

It's been a minute...

Actually, it's been several months - countless minutes - since my last newsletter. Believe me, I don't flatter myself by thinking that you have all been waiting with baited breath for this newsletter to land in your inbox, but the fact that I have inadvertently taken such a long hiatus from writing must mean something. Or maybe not. Maybe it's just a reflection of how this year has been for all of us.

It's no secret that many of us feel like this is THE most challenging year of our professional lives. And that's significant and concerning, given the fact that the second most challenging year was last year. Our ability to absorb more, to do more, to be more has been severely tested this year. We've been riding the waves of COVID infections and quarantines; sub shortages and ever-changing health and safety protocols. We are experiencing student behaviors that feel unfamiliar in terms of their frequency and intensity, leaving us puzzled, frustrated, and searching for solutions. We are worried about the mental health of our students, our colleagues, our family members, and ourselves. Simply put, the trauma we have collectively experienced over the past two years has left us exhausted in ways that are hard to explain.

At the same time, we feel as though our profession has never been under more scrutiny by parents and the general community. Boundaries that previously existed between home and school appear to have been permanently eroded over the past few years. While we continue to welcome and celebrate the importance of healthy partnerships between parents and schools, we don't welcome the worry we feel that something we say or do will wind up being taken out of context and broadcast on social media. We struggle when decisions that we make using our experience and judgment as professional educators, decisions that we believe are truly in the best interest of our students, are challenged and questioned by those who think they know better than we do.

So, yes, without question, it's been a difficult year. We are all - teachers, administrators, staff members, parents, and students - still struggling to find our way back onto solid footing after two years of disruption. There is no magic wand, no re-set button, no simple recipe for making things better, easier, or more "normal" again. We can't go backwards; we can only go forward. And we need to go forward together.

We need to do what we have always done so well together. We need to stay committed to our shared values of being a supportive environment for all, putting students first, and relying on the strength of our collaborative processes and respectful relationships. We also need to practice forgiveness and grace, with each other and with ourselves. There is no roadmap for the times we are living in so we need to trust that each of us in our own ways are doing the very best we can do each and every day. We need to assume good intentions, and we need to be OK with letting a few balls drop once in a while.

So, if there is something that you've let slide this year because you just needed to create some space to breathe - that's OK. If it's important, you can always come back to it when you are ready. I did - so I know you will too. Until next time... *Melanie*

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The Pittsford Central School District community works collaboratively to inspire and prepare our students to be their best, do their best and make a difference in the lives of others.

Spring is here!



While our temperatures are still very unpredictable (70 degrees one day, 42 the next...) mother nature has worked her springtime magic over the past couple of weeks. The grass is green, the daffodils are in full bloom, the forsythia bushes are already in danger of dropping their blossoms, and there is the distinct scent of fresh mulch in the air as I walk around my neighborhood.

The return from April break doesn't just mean warmer weather and tulips in bloom, however. It heralds the final weeks of the school year and all that that entails. AP exams are just around the corner, as are spring concerts at every building. The high school master schedule for next year is being built while placement discussions are occurring at the elementary buildings. Senior Inquiry projects, Open Houses, Fine Arts festivals, Ice Cream Socials, awards ceremonies, and field days; Regents exams, proms and graduation... In a blink of an eye this school year will come to a close.

It feels important to recognize that while things may not yet feel 100% "normal", this final quarter of the school year will be the most normal final quarter of a school year we have had since 2019. While so many of our end-of-year activities are celebratory in nature, this year in particular they may also trigger some anxiety and worry. Our students have not had the opportunity, or been expected, to participate in many of these events in recent years and may need some additional support and instruction regarding expectations. Keep in mind that those 8th graders sitting in your classrooms right now were in 5th grade the last time they had a "normal" end to their school year; those 11th graders were 8th graders; your 2nd graders have never experienced all of the typical end-of-year events.

Savor these spring weeks with your students and all that this time of year offers us in schools. This is the time when we see the fruits of our labor paying off in remarkable ways. This is the time for celebration and reflection; hard work and fun. This was the time that was stolen from us two years ago; make the most of it and be grateful to have it back. The school year will be over before you know it!

A plug for a podcast!

Sometime during the COVID shutdown I discovered Jennifer Gonzalez and her [Cult of Pedagogy](#). Her's is a site I continue to go back to when I'm looking for resources when I'm planning for a meeting or some form of professional learning, or when I just want to do some learning myself. She has hundreds of blog entries, close to 200 podcasts (to date), video clips and more on a wide range of topics.

Recently I listened to her [podcast interview](#) with Hedreich Nichols, author of the book, *Finding Your Blindspots*. In the book, as well as in the interview, Ms. Nichols takes readers/listeners through a series of 8 questions that she encourages all of us to ask ourselves in an effort to uncover our blind spots, or our hidden or implicit biases. The goal is not to just quickly scan through the 8 questions assuming there is a right or wrong answer to be found. The purpose of the questions is to encourage real reflection about the ways we interact with people we consider family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers and to understand more about the ways that our own biases (we all have them) impact those interactions. She is very clear that this is not about a desire to stir up feelings of guilt or shame but rather to find small, but important, ways to bring about understanding that may potentially lead to positive change in the name of what she terms more "**culturally responsible**" teaching. In the second half of the podcast, she provides listeners with six steps they can take, and two things not to do! I encourage you to subscribe to the podcast and take a listen!

8 QUESTIONS FOR
UNCOVERING YOUR IMPLICIT BIASES

1. **How diverse is your personal circle and why does it look like it does?**
A limited social circle limits your perspective.
2. **Who are the "others" in your life?**
Notice who you consider "one of us" and "one of them."
3. **How often do you use generalizations?** Notice when you use "they" to describe people of a certain race, culture, or other group.
4. **What is your initial perception when you talk to someone with an accent different from yours?**
5. **Do you think the integration of diverse historical perspectives is good practice or divisive politics?** The latter suggests a resistance to learning.
6. **Who is on your "free pass" list?**
We tend to be more forgiving of those we like and agree with.
7. **When do you tend most toward non-acceptance and judgment?**
Are your triggers cultural? Ideological? Religious? Something else?
8. **How much cross-cultural literature, TV, and movies do you consume?**
Not much? You're probably not familiar with lives different from yours.

LEARN MORE IN EPISODE 188 OF THE CULT OF PEDAGOGY PODCAST

And, if you are looking for more, or different, strategies, resources, and ideas that are practical to implement, check out the entire [Cult of Pedagogy](#) website if you haven't done so already!

Beware the dangers of the false dichotomy

In times of stress, when we feel like our plates are as full as they can possibly be, our natural tendency is to reject anything that feels like it will add to that overflowing plate. So often these days I hear teachers (here and elsewhere) express concerns about how they can possibly accomplish X when they are also expected to be responsible for Y. Those statements tend to sound something like...

“I have my academic standards that I am responsible for. I can’t also be responsible for the social emotional learning of my students.” OR

“How can I be expected to cover all of the content students will need to be successful on the final exam AND take time to do relationship building activities with my students?” OR

“Restorative practices means students won’t experience real consequences when they misbehave.”

Each of these statements, while reflecting very real concerns and frustrations, represent a false dichotomy. As we continue our efforts towards becoming a more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning community, we must understand and embrace the belief that it is through the building of respectful, supportive relationships with our students, and the ongoing attention to their social emotional learning needs, that we enable them to meet their full academic potential. It can’t be “either or”; it must be “and”.

There are so many ways to incorporate **social emotional learning** into academic learning that many of us do this naturally, without necessarily being aware of it. Any time you purposefully partner students up in your class and ask them to talk together about the subject matter at hand, or have students work in a cooperative group to complete a task, you are helping them to develop interpersonal skills necessary to maintain positive relationships. When you assign your students a long term project and support them in the organization and time-management skills necessary for successful completion, you are contributing to their ability to demonstrate decision-making and responsible behaviors in school. [New York State’s Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks](#) make it clear that SEL and academic success are necessarily intertwined and one should not supplant the other.

The same is true for establishing and maintaining positive, supportive, **relationships** with your students. We know that the brain can’t learn effectively when it feels stressed or overwhelmed. In fact, a brain under stress automatically goes into a fight or flight mode, which stops the learning process. Little things can go a long way towards making your students feel safe, recognized, and valued, thereby allowing the brain to “relax” and learning to take place. Greeting students by name as they enter your classroom is a small but significant gesture that takes no time away from the day’s learning objectives, but goes a long way towards making every student feel seen and valued. Selecting instructional materials or examples that reflect your students backgrounds, interests, likes/dislikes, is another way of establishing relationships as it communicates to them that you know who they are. Taking two minutes at the end of a class period to periodically play a quick round of “[This or That](#)” is a fun, low-stress way for everyone in the room to learn a bit more about each other, building connections through identified similarities and differences. Feel free to make the choices related to your content! For more relationship building strategies, click [Here](#) or [Here](#). Many of these should sound familiar to you as I know that many of you practice them on a regular basis. Getting the best out of students academically requires an investment of time and energy to build and maintain positive relationships.

Finally, the concern that the use of **restorative practices** as part of our established Code of Conduct will result in us “giving hugs instead of consequences” is yet another false dichotomy. Restorative practices are about taking accountability for harm that is caused as a result of behavior, and working to restore damaged relationships. Engaging students in restorative work is just what the name implies - it’s work. It requires reflection, honesty, empathy, and a desire to move forward in a positive direction. It takes time, and it’s not easy. Engaging students in restorative work, however, does not mean that they will not also experience more “traditional” consequences for a behavioral incident. It’s not an “either/or” situation. Having a restorative mindset signals the value we all place on the importance of positive, respectful relationships as well as our understanding that it is through those relationships that we are most able to effect positive change. Will students still need, on occasion, to experience traditional consequences? Of course they will. But when they return to our setting we want them to be able to do so with relationships intact, harm repaired, and knowing that they continue to be a valued member of our learning community.

Nothing about our lives as educators can be clearly separated into either/or dichotomies. Our work is much too complicated and full of nuances for that. As busy and stressed as we all are, it’s important to remember that we all have it in us to support social emotional learning and positive, productive, respectful relationships with our students. If we don’t, their learning suffers. Perhaps more importantly, if we don’t, then who will?

ILC updates...

Members of the Instructional Leadership Council have spent a fair amount of time this year unpacking and making meaning of [New York State's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#) (CR-SE Framework). In the fall, we worked to find the connections between the CR-SE Framework; our previously established ILC goals in the areas of curriculum & assessment, instructional practices, educational structures and partnerships; and the District's Equity Goals. As the shared decision making body responsible for oversight of our instructional program, it is important that we are all clear in our understandings of how all of these pieces fit together in informing our work moving forward. We are now engaged in sub-group work focused on the identification of, and support for, culturally responsive instructional practices and a plan for creating a "teacher friendly" document that clearly shows the connections between our Next Generation Skills, the NYS SEL Benchmarks, and the CR-SE Framework. These are meaty, and meaningful, conversations that will lead to practical supports for teachers and students.

In addition to the above, long-term work, ILC has received a report on the updates being made to our K-12 Social Studies curriculum, charged an ad hoc committee to study 4th-6th grade math grouping practices, and reviewed data from a parent/teacher/student survey on the efficacy of our one-to-one laptop initiative.

Despite some interruptions to our meeting plans caused by sub shortages and weather emergencies, we have appreciated the opportunity to be back together, in person, focused on important long-term work as it relates to the district's curricular and instructional program. I am always appreciative of the time and focused energy given by each and every member of our Instructional Leadership Council.

PLC Advisory Committee continues it's work...

The PLC Advisory Committee was launched in December, 2019. After four very productive meetings where we learned together about highly effective PLC work, we established our purpose statement (see below) and had just begun identifying the barriers that stood between our current state and where we hoped to grow towards as a PLC community. Then, COVID hit, we were shut down, and the PLC Committee did not meet in person again until September 2021.

What happened in the months between March 2020 and September 2021, however, was that almost all teachers got a taste of what working with their PLC could do for them, and for their students. The Wednesday afternoons that were built into everyone's schedule during the 2020-21 school year provided time and opportunities for collaboration that had not existed, at least not to that extent, previously. While the PLC Advisory Committee can't reinstate "early release Wednesdays", members of the committee have been focused on ways we can support the continued commitment to PLC work throughout the district.

As a group, we have looked for any potential opportunities within our current structures to provide time for collaborative teams to meet to focus on the four PLC questions. The PLC Advisory committee members have also been involved in conversations regarding WIN day implementation for both the middle and high school levels. Currently members are working on the creation of a "PLC Playbook". This resource, which we hope to make available to all teachers by the beginning of next school year, will include common language, sample templates, resources, testimonials, and Frequently Asked Questions about PLC work. Our goal is to provide support to teams that are functioning well, and teams that are still trying to figure things out, by building in a variety of differentiated and flexible resources. Stay tuned for more to come!

WHY PLCs in Pittsford? *Because...*

We believe in a collective responsibility for all students' learning.

We recognize that our work is complex and no one person can do it alone.

We strive to continuously do better for our students and ourselves.