
Innovations



The Catholic School Matters Newsletter in the United States

By Timothy Uhl

In the United States, most Catholic school principals encounter a fairly isolated existence. Due to the structure of most Catholic elementary schools, the principal and pastor are on their own to operate their school. Most high schools operate independently and are often in competition with other Catholic schools. There may be a parents' organization and an advisory council, but the reliance of Catholic schools on site-managed operations grants freedom but can also be isolating. Finding a professional learning network (PLN) and discovering best practices of other Catholic schools can be difficult.

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Catholic School Matters is a weekly newsletter/blog and podcast which was designed to promote solidarity among American Catholic school superintendents, principals, teachers, and supporters. Every week, the newsletter is read by thousands and the podcast has reached over 100k downloads. Now supported by the National Catholic Education Association, Catholic School Matters is a resource for innovation and best practices produced by a superintendent in Montana, one of the most far-flung Catholic outposts in the United States.

I am the superintendent of Montana Catholic Schools and the creator of Catholic School Matters. I started using the Smore platform almost 10 years ago when I was a Catholic elementary principal to provide a weekly newsletter for my school parents and teachers. With the advent of Twitter, I began coming across articles on Catholic school innovation and educational research that was helping me to imagine a new future for my school. I realized that his teachers and parents were also interested in reading about best practices and so I began changing my weekly

newsletter from a series of announcements to a sharing platform for the most intermeshing stories I had come across on teaching, learning, parenting, discipline, theme management, and innovation. I figured if I was curious or interested in an article, other people must be, too. I grew to embrace his role as "lead learner" of the school and people responded by reading the newsletter.

When I became a superintendent in 2014, I realized that the geographic isolation of Montana Catholic schools made the school leaders hungry to connect with the larger world of Catholic schools. Most Montana Catholic schools are 100 miles or more from the next Catholic school. I continued publishing a weekly newsletter and as the readership grew beyond the borders of Montana, I rebranded it as Catholic School Matters to reflect the focus on the national (and international) conversations around Catholic schools.

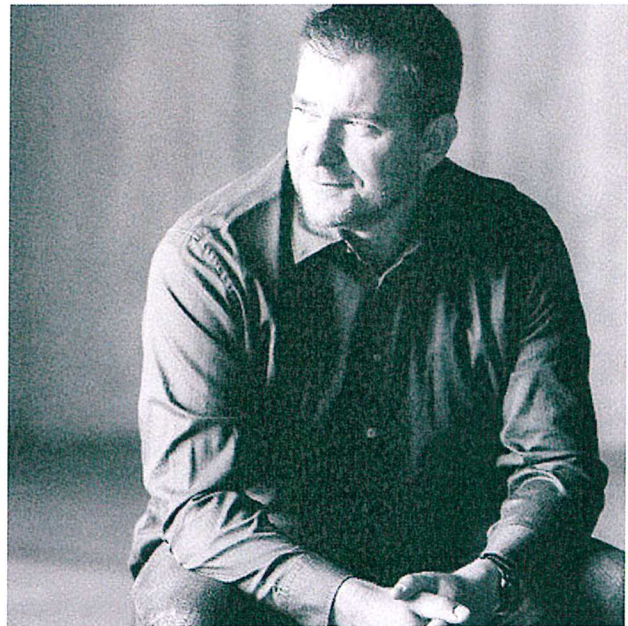


Photo: Timothy Uhl.

At the same theme, I began listening to podcasts while driving around Montana, the fourth-largest state in the US by land mass. One day, I came across a podcast produced by one of my former high school students where she would invite on a friend and talk about the creative process. "I could do this," I thought. When I came home from that drive, I made a list of the most interesting people I knew in Catholic education. Then I made a list of the most interesting people I would like to talk to. I found out that then list was over 50 people. And so I began.

Over the next few months, my plan came into focus. I began calling other podcasters, watched more than a few YouTube videos, read more articles than I

needed, and began collecting the technology and information I needed. I approached a business active in Catholic schools and asked for a \$900 sponsorship to cover all of his expenses and found they were willing to give that and more. I began calling potential interviewees and was surprised to find that they all said “yes.” In the fall of 2016, the podcast was launched.

I began the podcast with the idea that perhaps I would record 30 episodes and my hope was that I would find 50 listeners. I was surprised to find that the first episodes were consistently over 100 listeners. After 15 episodes, in fact, I recorded a “halftime” episode thinking that I was getting close to completion. However, I found that I never had a shortage of potential guests and people kept recommending more and more guests.

In the second year, I launched three unique series: a 10-part series on Church documents tracing the important education documents the Church has produced over the past 60 years, a series on turnaround schools, and another on new Catholic schools. The Church Document series has been constructed to be an online PLC with guest blog posts and link to the original documents. Listenership increased. One of my personal highlights that year was a face-to-face conversation with Sr. Helen Prejean, the death penalty opponent and social justice activist.

In the third year, I began tying episodes of the newsletter to the podcast in a new format I dubbed “Catholic School Matters Radio Hour” and began conducting more face-to-face podcast conversations. The podcasts began taking on more “long form” conversations which provide listeners an in-depth conversation about an interesting person in and around Catholic education.

This year, the synchronicity between the newsletter and podcasts has continued with episodes on new Catholic schools, the Vatican document “Male and Female I Created Them,” a conference on serving students with learning differences, a survey on measuring Catholic culture, among others. The newsletter has also take on a few new features, namely the weekly “Case Studies Ripped from the Headlines” which introduces a recent Catholic school controversy. These case studies challenge readers to reflect on a controversy and examine whether they would have chosen a different path.

In addition, I provides a weekly reading list to provide thought leadership as well as a small section on Montana news which provides a window into the weekly goings on in his two home dioceses (Helena

and Great Falls-Billings). All of this is free and open to all. Again, I have embraced the idea of building solidarity, connections, and leading through learning.

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I am often asked, “How do we do this?” Approach it from three angles. First, figure out what your teachers and principals need. Survey them to figure out if they want to read articles and which topics interest them, and what services do they need that your office could provide in the form of newsletters, podcasts, or videos. Then figure out how to find those. For me, it started with Twitter and finding the people who were providing that content. Then I moved to RSS feeds, signed up for newsletters, and eventually, I have people email me interested articles and blog posts. Your teachers and principals probably subscribe to a variety of blogs and newsletters and they might send them to you.



Next, figure out the technology and platforms. There are of lot of different platforms which require a variety of technological skill and subscription amounts—both for newsletters and podcasts. Reach out to other dioceses who have great looking newsletters or YouTube channels or podcasts to find out what they use. Figure out which one works for you. This closely relates to the third angle. Who is going to do it? Divvying up chores is easy in my office since I am an office of one. But in larger offices, you’ll need to clarify who is writing, who is curating, who is putting the newsletter together, etc.

Catholic School Matters has inspired many other dioceses to use the Smore platform to distribute weekly or monthly newsletters to their principals and teachers to keep them informed and curious about best practices in Catholic schools.