answers he received from colleagues had more to do with precedence (“we have used this book successfully for years”) rather than an affirmation that this was the best book at this time, for these students. He changed the approach from a class reading a group of unrelated books to a theme-based approach such as “The Hero's Journey” using both stories and Joseph Campbell's writings on the Hero theme.

Peter eventually went on to work at Boston College (BC) in the Office of First Year Experience. During his tenure, Peter oversaw the freshman retreat program, which he grew into the largest in the nation. During his tenure at BC, Peter benefited from the mentorship of the President of Boston College, Father William P. Leahy, SJ. Guided by the advice of BC's President, Peter entered a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania.

Peter's coursework focused on higher education management and he wrote his dissertation on the impact of New England all-boys schools on the definition of masculinities that young men formed as they transitioned into college. One of the schools he studied was Catholic Memorial.

**When the CM president's job became available, an educational consultant reached out to him knowing he had studied the school.**



Middle School Students set sail (and paddle) on the Charles River in watercrafts of their own making. The event is a popular interdisciplinary Spring tradition.

## A School with a Chip on its Shoulder

*One employee who worked for Catholic Memorial for years, a self-described “jack of all trades,” feels strongly that the board, and the school in general, did not introduce Peter to the community in a way that would help him or the school.*

This employee believes that once Peter was chosen, a lot of work should have been done both inside and outside of the school to make his arrival — and the charge he had been given by the board — understood by all.

Members of the community both inside and outside of the school were saying things like, “He doesn't know us,” and “He wants to turn us into Belmont Hill.” Before the parents, alumni, and staff could really get to know Peter, the fears and rumors of impending change seemed to fill the community and the halls of the school.

A current parent with long ties to the community describes CM as always having a “chip on its shoulder.” The chip can be good, she says. The school was never as well-off as competitors in the Catholic school world, so they prided themselves on making do with a sound education, knowing and caring for the individual boys, and occasionally being superior in certain sports. That chip allowed them to soldier on despite having a physical plant that was often in a state of disrepair, and not being able to offer scholarships and aid packages that matched their competitor schools.

**But that chip on the shoulder could also cause a sense of insularity, allowing the parent and alumni groups to become almost tribe-like, suspecting most others as “outsiders” and worrying that change would strip them of the things they loved best about the school. One person said, perhaps facetiously, that “if your great-grandfather was not born in West Roxbury, you are forever an outsider.”**

So, Peter entered a school that was struggling financially, highly suspicious of his motives, and stuck in old, and — in his opinion — outmoded approaches to pedagogy. His goals were to live out the charism of Blessed Edward Rice and the mission of the school in a forward-leaning way, which proved challenging. According to one board member, “We should have paved the way for Peter before he came. There were long-time faculty members that needed to go, the board and administration knew it, and we should have dismissed them before Peter arrived.”

Instead, in his first year, Peter had to dismiss a coach who had worked at the school for 39 years, had a very successful record, and was beloved by many of his players and other community members who numbered into the hundreds. He also dismissed a long-time Division Head who held an equally high profile.

These firings grabbed headlines in *The Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald*, and confirmed for many that the best things about Catholic Memorial were about to drastically change — for the worse. Many alums called for his departure. Three trustees confirmed that making Peter bear the burden in these situations was a massive failure on their part, and they still feel badly about it to this day. The day the story hit *The Boston Globe*, Peter got a call from Fr. Leahy, who seemed to know that Peter needed encouragement.

**That would not be the last “hang in there” type call from Fr. Leahy and, in hindsight, Peter sees those calls as a key part of how he was able to continue to press forward.**



Colleagues referred to [Peter], with admiration, as stubborn a number of times, and in this case, stubbornness was his best friend.

### *The Vision - Inventing a New School from the Old*

When Peter looked at the revenue issue, he did not immediately think of a new development campaign or other ways to financially rally the community around the failing school. Instead he thought about giving them something new to rally around. Instead of asking to support the old school, he wanted them to help him invent a new one, or at least a hybrid that combined the best of the old with a “new way” to engage boys. He strove to balance tradition and innovation.

Peter’s “habit of mind” — asking “why” things are done the way they are — led him to recharge a moribund wrestling program early in his career, and then a stale middle school English program a little while later.

This time, the scale was much larger: an entire school, a beloved place that would go to ground if big changes were not enacted fairly quickly.

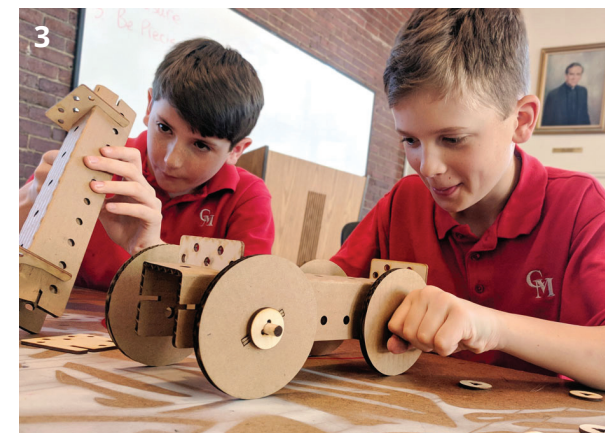
Defying the claim that “he does not know us,” Peter went about trying to learn about and from his new community. He encountered many rejections (the senior class refused to applaud for him after his address to them at the end of the year, for example) but proved an irresistible force. He

persisted. Colleagues referred to him, with admiration, as stubborn a number of times, and in this case, stubbornness was his best friend. He was starting to win over some staff members in the school.

He watched his students carefully, trying to note when they were most excited and engaged with what they were doing. They were not engaged in most conventional classrooms, but in classes that required the use of the body as well as the mind, they came to life. When they were talking about or helping to solve real-world problems they became animated. They liked work that was relational — a team, a work or study group. Peter knew of schools that were implementing the Harkness method for class discussion as a step on their innovation journey. He thought that approach might be a good move for those schools, but instinctively knew that a Harkness table was not for his school. His vision of a high engagement, hands-on curriculum that was centered around real-world problems was starting to form.

Peter believes that Catholic schools need to “cross-pollinate.” He thinks the tendency to change slowly may reflect the timeless nature of the church, but in education, changing slowly means being behind and possibly becoming irrelevant. Getting fresh ideas on how a classroom might look and how his boys might look while learning was exciting.

To that end, he had an eye on a shipping container that could be turned into a hydroponic farm. He wanted the boys to look after it and use it in classes. He told the Board Chair at Boston College about his vision. One of the most influential men in Boston was impressed and told Peter he’d buy him the container. Peter’s vision was starting to have a physical manifestation. It was an early win and an external validation.



- 1 A student works in the school’s Freight Farm, a self-contained hydroponic garden hidden inside a shipping container.
- 2 Students work a pop-up farmstand with Shawn Cusson (in lab coat). Shawn teaches Critical Making and runs the Frieght Farm.
- 3 Student’s in the seventh grade Critical Making course construct rubberband-powered cardboard dragsters.

## Lessons Learned:

### *For and From the Board*

#### **Communication and messaging needs to be top of mind**

When the board knows that it is about to embark on a significant change of direction that will affect all areas of the institution, it must be transparent with all stakeholder groups. In writing, meetings, speeches and community outreach, the board must shape and present the messages that these various constituencies receive. The board must be available to answer the inevitable questions and myriad expressions of anxiety.

#### **Don’t saddle the new Head with team members who shouldn’t be on the team**

If there are high profile dismissals that need to take place, those should be done prior to the arrival of the new Head. All Heads will likely need to evolve their leadership team, and it’s to be expected that there will be turnover in that group. That said, many schools have one or two people who have been there for a long time, sometimes are beloved, but may also exert a strong negative influence on the community. Their departure would create such a firestorm that it’s not unusual for a sitting Head to decide not to take action and kick the problem down the road. This work should not be laid at the feet of the new Head. Otherwise, the associated anger and resentment that stems from these types of dismissals taints the new era, consumes the new Head, and slows progress toward the new vision.

#### **Major change will cause anxiety and anger. It is inevitable. Steadfastly supporting the Head is crucial.**

Major school change requires tremendous energy and a great deal of courage. Leadership needs to be supported by the board by whatever means necessary. In the case of CM, a few board members wanted to see the president, Peter Folan, take advantage of an administrative coach so that he would have a safe place to think, prioritize and even vent. They wanted him to have what was needed to move the school forward.



## The Three Pillars: Tangible, Relevant, Manageable

Almost five years ago, Peter attended a conference on Making and 21st century learning. It was there that the light bulb went off. He knew that his school had to respect what they knew about boys and the way they learn. He saw a booth where a wind tunnel painted bright orange attracted attendees to take a challenge: make a simple folded paper construction float between two marks in the vertical tube.

It wasn't easy — you had to think of so many things at once. It had to float, but its surface could not catch so much air that it would ride too high. Too little surface, or a surface that did not hold air in the right way, and it would not rise high enough. To his mind, those turbines and the mental challenge that came with them screamed "Boy!" The project was, in Peter's words, "Tangible, relevant, manageable." He asked the organization sponsoring the exhibit if they would work with him — with his school. That organization was EXPLO. Peter arranged a visit to EXPLO's headquarters.

Located in a building that started as the first academic press in the United States, the Exploration Center is part office, part lab, part maker space, and part studio. A large portion of the 30,000 square feet is work space, scattered with tools and equipment, but also artifacts of projects and curricular experimentations. Cardboard moose dot the building, as do monsters climbing up the sides of Empiresque towers, as well as finely cut paper pigs and wolves, all the imaginative results of the active brain of EXPLO's Creative Director, Dave Hamilton. After marinating in the other-worldness of EXPLO for a couple of hours, seeing, doing and talking pedagogical approaches and curriculum design with Dave and Moira Kelly, EXPLO's president, Peter announced, "I want this."

What "this" would be was not yet clear. But later in the year — late spring in fact — Moira called Peter with an idea. EXPLO was looking for a school to pilot a course in Critical Making. The materials would be low cost and the course would focus on building observation skills, critical



EXPLO's wind tunnel

thinking, complex problem solving, with a strong dose of collaboration, critique, and design thinking. Solutions would be open-ended. Students would work on becoming more comfortable with ambiguity and failure. Since the curriculum was not fully designed, this was going to be a bit of flying the plane while building it. Was Peter willing?

Peter jumped at the chance and quickly decided that all incoming 7th graders would take the course. But there was no room in the schedule. So he decided that CM would no longer require Physical Education classes, and instead would use that time for Critical Making and project-based learning. That, of course, was a controversial thing to do, but he needed time, space, and budget to enact his hands-on learning agenda, and time was another resource that was not in abundance. Choices had to be made and he made this one quickly.

The first year was especially challenging. Though Exploration was on campus frequently to shape the curriculum, and to give guidance and encouragement to the teacher, the teacher had to stray a long way out of his training and comfort. Eventually a required 8th grade Critical Making course was added to the 7th grade course and now three teachers have gone through the experience of being Critical Making educators. As with any new endeavor, there were successes and then things that did not go so smoothly.

### Teaching and Learning. Learning and Teaching.

Two 8th graders who had taken the Critical Making course spoke about how it worked for them. One said, "Many of my classmates were not ready for this class. It didn't play by the rules of all the other classes we have ever taken. It wasn't simply doing what you were told, and getting a good grade when you did it right. We don't always know what 'right' is."

The students think they know the "why" for a conventional class. Often, the "why," as so many students define it, is so you can get good grades, and get into a good school, and eventually into a good college. At the end of that road, a good job awaits. They are trained to play the game of school almost from first grade. They are extrinsically motivated, mostly because schools teach them that the

rewards are "out there, later." It is hard to feel true passion for something that promises something conventional and good at some indeterminate time down the road.

But when the learning inspires or is inspired by curiosity, the feelings are different. The same student continues: "When Critical Making goes well, it has been so interesting. Sometimes it makes me see the world differently than I ever have. We did a project on dandelion seeds. We looked at how nature designed them and how they travel and catch the wind. We built our own seeds to understand them more. I'll never look at them the same way again."

**Shawn Cusson, who was among the first teachers to teach the Critical Making course, said that the difference between a conventional course and this new course is around questioning. In a traditional classroom, the teacher is asking the questions. In Critical Making, students are formulating and asking the questions and learning that there is often more than one viable answer.**

Students have to re-learn how to be questioners. They were once very good at it, but many schools take over that natural function of a young person's brain, and the students' questioning-reflex atrophies. Looking carefully at some object or at some process and then allowing questions to emerge is not the route that most classes in most schools have taken with their learning process. Shawn has seen his students feel everything from exhilarated and bold to tentative and nervous. In his class, the students are claiming more control of the questions and the reflection — their learning — and the longer they stay at it, the more rewarding it gets.

Teaching the Critical Making course has been the hardest and best challenge of Shawn's teaching career. The range of what he teaches — from supposedly simple skills like learning how to use a ruler to the complex processes of giving and receiving feedback — is wide, and has brought out skills in him that he didn't expect to exercise. He is grateful for the growth that his teaching has experienced.

Assessment has been an issue, but Brian Mulcahey, who also teaches the Critical Making course, feels that progress has been made with students in that regard. He feels he is better able to explain what "success" looks and sounds like in his class, and students are starting to understand what he calls "The New Why."

## “Resisters” and “Assisters”

### The Need for Colleagues and Comrades

*It was clear to Peter that he could not go forward with the faculty as it was currently constituted. Many were not interested in change. The current curriculum had worked well for them for many years, and the idea of incorporating project-based learning into established, well-worn lesson plans was not an attractive idea.*

Some were quite good at pouring knowledge into their students and then testing how much of it they retained. But many did not know if they could be good at this “new thing.” Others were fairly certain they did not want to be.

Some of the people who had to leave (or wanted to leave) were long time faculty members and even administrators. The principal, a former physical education teacher who had been there 37 years, had planned his retirement to coincide with Peter’s first year. With that position opening, a group of administrators felt that it was “their turn” — they saw the principal’s job as a reward for long, dedicated work. But it was clear they did not share Peter’s vision, and he did not think he could move forward with one of them in such a pivotal position. Instead, he asked a long term member of the faculty (45 years), who had signaled his belief in the new direction, to take the job.

The new principal, Tom Beatty, said he spent a lot of time asking his old colleagues, “What was bugging them?” They trusted him and shared their worries. A number of them had too great an attachment to the past, and he could tell they would not make it. But others, once they expressed their anxieties, and felt listened to by Tom, made a concerted effort to move along with the changes. He felt his role as a veteran who loved the school was to smooth feathers where he could and sincerely wish his colleagues well at their next endeavor if he couldn’t. Mr. Beatty said

that an important factor in moving the school quickly was a favorite line that he used often: “If you have worries about proposing something new, but fear ‘red tape,’ just know that Peter and I are the red tape. If we like the idea, it will happen.” New things would not get lost in committees forever. Good ideas were elevated quickly. Tom held this important position for four successful years. He was a key steadying influence and leader before he retired in the spring of 2019.

An important ally in managing school change was the Chair of the Theology Department, Mickey Corso. Mickey had been working as a consultant for K-12 public schools with a special interest in professional development. He believes that if teaching is going to change, professional development has to change, too. He thinks a typical mistake is that the content of the professional development is too top-down. He believes that faculty want a seat at the table where PD decisions are made. They don’t even need to believe they are making the decisions, but want to sit with leaders and make sure they are heard. And then see that sometimes their ideas are acted upon.

He has heard teachers say, “We should be deciding what we need to know.” To a great degree, he agrees with that. Maybe not at the beginning, when they are first exposed to a new vision. But once they have decided to embrace that vision, the teachers should be able to ask for the type of help and training specific to their subject area and to their personal quirks as a teacher. Mickey hopes that “peer mentoring” will increase the feeling among faculty that ideas and techniques are bubbling up from the faculty, and



Andrew O'Brien, Tom Beatty (left), and representatives of the Yawkey Foundations join Folan for the CIAL groundbreaking.

are not being imposed from the top. He believes that when both teachers and students find their own voices in this transition, it will increase both the emotional health of the school and the depth of the learning that takes place within it.

Peter said that at the beginning, it was hard to know who supported his plans and who did not. But one

chaos and messiness will be some of the side-effects of that pursuit. Andrew felt that the school had fallen onto the path of least resistance, going about its days based on ritual and habit. He thinks that the impetus for change came from the simple and obvious need for the school to be better. The timeline for that change was sped up because of the need to survive financially. He thinks

strategies. Brian has the feeling that now most teachers and staff at the school want to partner with the change and see where it takes them and the school.

Peter repeatedly said that he would not have been able to make it this far if not for a very supportive Board of Trustees. They were, in some ways, the first comrades, bolstering

Peter repeatedly said that he would not have been able to make it this far if not for a very supportive Board of Trustees. They were, in some ways, the first comrades, bolstering Peter up in the dark, early days, and supporting him when he had to make tough personnel changes and bold decisions.

person about whom he had no doubt was Andrew O'Brien, who was the Vice Principal of Student Life. Peter had hired Andrew into the vacant role in his first official act as president in 2014. Peter said the uncertainty at the school cut both ways — teachers and administrators did not yet know if it would be okay to tell the new president if he was veering off the path or making some other mistake. Andrew served the essential purpose of being direct and honest with him including respectfully calling him out, when necessary. Because of that, Peter found Andrew to be an important partner for the journey ahead.

Andrew describes himself as a person who is comfortable with disruption. By which he means that he is a searcher for the best ways to teach and learn, and is not dismayed that

both reasons are good, and the combination allowed for the much-needed sense of urgency. Andrew thinks one of his strengths — besides an analytical mind and a good sense of organization — is that he is fiercely loyal. He feels that way towards CM and to Peter as he tries to revitalize the school.

Brian Palm, the Assistant Head of School, and also Head of the Middle School, saw early in the journey that the school staff and community broke down into two camps: “Resisters” and “Assisters.” At first, the ratio between the two was heavily in favor of the Resisters. Over the last few years, he feels the Assisters are now ascendent. Brian credits a lot of that to the professional development model that Mickey and Andrew pioneered, which has led to greater confidence for teachers as they try new classroom

Peter up in the dark, early days, and supporting him when he had to make tough personnel changes and bold decisions. They stood behind him, encouraged him, and also invested in the school with the critical philanthropic resources that were needed. He doesn’t know how any institution could enact positive change without the full backing of their board. Barbara Fitzgerald, current Chair of the Board, called Peter a “true visionary who feels the changes in his bones.”

**From the beginning, the board felt the importance of the historical moment, and did not want their failure to act to be the reason the school would fail. From hiring Peter, through year six of his tenure, they have partnered with their new president, and he appreciates their care and support.**



## Intensity and Burnout: Increasing the Capacity of the Team

Many administrators and board members also spoke a variation on a theme: This process has been intense, and burnout is a worry. They almost all said some variation of “not for me, but for Peter, and some of the others.” Clearly, they have a kind and worried eye out for their leader, and for each other, and felt the toll that this work was taking.

Brian Palm echoed another thought that was expressed by many: too much of this work was happening in a top-down manner. Delegation, or the shifting of the load of innovation to the teachers and students, was not happening as quickly as it could. Some of that was simply because the administrators are true believers — no one buys into the vision of a new learning paradigm more than they do. There is an old cliché that revolutionaries love the battle but struggle when they finally win and then have to govern. The energy required to stage a revolution is a different kind of energy than that which is required to run the daily functions of governance.

Three members of the Board said that it was now very important that Peter increase the capacity of his team, and trust them not just with



Center for Integrated and Applied Learning - Architect's Rendering

the daily running of the school, but also the deepening of the vision. Peter admitted that he loves to think about the small details that make the new classes and projects run, and perhaps involves himself too closely with their implementation. Peter is self-aware, and he laughs and shakes his head when talking about the specifics of what he has set in motion. He doesn't believe it is because he doesn't trust and admire his team — it's that he is a teacher at heart and wants to be part of that feeling one gets when a great idea is realized in the classroom.

Board Chair Barbara Fitzgerald sees Peter's need to work on team building and delegation as a way to multiply what the school can do, and to preserve its most important asset: the president himself. Chris Lee, another board member, says that seeing Peter in an analogous way to Elon Musk can be helpful. “Peter sees

the whole thing, and wants to do the whole thing,” he says. “But it is not good for the school if he tries to do everything.”

Former board chair Mike Costello brought up another important consideration: “We run lean, no doubt about it. It is hard to give a break to those who might want to work on some other important thing.” Time is money, as the old saying goes, and many struggling schools have little of either. To hire new people to staff new positions to do some of the work on innovation would be great, but the school cannot afford that.

Principal and Assistant Head of School Andrew O'Brien, who was selected to lead the school after a full search process on the retirement of Tom Beatty, says that he would love to free up a period or two for a number of his teachers so they can design new things and receive training on how to

implement them, but it is just not feasible. They are so tightly scheduled that he would have to hire someone to teach other courses that are being left. With the current schedule and fiscal state, there is no slack or wiggle room to make time for training. So administrators and teachers are doing it the old-fashioned way by giving their “extra” time before or after their obligations.

One trustee said that his vision for using any new resources would be to address deferred maintenance (which is considerable, as any school with old buildings could attest); invest in a digital media campaign to “control and distribute the story of Catholic Memorial's innovation journey”; and fund some ways to increase faculty compensation through either time or salary. While the school continues to work towards a more public launch of a major comprehensive campaign, the school did receive wonderful news in 2018. The Yawkey Foundation awarded a major \$2.5M capital grant, their largest to a Catholic high school, to build the Center for Integrated and Applied Learning. This major gift coupled with the support of two key philanthropic alumni who also invested a combined \$3.5M are key factors in the actualization of this vision. These two men, both former corporate executives, each funded the school early in Peter's tenure and both recommitted to the new Center.

**At the start of his sixth year, the school has comprehensively raised north of \$17M, which exceeds the school's only prior campaign (2006) of \$2.5M. This success is due to the support of 39 major donors who have rallied to support the school and the innovation that is occurring. At the same time, the school is thankful for the generous support of many alumni, parents, and friends who support the mission and annual fund each year.**

## Lessons Learned:

### *For and From Department Heads and Teachers*

#### **Find and recognize the early adopters**

Find, engage, and celebrate the “teacher-enthusiast” as soon as possible so practitioners of the new way normalize the new practices by word of mouth and encourage curiosity among their peers.

#### **Make the work public**

Encourage students to make the results of their work in the new mode public. Give the students places to share their new work and their stories about what it was like to do the new work in many places — to faculty, parents, and each other.

#### **Clarity of vision requires granularity in its articulation**

Make sure that department and section heads have a full understanding of where the school is trying to go with this new approach. Let them become knowledgeable about how the approach works, and what the benefits are to students (and teachers). Give them sufficient training so that they can be genuinely helpful to their department members. Allow them to express the mission of the new program rather than relying on the top leadership to do it.

#### **Shared accountability**

At first holding teachers accountable to the new program will be the work of the administration. But soon, that burden needs to shift to department heads and peers. It is a different thing (emotionally and professionally) to disappoint a fellow teacher rather than the administrators of the school.

#### **Professional development is key**

Professional development around the new venture is essential. To the extent possible, it should be driven by the teachers, who should have a mechanism for expressing their specific needs as they relate to subject matter and their personalities. Groups of teachers working with department heads is ideal.

#### **New assessment methods are likely and time needs to be spent on developing them**

In schools, assessment is a universal concern. If a new approach to learning requires a new method of assessment, then research, training and communication are the keys to finding and implementing a new assessment approach. Assessment can cause anxiety for teachers, students and their parents, so explaining the “why” behind the changes to all stakeholders is crucial.

## The Center: Housing the Creative Churn

*As you face the high school, there is a wing on the right-hand side that once was the residence of the Christian Brothers who ran the school. In more recent years, it has been a hodge-podge of offices. But at this moment, it is stripped down to the rafters, ready to become a totem, a physical manifestation of all the creative churn of the last few years.*



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— Peter Folan

The Center for Integrated and Applied Learning will house maker spaces, art studios, performing art spaces, and classrooms. In the announcement to the public, Peter is quoted as saying: “The Center is designed to enhance the education of young men through project-based and applied learning, which fosters the skills necessary to succeed in the tech-heavy Fourth Industrial Revolution. We are extremely grateful to the Yawkey Foundations for this generous gift and their support in how we educate students from diverse backgrounds.”

Teachers and administrators spoke of the construction with both a rueful smile about the amount of displaced people and offices caused by the construction, and controlled excitement about what this will mean for the students of CM in the very near future. When asked what type of student will thrive at this “new” school, Liz O’Connell (parent and staff member) said, “The student that will do best in the Catholic Memorial of the future will be a boy ready to take chances. He is a boy that is looking to be independent but will understand the importance of community and his place within it. He will find and use his voice to express what he is learning and also to express his sense of right and wrong.”

The spaces will be filled with appropriate contemporary technology: 3D printers, laser cutters, and other new devices. The Center will support the sciences, but equally, as many people were quick to note, the arts. Interdisciplinary approaches to formerly siloed academic departments are being celebrated in theory, but pursued with some awkwardness in most schools. Catholic Memorial hopes to lead the way with an approach that celebrates connections between human pursuits, rather than the exaggerated differences of old-fashioned academic departments.

**The building of the Center is not the culmination of all this work, but represents the end of the first phase. The direction has been set. The teachers and students who are there know what they are getting into. There will soon be the kind of spaces and equipment that can support the teaching and learning they have been envisioning. Everyone at Catholic Memorial knows there is much work to be done. But now it is forward-facing work, building up and learning new ways, rather than un-learning ways that were holding them back. They are tired, but optimistic. They’ve earned that.**

## Lessons Learned:

### *For and From Administrators*

#### **Manage the inevitable grief**

Change will bring grief from teachers, students, families, alums — almost everyone who was invested in the old way. Leaders must understand that grief is inevitable, and will express itself in various ways. Open and direct expressions of grief in front of the school community is preferable to parking lot conversations that foster resentment and bring the community down.

#### **Quickly broaden who owns the vision**

It is okay if the initial vision emanates from just a few people. But the implementation of the vision should be shared and made plain to as many like-minded souls as possible to mitigate the sense of a “top-down” imposition.

#### **Build a team where disagreement can live**

Abraham Lincoln had his Team of Rivals, a group chosen because he knew they did not always agree with him. While that may be an extreme case, it offers some lessons. Surrounding the leader with sycophants can be tempting, and even feel encouraging to the leader. But it is ultimately destructive. The leader must form a group of people who will tell him or her what they see as mistakes of approach and/or implementation. They need to be forthright, honest, confidential and loyal. And the head or president should be given wide latitude in choosing his or her group.

#### **Distributed leadership**

Decentralizing the call for change and the implementation of the new program increases the capacity of others in the school and multiplies what the school can accomplish. Rather than reliance on an informed few, the school should have a number of people at different levels of the organization who are driving the change forward. Handling the practical and emotional fall-out of school change is exhausting. Avoiding burn-out of the senior leadership group is another reason that responsibility for implementing the new program needs to be decentralized as quickly as possible.

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#### **Department Heads play a key role in moving the agenda forward**

Convince and then empower the department and section heads to explain and eventually evangelize about the merits of the new program. This will require conversation, sharing readings, even positive debate. When they are on board, the transition suddenly has a new set of wings.

#### **Change takes time**

Five years was the estimate expressed more than once. According to one experienced person, the third year is the key year. By then, those who would resist are mostly gone or have become quiet and less destructive. The emotional turmoil starts to decline, and the school can focus on the actual program. This is the year for greater clarity around training, professional development, assessment and outreach. A school can now manage the concepts rather than spending most of its time convincing people.

#### **A mentor can make all the difference — particularly on dark days**

For Peter, his advisor and mentor was Fr. Leahy. Peter is clear that you have to be open to being mentored. Sometimes you need to hear things you would rather not hear. But a good mentor is invaluable, particularly when you are dealing with difficult circumstances. Peter wonders if he would still be at CM today had it not been for Fr. Leahy’s advice and support.



## **Publication Update Winter 2025**

Under Peter's leadership Catholic Memorial has raised \$30 million, renovated and reimagined spaces, made dramatic improvements to the physical plant, strengthened the hiring pipeline, increased the number of students attending highly competitive colleges, made the curriculum more hands-on and relevant, and strengthened CM's enrollment profile. But as Peter says, the work is never done. After revitalizing Catholic Memorial, Peter is moving to Dexter Southfield School. He will become the School's 5th head beginning in the 2025-2026 school year.