



STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



A MESSAGE FROM THE HEADMASTER

Dear Friends,

Charles Merrill's decision to house Commonwealth in two brownstones reflected his own fundamental commitments and shaped the school in critical ways: the school would be about people, not fields and facilities, and it would benefit from the intellectual, artistic, and social stimulation of the city. In turn it would serve Boston and its diverse neighborhoods. Commonwealth has been a place where students and teachers work together, collegially, in a setting that feels like a home, creating a close community that cultivates not only sharp minds but thoughtful, considerate hearts. For its intellectual depth and accomplishments, its social commitments, and its students' creative expression, Commonwealth has rightly taken its place among the most exciting and interesting schools around.

While alumni/ae from decades past sense a similar energy and ethos when visiting us, the school, nonetheless, continues to adapt and change. It must update and improve the facilities it has in order to support effectively its greatest asset—its people—if it is to continue to offer a distinctive education. To that end, the Board of Trustees, over the last three years, has led a strategic planning process. With committees assigned to study the key areas of faculty, program, technology, facilities, and affordability and access, they rigorously examined Commonwealth's strengths and its needs in order to determine how best to proceed in the coming years. At their meeting in May 2014 the Board approved a new, five-year strategic plan, which sets out clear goals and specific actions to support teachers and students, improve our programs, and revitalize the lovely and historic building which we call home.

This booklet summarizes the plan's findings and recommendations. The entire plan, and additional information, is available online at www.commschool.org/plan, and a complete list of committee members is listed on the back of this booklet.

I want to thank co-chairs Karen Firestone, Therese Hendricks, and Bob Murchison and everyone who served on our planning committees for their thoughtful guidance and contributions throughout this process.

Yours truly,
William D. Wharton
HEADMASTER

FACULTY

Each of us in our own different ways has shaped what the school offers. There's something extraordinary about the freedom given to a teacher to invent a course with the help of a Hughes Grant. You teach it with enormous enthusiasm, because it's something that you're interested in learning about, discovering, shaping yourself. What you have to offer makes a big difference in a very immediate way to the kids you teach, and to your own intellectual life as well.

JUDITH SIPORIN, ENGLISH TEACHER

Judith Siporin is currently creating a Renaissance art history course inspired by her passion for Caravaggio. With the help of a Hughes grant during a recent sabbatical, Judith spent a month in Rome viewing his paintings and exploring Renaissance gardens.

We ask much of our faculty at Commonwealth. Not only are they expert in their subjects and skilled classroom teachers, but as advisors they provide students with academic, social, and personal support. We also ask them to contribute to the administration of the school, serving as *de facto* deans, admission officers, college essay advisors, project coordinators, and more.

Attracting and keeping a faculty of this caliber would be a challenge for any school or college. Commonwealth's expectations raise the bar. Teachers enjoy the autonomy they are given in the classroom as well as the unusual voice they have in helping to shape the institution, but the school must offer competitive compensation that makes a life in teaching appealing, as well as opportunities for professional development that equips teachers for their various roles and enables them to sustain active intellectual lives. To help the school recruit, retain, and support a talented and diverse faculty, the strategic plan identified these priorities:

- Augment faculty salaries, especially for those teachers with less than fifteen years' experience, to ensure that we are competitive with our peers.
- Replenish the John Hughes Fund for Faculty Development, which allows faculty to study, travel, or otherwise pursue an interest that will reinvigorate what they teach and how they teach it. The fund also supports participation in conferences and workshops during the year. Created in 1997, the John Hughes Fund, which honors one of the school's first teachers, is nearly spent.
- Unite the role of faculty recruiting, mentoring, and support in a new position: Director of Faculty.



VITAL RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships we have with our teachers generates a warmth that persists throughout our time here. The conversations we have with them sometimes seem a more vital part of our education than anything on the syllabus. I can almost chart my own development by the talks I've had with my teachers and my advisor.



ACADEMICS, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, AND ATHLETICS

The insistence on an imaginative intellectualism helps explain how Commonwealth continues to attract and nurture students so committed to academics, the arts, social justice, and friendship, year after year after year.

MELISSA HABER '87, P'15, HISTORY TEACHER

Connecting ideas across academic disciplines has become a larger part of scholarly work in recent years. Commonwealth's small scale and the way we frequently meet and talk already create informal opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration. This plan aims to formalize that give-and-take in ways that will not only enhance students' experiences but also help raise the visibility of the school. At the same time, stronger support of students' extracurricular life can help make their experience outside the classroom more coherent and meaningful. And Commonwealth recognizes the need to promote health and wellness throughout school life, from sports to lunch to advising. With that in mind, the strategic plan proposes several additions to Commonwealth's already exemplary program.

- The senior capstone is a semester-long independent research project designed to let students flex their scholarly muscles. We have already launched the program: in 2014–15, three seniors are planning capstone projects, on topics ranging from Nietzsche and existentialism, to researching and writing a play based on women's diaries from the Civil War, to a graphic-novel on the origins of the Comics Code.
- Our students' successes in Math Team and Model United Nations have energized their learning and raised the school's profile. We plan to make more opportunities for students to publish, present, or exhibit their work outside the school.
- We plan to create a comprehensive health and wellness program by coordinating what are now mostly separate elements—the athletics program, advising, food service, and our Health and Community class—to emphasize the connections among nutrition, exercise, and physical and mental health.
- Also with a view to coordinating and integrating student activities, the plan recommends creating a part-time role to promote and coordinate, in concert with advisors, students' extracurricular activities.

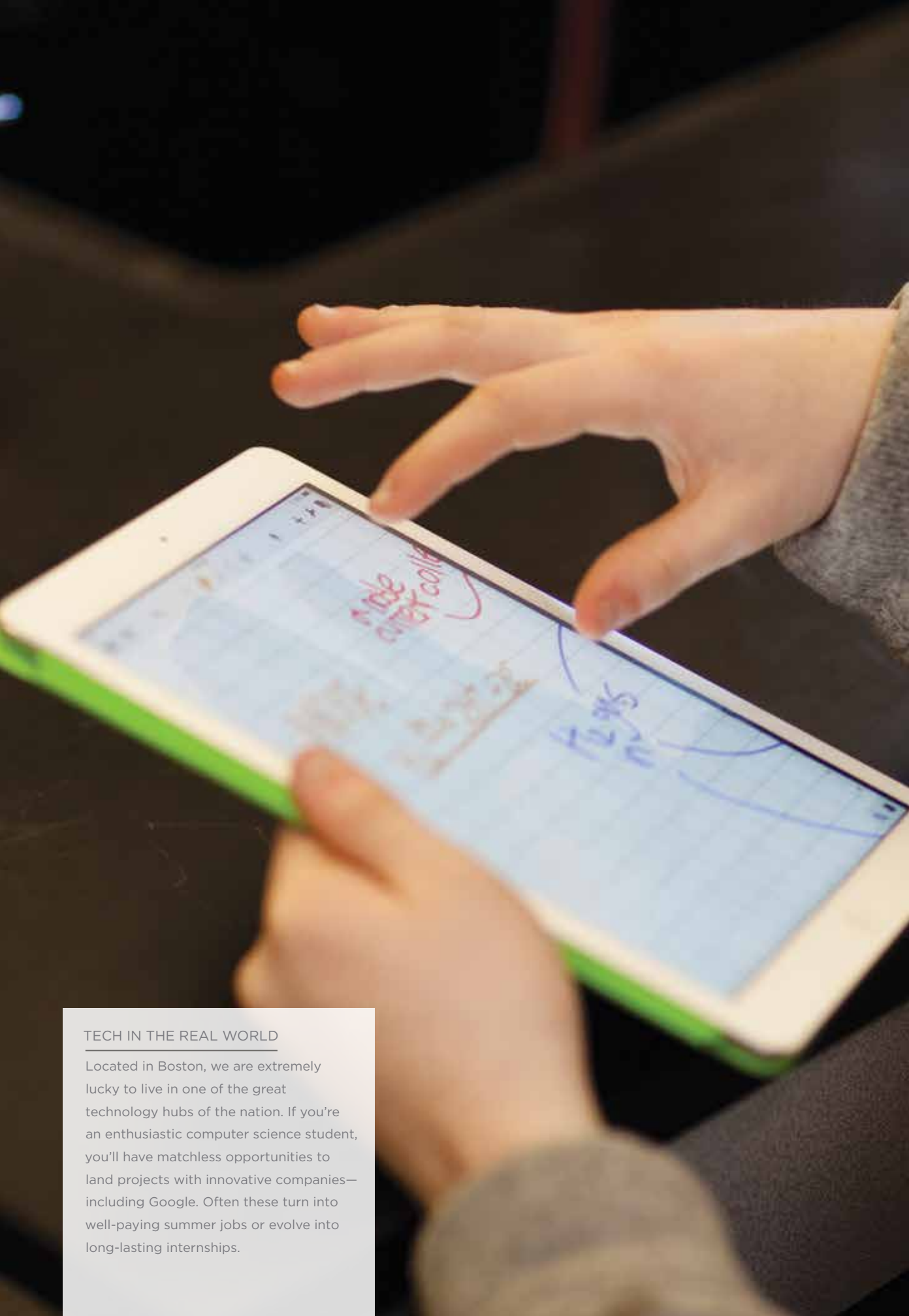
TECHNOLOGY

Using an iPad to create animated presentations of problem sets made learning physics more intuitive and interactive, not to mention more fun.

MARY PEDICINI '15

There's a lot of talk about how technology is revolutionizing education: online classes, mandatory iPads, electronic books, etc. Technology has transformed many of the ways we work at Commonwealth—laptops and projectors are a part of every classroom—but we have been resolutely careful and thoughtful about adopting new tools. We are determined to preserve the close face-to-face relationships that define and shape our community where personal interaction, argument, and discussion—as well as deep exploration and reflection—are central to learning.

- The growth of online learning presents interesting opportunities for schools like Commonwealth, where our small size sometimes limits the range of courses we can offer. After looking at various online options and the experience of peer schools with online learning, we have decided to proceed carefully. This year a small class in advanced computer programming is using online materials from a Stanford OpenEdX course to supplement their student-chosen year-long topic on artificial intelligence.
- We have run a number of pilot programs using iPads; the tablets have proven useful in physics and foreign language classes. The goal is to have technology support and advance the art of teaching, not substitute for it. We will continue to upgrade our technology infrastructure to permit the prudent adoption of such tools.
- At this point, we have determined that the usefulness and economics of electronic books do not yet deliver on their promise. Our students also have made clear that they prefer paper books, especially for English classes where annotation and navigation are simpler with paper. We will continue to watch the development of electronic books.
- We have adopted Google Apps for Education for communication and the management of courses and syllabi, and we continue to explore software that will help us support and monitor our students' work.
- While not specifically a part of the strategic planning process, our librarian, in collaboration with history and science teachers, has developed a program that teaches students in grades 9-II research techniques, starting with print and moving to the evaluation and sophisticated use of online resources and databases.



TECH IN THE REAL WORLD

Located in Boston, we are extremely lucky to live in one of the great technology hubs of the nation. If you're an enthusiastic computer science student, you'll have matchless opportunities to land projects with innovative companies—including Google. Often these turn into well-paying summer jobs or evolve into long-lasting internships.



A PLACE THEY CAN CALL HOME

One of the most rewarding things about being in a school like this is bringing in kids whose lives you can help to transform. At the same time, there are just as many stories about kids from Newton or Brookline or Cambridge who came to us because they were doing incredibly well in school, but were bored, weren't being challenged, or were viewed suspiciously because they were interested in computer programming or they were avid readers. They come here and find a community of kids who share a lot of these interests; you are not an outsider at Commonwealth if you like to argue about Physics. For them coming here has been just as transforming in some ways. They seem to have found the place that they can call home.

BILL WHARTON, HEADMASTER

AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS

“Although we have a unifying Commonwealth identity, we come from different locations throughout the greater Boston area and represent different cultures. I have gotten to know and love people with unusual talents and tastes who I would not have known if I had ended up at a larger school. Here, we become aware that not everyone we meet will have the same story as our own.”

One of the reasons Charles Merrill started Commonwealth was to offer a top-notch high school education to people who could not otherwise afford it. One of the first things he did was to seek out students from underrepresented communities to bring to the school. For many years, Mr. Merrill used his own money to support those students. Today, the funding comes from donors via the Annual Fund and gifts to the endowment. In 2014–15 the school granted about \$1.25 million in financial aid, with the average grant more than \$27,000.

We have two programs in place to back up grants with academic support. Entering Commonwealth identifies promising incoming students whose preparation makes the transition particularly challenging, and provides extra advising and support throughout their career at Commonwealth. The Homework Project, a recommended option for some students and open to all, provides a proctored evening study hall twice a week, designed for students who need a structured setting in which to work.

But we want to do more. Each year there are qualified applicants whose financial needs we cannot meet, and necessity forces them to choose other schools. The strategic plan includes these priorities:

- Expand our ability to meet financial need and to endow support programs such as Entering Commonwealth and the Homework Project.
- Strengthen our outreach to underserved communities. For the sake of opportunity, and for the way it opens all of our students to new points of view, we want to increase the cultural and ethnic diversity of our enrollment.
- Increase revenue by growing the Annual Fund and exploring new revenue sources such as summer programs. Planning is also underway for a capital campaign to support our students.
- Continue the school’s prudent fiscal management and develop a benchmarking system to ensure tuition increases are well managed and justifiable.

OUR HOME

When I see my friends surrounded by the details in the stairways and classrooms, I feel a connection to everyone who has ever gone to school here. This building is why I love Commonwealth.

CHRISTOPHER GLEASON '15,
SON OF DAVID '79 AND NEPHEW OF ALICE '81


For every Commonwealth student, home has been 151 Commonwealth Avenue. This treasured building has sheltered classes, recesses, assemblies, cubby klatches, teacher conferences, grading meetings, study halls, stairway encounters, sports official (fencing, yoga, dance) and unofficial (street hockey in the lunchroom?), three pianos, napping students, and even the occasional rock band—but no roller skating.

The atmosphere inside our walls tempers the intensity of the academic program with humor and friendliness, and encourages the creativity we treasure: the best insights sometimes come during a break with friends in a lobby corner or while relaxing in a teacher's guest chair. Denizens of 151 Comm. Ave. sometimes even take a bit of pride in our casual feel. It's a sign that we stand apart from other schools.

We must, however, make improvements to our building: enhance the layout and facilities to support our programs and upgrade the structure and systems, all while preserving its historic, intimate atmosphere. Several major projects are included in the strategic plan.

SCIENCE LAB RENOVATION: In the fifteen to twenty years since Commonwealth's science classrooms were last renovated, much has changed in science and in science teaching. Plans are already well along for a renovation that will bring:

- Flexibility in layout and furnishings to move more easily between investigation and discussion.
- Dedicated prep areas outside the classrooms, which will allow experiments to be run more often.
- Improved ventilation and safety systems, broadening the kinds of experiments students and teachers can perform.



WHERE I'M HAPPIEST

When I walk in the door it seems so homey and lived in and full of kids and personality. The character of every detail of this place is so quirky and delightful, and even though none of those adjectives would have described my own kids' modern and spacious elementary school, I always felt glad to be here, and I thought that distinction taught me something about where I was happiest.

KATE BLUESTEIN, ENGLISH TEACHER

INTERIOR RENOVATION AND RENEWAL: The demands of 145 students and thirty teachers stretch our facilities to the limit, so we must make the best use of all we have. As part of the planning process, faculty, staff, and students have been working with a team of architects on a master building plan. Next summer and beyond we will undertake major renovations of our brownstones. The science room work described above will be the first part of that plan to come to fruition. In following summers, other work will create spaces more in line with current teaching and advising needs and improve the accessibility of the building and the flow of people through it.

- One of the most noticeable changes will be relocating the stairway that connects the first floor to the lower level: it will become a continuation of the Dartmouth stairway. In the process, we will gain additional space for science facilities; make it easier to go from upper floors to the lower level; and widen the connection between the Commonwealth and Dartmouth lobbies.
- Other plans include widening hallways, creating small meeting rooms for student collaboration or teacher conferences, and combining two third-floor classrooms to make a multi-purpose room that can be one large space or two classrooms.

UPGRADING SYSTEMS: When they work well, utilities such as heating can recede into the background, largely unnoticed by a building's occupants. Commonwealth's building systems have shown their age in recent years, and it has become clear that a major overhaul is necessary. The strategic plan includes an entirely new high efficiency heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system, along with new windows to help it operate with maximum efficiency. While this work may not be glamorous, the benefits in terms of comfort, cost savings, and sustainability are significant.

ELEVATOR: You read that right: Commonwealth is planning to install an elevator. It is, in part, a legal requirement—we are renovating enough of the school that we must move closer to complying with the Americans with Disability Act. But, frankly, installing an elevator is overdue, and it addresses an important shortcoming in our ability to meet our mission.

Commonwealth's 2014 Strategic Plan was developed with guidance and input from a wide range of people: faculty, staff, students, alumni/ae, current and former parents, and trustees. We think it represents a set of projects and goals that will make Commonwealth stronger.

Updates on the plan and its progress will come via email and in CM, the alumni/ae magazine. You can also see updates and more information at www.commschool.org/plan.

The Commonwealth School 2014 Strategic Plan Committees and Members

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Monica Schilder

TECHNOLOGY

Jeff Flowers, *chair*
Steve Hanna '82 P'13
Lisa Pedicini P'15
Jeff Racioppi

COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL

151 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02116