

Alumni Spotlight

Leading Education through Innovation and Technology

John Swoyer '03



John Swoyer '03 arrived to Philadelphia University knowing he wanted to pursue a career in technology. At that time, the University was heading in a new direction with regard to technology and everyone was so friendly that Swoyer felt very comfortable on campus. Swoyer commuted for all four years, which allowed him to work part-time. Being a commuter did not stop him from immersing himself in the college experience. He forged friendships with many residents who became great friends. Swoyer valued the interaction he had with professors and PhilaU's approach to learning. His knowledge of culture, art, design, finance and information systems were broadened during his time at the University. "The classes weren't all directly geared toward my career path, rather they looked at content through a cross-curricular lens," explained Swoyer. "Due to this approach, I became a better-rounded learner and was able to appreciate other areas of interest." This later applied to his career, which took a path he never anticipated.

Swoyer began his career as a computer support specialist at a north New Jersey school district. He supported end users (teachers), staff and administration through integration of software, networking and hardware. He left this position when a former teacher at that district mentioned that there was a technology position available at a charter school in the Somerton area of Philadelphia. At that time, he was unfamiliar with charter schools. These are schools that receive public funding but operate independently. Today he runs one.



MaST Community Charter School is a K-12 school which focuses on mathematics, science and technology. Swoyer's roles at MaST have included director of technology, chief information officer, chief operating officer and currently, chief operating officer. Upon his arrival to MaST, he was encouraged to define the "T" in MaST. "I was given opportunities and always had a hard time saying no, which often meant long days and nights learning and developing new ideas of how we could better the school and classroom," he said. He began to attend board meetings, teach educational technology trainings and develop ideas that were outside of the traditional approach to learning.

Innovative integration of technology is instrumental because it is the way 21st century students interact and learn, and is also essential for a job in today's market.

The board and leadership at MaST also gave him the opportunity to work on two construction projects and move up the ladder into different roles. The school had to consolidate positions and he was promoted to CIO. Prior to being promoted, Swoyer obtained his MBA from Holy Family University. The changes in leadership allowed him to take on the operations roles as well, as the school was trying to find a new leader. During this time, MaST went through three CEO shifts in a short period. Swoyer was approached and asked if he was willing to give it a try and do the job. February will mark his fifth year as CEO.

MaST is a unique school because its K-12 environment transforms the idea of engagement and challenges traditional ways of learning by encouraging new ideas, spaces and concepts. "We have done things with spaces that people have never seen," noted Swoyer. The Library Media Center, Virtual Fitness Center, Playground of Innovation and Learning, Makerspace, BUILDIT Center and the Middle School Robotics lab are just a few of the spaces that have been developed under Swoyer and recognized as unique spaces that create engagement and help define the school's model. These students are learning how to create and use an email account in first grade, utilizing 3D printing in middle school and filming and editing videos as high school seniors.



As a CEO of a Philadelphia school, Swoyer faces many challenges. There is an ever growing demand for growth in academics and programs, yet they are consistently in a battle for funding. There is a great demand for the school. MaST has seen its waitlist more than triple, growing to over 7000 applications in four years. The journey for expansion in Philadelphia has been a struggle. He hopes to see a second school replicated with the success they have at MaST I. "I believe we have the power to change what education looks like in Philadelphia."

Swoyer has learned that one has to get oneself in the door and be willing to work hard in order for great things to happen. "I found an employer who allowed me to grow and challenge myself to take on something that was not even on my career goal list: running a charter school," explained Swoyer. "Since then, the biggest challenge that I have overcome is redefining what a school leader can look like." He has had many people tell him he is not an academic person in background and that he is too young to understand how a school should run. Swoyer accepted the CEO position at age 29 and since then, MaST has been named a P21 STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) school, one of two in all of Pennsylvania, the top charter school in PA and an Apple Distinguished Program for their one-to-one iPad program. "My position allows me to carry out a fulfilling purpose and to affect the lives of students on a daily basis."



Although Swoyer dedicates a lot of his time to MaST, his family keeps him balanced. Family is very important to him. He is married with three kids under the age of five. He is very close to his parents and in-laws. When he is not spending time with his family, he plays basketball to stay in shape and to keep up with the kids. He still designs websites through his technology business to keep his design mind sharp. Swoyer serves on the Northeast YMCA Board and the Coalition of PA Charter Schools Board.

Swoyer leaves alumni with this advice, "Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't do something. Work harder and prove them wrong. Let your actions be your words."