New CIO Brings Teacher Perspective

Our new **MICDS Chief Information Officer, Stewart Crais,** brings a unique perspective to his role as the School's technology leader: teacher. He began his career as a middle school English teacher at Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis, Tennessee. We don't want to disclose his age, but Crais (pronounced "cray") admits in his southern drawl that "back in those days there weren't a whole lot of fancy things. I had one Macintosh Classic computer with a 9-inch screen and the kids would all gather around me to play a grammar game." He noticed how much his students loved working with the computer, and recognized quickly that they were energized by a different way to approach learning. It's this mindset that continues to drive his work today, and while he's not in the classroom every day, he keeps that space—and its occupants—in the center of his goals.

Because Crais was an early adopter of technology, he became the go-to guy for his colleagues with tech questions. The head of the middle school asked what he wanted, and Crais continued to bring in more and newer computers and software, eventually assuming the role of Lausanne's technology coordinator. He eventually became the school's first technology director, working closely with teachers to help and guide them on incorporating technology into their classrooms and their pedagogical practices. He set up computer labs first, and, as technology progressed to laptops, eventually shepherded the school to its 1:1 computer program, where each student receives

a laptop or tablet. Lausanne was, like Crais himself, an early adopter of this technology, and the school leveraged its educational community to help inform its plans. "At any school, you don't have all the answers in your classroom, school, or even community," Crais said. "So you connect with other schools and professionals and build a community of learners."

Crais invited other educators and tech professionals to Lausanne, sharing what he had learned and picking their brains for their own experiences. He created The Laptop Institute and made connections with teachers from around the country, including some from MICDS. "We shared ideas and learned from each other because every school does it their own way," he said.

A solid 1:1 program, according to Crais, levels the playing field in the classroom because the students realize that their teachers don't know everything. Students have the internet right in front of them and can—and often do— challenge their teachers. This has changed the nature of teaching, making educators guides and partners in learning rather than straight disseminators of information. "Our goal from the Lower School through the Upper School is to help provide an opportunity for learning, and to teach students the enjoyment of learning. The content is almost a byproduct of those things," said Crais. "We need to engage students of all ages in the *idea* of education and learning from other people." The computers help with this, enabling teachers to be more involved in the classroom and less as lecturers. "They can be more engaged and one-on-one with their students."

Teachers are busy, and they need their technology to simply work. Crais, as a former teacher, understands this deeply and knows precisely what it's like to be frustrated by misbehaving laptops, projectors, software, and wifi. "Teachers have so many things to do in their classrooms," he explained, "and we want to remove as many roadblocks as possible. Technology should be like turning on a light in your classroom; it just has to work." He can't guarantee that there will never be an issue—email at MICDS went down for a few hours the week before school began due to a system upgrade that went off the rails, and which Crais seized as a learning opportunity—but he's working hard to understand our systems quickly and to create back-ups and secondary plans to keep users up and running. "It's frustrating when the wireless is down and I understand that," Crais said. "We're going to have those problems, but I'm hoping to bring in a perspective of partnership with everybody from **Head of School Jay Rainey** to my technology team to our teachers and support staff, to build this community and an

"Our students will graduate and go off to universities and colleges that expect fluency with technology, and eventually they'll be living and working in a world infused with technology. Tech is here to stay, so how can we rein it in and make the best environment in the classroom for our students?"
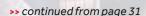
MICDS CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER, STEWART CRAIS

understanding we are all here for each other and here for the students to learn."

For his first year, Crais intends to focus on building relationships and learning about our current resources to gain a good understanding of where we are, where we want to go, and how we're going to get there. He also jumped immediately into working on how to make things better on a daily basis. "We're not going to change everything tomorrow," he said. "I have an eagerness and excitement about being here and about the possibilities this School has." He has already identified that we have an outstanding tech support team, solid infrastructure, and creative, dedicated people, and he's figuring out how to harness these resources and take MICDS to the next step.

"I'm excited about coming into a school where there are a lot of plates in the air spinning around, and learning how can we leverage some of those to our benefit for the students," he said. He recognizes that it's easy for someone in his role to get stuck in the operational

side of technology, so he wants to serve as the bridge between users and the tech team. Crais has eagerly begun developing partnerships with other School leaders, such as new **Assistant Head of School for Teaching and Learning Sally Maxwell,** and with teachers.

Some schools tout their decidedly low-tech classrooms, emphasizing that teacher-student relationships are most important. Crais agrees, but argues, "Our students will graduate and go off to universities and colleges that expect fluency with technology, and eventually they'll be living and working in a world infused with technology. Tech is here to stay, so how can we rein it in and make the best environment in the classroom for our students?" Crais believes that, as with most things, technology is good in moderation and balance is extremely important. He cites the Lower School use of tablets that became incredibly useful during the height of the pandemic, and speculates that we might intuitively step back a bit from tech in the classroom to focus on play and interpersonal connections.

"Our job is to teach how we can use this tool to expand our learning and our connections with other people, and learn when it is time to close the laptop and talk to each other," he said. "The laptop or tablet is just this tool we have access to, like a textbook or pen and paper. It's not smart to ignore tech; it's here and we have to use it and learn it."

Crais understands that many of our students spend a lot of time in front of screens outside of school, whether they are playing games or watching movies and videos, so we don't want them behind a screen all day long. MICDS strives to achieve a good balance as evidenced by the number of tools and software programs our teachers use. "We have a lot in our toolkit," he said. "Many technology and software resources are available to our teachers and students, but they are tools—a way to accomplish a task—and shouldn't be barriers to personal interactions and relationships among faculty and students. I look forward to working more with teachers and academic leaders on our continued balanced use of technology, finding times

when it's appropriate and meaningful to unplug." He is also planning collaboration with teachers and our Student Support Services team to incorporate social-emotional learning programs into our pedagogy, some of which has to do with what he calls "unplug time" and some that covers topics like using social media. The goal is to teach students how to embrace technology in appropriate ways.

This collaboration among various stakeholders throughout the MICDS community is something Crais identified during his interview process. "It's a warm, welcoming, friendly environment, which is exactly what parents want their children to be around," he said. He recognizes the history and tradition imbued in the School that complements the community, while also noting that it's a place to grow. He's looking forward to getting to know more people in his first year, developing strong relationships around the campus and with various departments and ensuring open lines of communication. "I'd like to be seen as a resource, and even if I don't have the answer, I can help find it." He firmly believes that while tech is valuable, it's not the solution to every challenge, and that to understand exactly what's needed, you have to go to the source. He plans to set up focus groups with users including faculty, staff, and students so he can understand how technology impacts their day-to-day lives at MICDS.

Not surprisingly, Crais lists his smart phone as the most useful piece of technology he owns, but perhaps not for the reason you might think. "I don't like to be tethered to my desk," he explains. The phone allows him to be accessible even when he's out of his office meeting people, exploring the campus, and seeing for himself exactly how technology is being used to serve the Mission of MICDS.

He's come a long way from having students crowd around that Mac Classic on his desk, and we are thrilled that Stewart Crais is leading the way forward with continued careful integration of technology into our classrooms and community.