

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL KNOWLES, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR IN THE OFFICE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN THE DIOCESE OF TRENTON

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “One of the most significant challenges to digitization is acceptance. The reasons for this are many. However, I will highlight two of them. Change is not always welcomed... The second challenge ... is training. Being able to adequately train educators in real-time... is vital to successful incorporation.”
- “The ability to share information and experiences is an incredible opportunity for K12 education. Students can travel anywhere in the world or space without leaving their classroom, which broadens the opportunity for exploration and learning... Digitalization can [also] provide financial [savings].”

Could you please describe where you currently work and what your responsibilities are?

I am currently an Associate Director of School Operation and Advancement in the Office of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Trenton. I have been in the role for less than a year. My responsibilities include overseeing the professional development program for our school leaders. In addition, I am working directly with a few of our elementary schools, focusing my efforts on administration improvements and STEM program development.

What has been your experience in your organization about digitalization and education? What has worked well?

I have been in Catholic education since 2015. Before that, I had spent 28 years in technology related to the aerospace defense industry. Before the pandemic, I initiated a program to incorporate digital learning into my Upper School program offering. The impetus for this was two-fold. First, we were looking to augment our curriculum with course offerings that we did not have the resources to hire additional teaching staff and prepare our students for digital learning. This proved to be highly effective. Many of our students could now select from a catalog of

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Michael Knowles, Associate Director of School Operation and Advancement in the Office of Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Trenton, discusses some of his experiences with digitalization in education. The interview is part of a series on that topic.

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course offerings that provided a tailored learning plan to meet their interests and needs. Second, we wanted to ensure TCA's smooth transition to remote instruction since students have their own devices. We saw that equity was an issue during the pandemic when creating a level playing field for students. At TCA (Trenton Catholic Academy), each student was given the same opportunity to grow, learn, and develop.

What has been challenging?

One of the most significant challenges to digitization is acceptance. The reasons for this are many. However, I will highlight two of them. The first is that change is not always welcomed. So, being told that technology will improve their teaching can be taken negatively. A way to address this also relates to the second challenge, which is training. Being able to adequately train educators in real-time to utilize technology in the classroom effectively is vital to successful incorporation.

Another challenge that our educators faced was that they were forced to implement "whole class" instruction as a way of teaching. Because of the restrictions placed on our educational system due to Covid, teachers found it challenging to implement the strategies in the classroom that they had used before. Students could not collaborate effectively and could not work as a group on a given topic. In addition, teachers found it difficult to tailor their instruction to meet the individual needs of their students. Small group instruction presented challenges since students could not be grouped together. We are now seeing the adverse effects of this type of instruction in our classrooms today.

Change management and the intentional implementation of a plan to institutionalize that change is essential to overcome the challenges of digitization.

What do you think more generally are the opportunities from digitalization for K12 education in the United States?

I think the ability to share information and experiences is an incredible opportunity for K12 education. Students can travel anywhere in the world or space without leaving their classroom, which broadens the opportunity for exploration and learning. However, one must also consider what digitalization can provide financial impact. An example here is having one guest speaker who can speak to 1,000 students in each school district and at the same time via a videoconferencing session can provide significant cost savings.

And what do you see as the main challenges?

The biggest challenge I see is the rate of change. To me, determining what to accept and when and then planning

for the inevitable change that will come is not an easy task. In the past, you bought a textbook. You plan to replace it in a certain period based on wear and tear or a planning cycle of curriculum review. Today, everyone says you need to be a "Google" school, and in less than two years, that may all change or not. Look at the changes in the use of devices in schools. In less than a few years, we left a school with a computer room, and now all our students have computers in their backpacks. Consider the implications of that from an administrative and educational perspective. That alone has been transformational.

Also, as I see it, the main challenge was having to go back to the "one size fits all" approach to teaching. Teaching is intimate between the teacher and the student. Teachers know their students in numerous ways, their strengths and weaknesses, the way they learn best and when they need remediation, and when they need to be challenged. This was a daunting task for teachers during the pandemic. One of the best practices in education is Project-Based Learning, which was on the horizon before the pandemic presented a challenge. Students were learning how to solve a real-world problem by working from the bottom up. With the restrictions in the classroom, inquiry and research were impossible to conduct. Teaching was in isolation rather than collaborative.

Do you know of other experiences that were innovative, and which may have inspired you?

In a previous answer, I referred to my pursuit of online learning at the secondary level. That was innovative. Now it is ubiquitous.

Do you know of experiences that did not work so well and could explain what to avoid?

I think the whole idea of remote learning has not worked well. Remote learning is much different than online learning. The pandemic forced education to go remote in many cases for a period of time and in some cases, for an extended period of time. The device became the classroom, and the technology was not used to its fullest potential. This, of course, is of no fault to anyone. However, I continue to say that the response by administrators and educators to Covid was like the "moon shot," so much had to be done so quickly to continue serving our students in a period of incredible uncertainty. Like the early days of the space program, we learned so much from the early days of the pandemic and still are. That learning has and continues to be incorporated in the way we educate. Now that we are emerging from the pandemic with a need to level-set, everyone needs to understand the difference between remote versus online learning.

What was your journey? How did you end up working on K12 education?

I taught religious education for many years and loved mentoring new engineers in my previous career. So, when the opportunity presented itself to join a school in an administrative role, it was a calling. I taught Computer Science, and my other responsibilities then became to be the lead mentor for the school's robotics team. I recently completed my course of study to earn a Master of Arts in Education at Seton Hall University. A note here: it was a hybrid program of online and in-seat learning.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about giving back. So many helped me become the person I am today, and whether it is with my

children or the students in my school, I want to share my life experiences to help them out on their life journeys. Also, I love robotics. It is so much more than building a robot. It is a gateway to a better future for those who participate. I am passionate about wanting students to see their full potential and accomplish more than they ever thought they could. That is one of the reasons that I am passionate about working with robotics. It provides real-world problem solving for our young people and allows them to share ideas while working collaboratively.

Education is not limited to the material taught and assessed; it develops the whole child socially, emotionally, academically, and spiritually. I have been blessed to have been a part of the growth of so many young adults during my time at TCA. My mission continues as I lead young minds working in our robotics program.

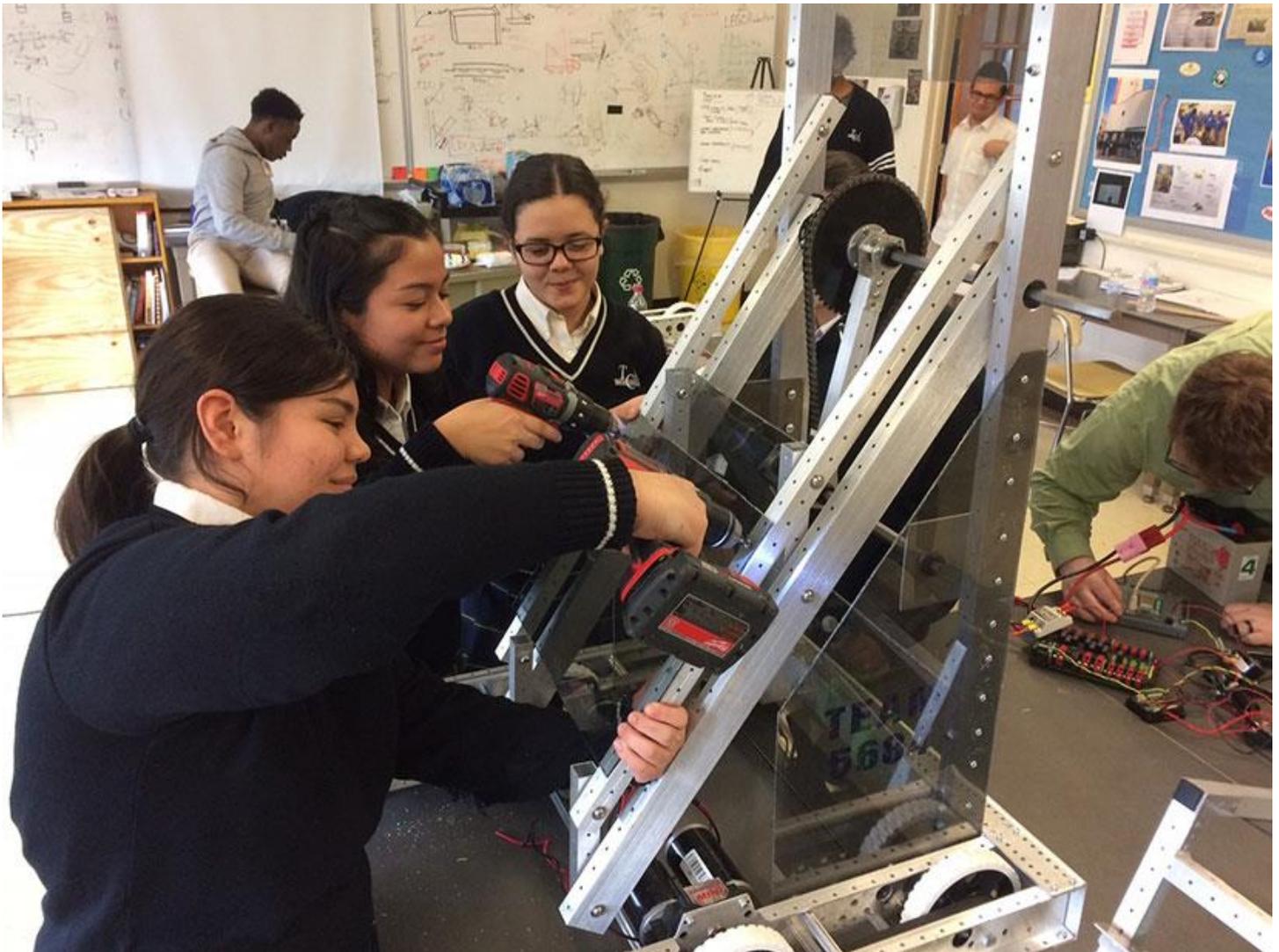


Photo: members of the Trenton Catholic Academy robotics team, the Iron Mechs, work on a project.