

So this is what it feels like...

We talked about it, we speculated about it, we (thought we) planned for it, but now we know. Now we know that this is what it feels like to return to school after 18 months of “school disruption” due to a global pandemic that is still raging in the midst of social, racial, and political turmoil, with kids who have seemingly forgotten what it is like to be in school full time and are presenting with “gaps” in learning that we are trying to figure out how to address. This is what it feels like - and it doesn’t always feel good!

Don’t get me wrong. I know that it actually feels very, very good to be back in school every day with your students. To be able to say, “see you tomorrow” and have that be a true statement. To once again be able to work with readers at the kidney table, facilitate math centers, allow students to engage in some form of group work again. All of that is wonderful and everyone I have talked to is quick to acknowledge and celebrate that. But there are also aspects of this fall that have been very challenging at every level.

To respond effectively to those challenges our students need something different from us. They need us to re-teach them some of the basic routines and expectations. They need us to help them re-adjust to being on “our timeline” instead of their own at-home timeline. They need us to teach, model, and reinforce appropriate and respectful behavior. They need us to help them develop self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness skills. They need us to SLOW DOWN and listen - truly listen - to what they are telling us they need.

We hold ourselves, and our students, to high standards. We tend to define ourselves and our success as educators by the academic success and accolades our students achieve. We are a community of Type A, high achieving, highly skilled professionals. As such, it is hard to slow down. It is hard to give ourselves permission to set aside the day’s lesson plan in favor of sitting with our students and supporting them as they process the concerns that are weighing heavily on their hearts and minds. But that is exactly what they need us to be willing and able to do.

Our students will not successfully come along with us on the learning journey this year if we are trying to do too much of what we think is important, while not slowing down to respond to what they are telling us, through their words and actions, that they need. Your Instructional Roadmaps/Guides to the Essentials should provide you with the “permission” you need to slow down, re-teach the learning behaviors students appear to have forgotten, integrate learning strategies that help students build relationships with each other, and on occasion, throw the days’ lesson out the window to respond to whatever is uppermost in the minds and hearts of your students.

We did our best to be prepared for what this year would bring, but there was no way to really know what the demands would be. Now that we know, we need to respond accordingly. Slow down, be patient, listen to understand, focus on the essentials, and trust yourself to do what is best for this group of students, this year, during this difficult time.

Until next time...

Melanie

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.

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Equity and Inclusion Goals

At its September 14th meeting, the Board of Education adopted a set of [Equity and Inclusion Goals](#) that will inform the work of our district, at all levels, over the coming months and years. These goals were an outgrowth of the District Summer Leadership Workshop where 80 stakeholders came together to articulate our commitment to equity, understand more about the connection between our work at the district level and the expectations framed by the state, and take a deep dive into Pittsford's [Educational Equity and Excellence Policy](#). A critical part of implementing this policy is the establishment of goals, and the ongoing monitoring of our success in achieving those goals.

While the full complement of goals cuts across all of the District departments, the Office of Curriculum and Instruction has primary responsibility for the work involved in achieving several of the stated goals, including:

- ◇ Ensuring that common resources used for **K-12 ELA** instruction represent the diversity within our student population and provide students opportunities to both see themselves and understand the experience of others;
- ◇ Updating the **K-12 Social Studies** curriculum to reflect our commitment to the NYSED Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework;
- ◇ Integrating **NYSED SEL Benchmarks** into all new/revised curriculum units;
- ◇ Examining the process for identifying students for **AP Classes** across all subject areas and schools to identify specific barriers creating inequity;
- ◇ Evaluating and recommending any necessary changes to **4th-6th grade math grouping** practices in order to ensure equitable access to higher level courses and to support student confidence in their perception of themselves as learners;
- ◇ Creating and implementing **Equity Analysis Protocols** for curricular and non-curricular learning experiences so that all certificated staff and administrators have shared transparency and accountability; and
- ◇ Embedding **professional learning opportunities** within building level and district level structures for all faculty and staff that address and promote equity and inclusivity as defined in the Educational Excellence and Equity Policy.

These goals will focus much of the work of groups such as the Elementary Academic Council, the Secondary Academic Council, the Instructional Leadership Council, and the District Standards Leaders Team this year. They will also inform the work of some of our Steering Committees, building level ILTs, and our entire administrative leadership team. For much of the work, we will seek to involve the voices of people not typically at the table, including students, parents, and community members as appropriate. Some of this work is already underway, and some of it will challenge us to think critically about some of our long-held assumptions and practices. All of the work will be done according to our PCSD Core Values of being collaborative, student centered, supportive of all, progressive, and focused on continuous improvement.

I look forward to engaging deeply in this work with you.

Equity Toolkit reminder

We all share the goal of creating and sustaining learning environments that are welcoming and affirming; where all students are treated respectfully and with dignity; and where difficult, necessary, and brave conversations can take place productively. Sometimes, that can feel like a challenge as we are confronted with unanticipated events, student behavior that may not always be in keeping with our expectations, parent concerns, and the hidden implicit biases that we all (students and staff) carry with us every day.

You are not alone in trying to navigate these increasingly challenging waters. The District has put together an [Equity Toolkit](#) to help you. Contained within the Toolkit are documents intended to provide you with support and advice on everything from fostering cultural awareness in your classroom, to turning challenging moments into teachable moments, and much more. We strongly encourage all teachers to bookmark the toolkit and use it as a helpful guide to creating equitable, safe, and welcoming environments for all.



Elementary Grade Level Team sites



Elementary Teachers: Are you wondering where you can access the most up-to-date Guide to the Essentials for your grade level? How about your November-March-June report card indicators? Wonder what's up next month for Number Corners? Feel like you really need to watch the AIMS-web SWAY again? Did you participate in one of the “routines” professional learning opportunities this summer, felt like you learned some amazing things, but have already forgotten a lot of what you learned? Or, were you not able to participate in that learning over the summer, but would like to check it out now?

All of this information, and much more, can be found by visiting the Team site for your grade level. Elementary Core Standards Leaders created a Team for every grade level and they use these as a consistent repository for sharing information, responding to frequently asked questions, and maintaining up-to-date documentation. Using Teams for this information should reduce the number of emails that you need to read, or sift through, to find critical information. These are “teacher only” sites (no administrators have access to the sites) in order to provide a safe space for teachers to ask questions, get feedback, try out new ideas, and collaborate virtually with colleagues.

You are strongly encouraged to make checking your grade level Team site a routine part of your practice. You can set your notification within the Team site so that you are alerted whenever there is a new post in the Team, or you can customize your notifications if you prefer. Either way - you don't want to miss out on all of the important information at your finger tips in Teams!

Please reach out to any one of our Elementary Core Standards Leaders if you have any questions about accessing and using your Team.

PLCs for All

Our October 8th Superintendent's Conference Day provided us with the opportunity to do a “re-set” on our Professional Learning Communities initiative. For the first time ever we were able to provide a common, consistent training to all teachers on the basic principles of PLC work. Even better, teachers were able to attend the training WITH the members of their PLC collaborative team and then had the opportunity immediately after the training to apply some of what they had learned. Among our goals for the day was the development of an understanding of PLC work as an **ongoing process** in which educators work **collaboratively** in **recurring cycles** of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better **results** for the students they serve. The four questions that drive the work of a PLC are always:

- What is it we expect our students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn?
- How will we respond when some students already know it?

Embedded within those four questions are opportunities to work collaboratively on essential learning targets, instructional planning and pacing, assessment of student learning, effective interventions, and much more, always with a focus on the evidence of student learning.

For some, this work may have been new. For many, the specific focus on the purpose of PLC work may have felt different than the what has been happening under the guise of PLCs in the past. For collaborative teams that have been functioning well together for a number of years, this day hopefully provided you with a refresher, and the opportunity to think about PLCs through an equity lens.

No matter where you are in the PLC journey it is important that we not think about our PLC work as being “one more thing we have to do”. Rather, time spent engaged in PLC work with your collaborative team should be time that helps you accomplish your learning goals for your students. Now, more than ever, we know that it is unreasonable to expect an individual teacher to meet all the needs of all of their students on their own. We need to work as a team to accomplish our goals. PLCs should not be seen as “more work”. When done well, PLCs provide the opportunity for more effective and efficient work on behalf of all of our students because a PLC team works interdependently to achieve common goals for students while also supporting and empowering teacher learning.

WIN time for our secondary schools

WIN time, a structure that has been in place in our elementary schools for a number of years and was piloted on a limited basis at two of our secondary schools pre-COVID, is an opportunity to provide students with more of what they need - or “What I Need”. This year we are looking forward to a more comprehensive pilot with WIN time across all four secondary buildings and plans are underway to integrate this into the weekly schedule later this fall.

We can think of PLC time and WIN time as two sides of the same coin. It is through an effective PLC model that teams of teachers are able to identify which students need more of something - more time, more or different instruction, more enrichment - in order to learn at high levels. WIN time gives us the structure to provide those things that students need.

Our goal in this extended pilot is to create a block of time within the school day, once each week, that would serve a dual purpose of allowing some teachers time to meet with their collaborative PLC team while others work with students for WIN time. WIN time activities are meant to be aligned with the learning goals already established for a class and therefore should not require teachers to plan new instruction to be delivered during that time. All four secondary buildings will utilize the same schedule for WIN time, so that traveling teachers’ schedules are not negatively impacted, and to allow for cross building collaboration as desired.

There are MANY logistics still to be worked out, including the determination of a start date. Principals will be reaching out, working with their ILTs, and communicating with the entire staff as the planning for WIN time gets underway.

SEL - it’s everyone’s responsibility

Attending to our students’ social emotional needs has never been more important than it is right now. I hear from teachers at all levels how students are struggling to adjust to being back in school, with full classrooms and crowded hallways, every day. They seem to have forgotten how to “do school” and how to interact respectfully. They - and we - have experienced 18 months of trauma induced by the global pandemic that has isolated us and made us fearful for our health and the health of our loved ones; racial unrest on a national and very personal local level; and the divisive political rhetoric that could lead us to believe that our leaders are less interested in solutions than they are in creating more turmoil. In addition, many of our students are carrying other more personal stressors and traumas around with them every day that we may, or may not, be aware of.

The vast majority of us are not trained counselors or mental health professionals; we are teachers trained in our own areas of expertise, but not in dealing with mental health or social emotional issues. So what are we to do?

The reality is that the human brain cannot learn effectively when it is under stress. During times of extreme stress, the most primitive part of our brain takes over, we go into “fight or flight” mode, and learning can’t happen. If we want students to learn our content and skills, we need to provide an environment that supports that learning. We do that by consciously and deliberately building relationships with our students, and supporting them in building relationships with each other. We create classroom spaces that are defined by empathy, patience, and supportive challenge so that our students are emotionally capable of learning.

There are many ways to integrate “SEL activities” with the learning of academic content. Anytime you have students connecting with partners or in small groups, you are honoring the part of the brain that has a deep need for relating to others while strengthening your classroom community. A learning protocol known as [Quiz, Quiz, Trade](#) is an example of a way to integrate SEL with academic content as students are making connections with each other while focusing on academic content, but in a fun and low stress manner.

We can no longer afford to think of SEL as something separate and apart from our responsibilities for “academic” content teacher and learning. Future editions of this newsletter will highlight ways in which we can, and must, integrate the two in order for all students to be ready and able to learn and achieve to their highest potential.

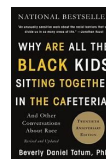
Book recommendations

Our district focus on equity and inclusivity is about improving our practices and the experiences of all members of the PCSD community. It is requiring us to examine every facet of our work - our systems and structures, policies and practices, curriculum and instructional resources - through an equity lens. We need to be willing to make whatever changes are necessary to ensure we are living up to our vision of being a truly equitable and inclusive school community. We will be called upon to set aside some of the things we have always done in order to make room for new, more culturally responsive-sustaining approaches to our work.

Experts in the field of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity often speak of this being, necessarily, “inside out work” meaning we need to look inside ourselves before making the changes that are visible on the outside. Real change is not motivated and sustained by external, or outside, forces alone. It requires individual members of the organization to do their own “inside work”. We must, individually and collectively, believe in the necessity this work, and understand the harm we risk causing to members of our community if we don’t do the work.

One way to engage in some of the “inside” work is to engage in professional learning opportunities, many of which have been, and will continue to be, made available to members of the district. Another way is to pick up a book and do some reading. Some of the books that I have found to be useful in my own personal “inside” journey include the following:

[Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria](#) (2017) by Beverly Daniel Tatum. This was probably the first book I read in this area and it really opened my eyes to some of the stories we tell ourselves about race, racial identities, and ethnic divides. Among other topics, Tatum addresses identity issues in multi-racial families and she introduced me to the “model minority” issues many of our Asian students struggle with. I highly recommend!



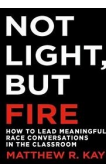
[How to Be an Antiracist](#) (2019) by Ibram X Kendi. This is a very readable book in which the author “weaves an electrifying combination of ethics, history, law, and science with his own personal story of awakening to antiracism.” Along the way, Kendi acknowledges his own “mis-steps” and learning so while his message is important and powerful, it never comes across as preachy.



[So You Want to Talk About Race](#) (2019) by Ijeoma Oluo. In this book the author attempts to do exactly what the title suggests: give us tools to talk with each other, our relatives and neighbors, and our students about race. Race is a hard thing to talk about and we are often afraid of entering into the conversation for fear we will say or do something “wrong”. This book is intended to help us navigate those tricky waters.



[Not Light but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom](#) (2018) by Matthew Kay. As a practicing classroom teacher, Mr. Kay offers important lessons for all educators about creating a classroom environment that supports serious conversations about difficult topics. This book is both practical and beautiful for the passion the author brings to this important work.



[Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#) (2015) by Zaretta Hammond. I know that this one is familiar to many of you as it has been shared in collegial circles and book study groups several times over the past few years. There is a reason it is so popular and has resonated with so many of us. Hammond does an exceptional job of making the case for culturally responsive teaching as being both “just good teaching for all” and something different and important that we need to pay attention to and understand. They don’t get better than this!



This is just a sampling of some good and important books, and an introduction to some important authors in this field. What are YOU reading? Have you come across a title that has supported your own work in this area? Please share so that we can learn from each other.