Curriculum Connection

Learning to row, together

For many years, my primary means of exercise has been running. I am not a competitive runner; I've taken place in only a handful of races in my 20+ years of running. I'm not particularly fast, and I'm even less fast over the past few years. I don't run with other people; I'm a solitary, early morning, kind of runner. I roll out of bed, lace up my running shoes, put some tunes in my ears, and head out on a familiar route for a few miles of pavement pounding. Running helps to clear my head, feel good about accomplishing something good for myself, and allows me to enjoy dessert once in a while with a little less guilt. I've been doing this for years. I know how to do it, and I hardly think about it anymore.

During the pandemic lock-down my husband and I treated ourselves to a new piece of exercise equipment. We bought a rowing machine, set it up in our basement, and have both become regular users. Admittedly, it's kind of a fancy rowing machine that allows you to row with, and be coached by, a professional athlete. As someone new to rowing, that's been really helpful to me. I'm learning the correct form and mechanics of the sport as I'm coached to think about how I'm using my arms, my legs, my back, my core in new and different ways from how I use those same muscle groups when I'm running. Working in synch with the athlete/coach, mirroring my moves with their moves, and feeling like I am part of the team of rowers that I can see on the virtual leader board, has helped me improve over time. Sharing this new activity with my husband, comparing notes on our rows, has also kept me motivated.

This fall, we have all been put in the position of needing to learn something new. We've spent the past however-many years lacing up our sneakers and going into our classrooms for our daily run. We knew how to do that, we were good - really good - at it, and we knew that every day we were accomplishing important things with our students. This year, we were thrown into a new boat and asked to find a way to keep it afloat and pointing in the right direction. We need to continue to use many of the same skill sets we've honed over all of our years in the classroom, but we have to use them in some new and different ways as we also learn and develop new skills.

There may never be a more important time to see teaching as analogous to the sport of rowing. This is not the time to be a solitary kind of runner. We need to be rowers who are in synch with each other. We need to seek out opportunities to learn from experts and be coached. We need to motivate and encourage each other, especially when things are feeling hard. Together, we need to remain focused on the same goal and work collaboratively towards achieving that goal.

Someday maybe I'll be lucky (and brave) enough to row on the water, instead of in my basement. For now I'm enjoying the challenge of doing something new and different and I appreciate the community of rowers that I am part of, even if it is almost all virtual. I've also found that as I've gotten the hang of rowing, my running has improved. I'm running a little faster, a little farther, and feeling a little stronger as a runner than I have for the past couple of years. I believe the same will be true for us as we navigate through the choppy waters of this year. We will emerge stronger and better than before. We will get through this year and we will be better individually, just as we will be better collectively, for having worked as a team to accomplish our goals.

Until next time... *Melanie*

Readiness for Remote Learning

As of this writing, we have been fortunate, in that we have not needed to pivot to fully remote learning for any class, building, or for the district as a whole. However, we also need to be realistic about the fact that this could change quickly. With little to no warning, we could find ourselves in the position of needing to quarantine a cohort of students moving them from an in-person or hybrid model to a fully remote model of learning for two or more weeks. We could be put in the position of needing to move an entire building to remote learning for a short period of time. Or, we could face an executive order putting us all back into remote learning for a potentially more extended period of time.

Given these uncertainties, we all need to be aware of, and understand, the expectations for remote learning that were developed by the Scenario Planning Committee this summer. If you have not already done so, it is important that you take the time to familiarize yourself with the Remote Learning K-12 Plan. Two additional documents have been developed to further articulate the expectations for remote learning at the elementary level, and these, too, should be reviewed by all elementary staff. The Elementary Remote Learning Plan explains what the program should look like from the perspective of a student. The PCSD Elementary Remote School - Expectations and Operations provides more detailed guidance for teachers. K-12 teachers who are currently teaching remotely are all carrying out the plans outlined within these documents.

As a district, we will continue to do what we can to anticipate and prepare for a sudden turn to fully remote learning. This includes monitoring and adjusting our current plan, furthering our technology access and readiness, and continuing to communicate with both staff and parents. In the meantime, knowledge is power, so please make yourself as knowledgeable as possible about our plans and expectations for remote learning this year.

The Importance of the Roadmaps

This past summer teachers of all grade levels, all disciplines, and almost all courses were engaged in the development of Instructional Roadmaps for the 2020-21 school year. Teachers had collaborative and challenging conversations that led to agreements about the most essential learning targets for the school year, what things would necessarily be set-aside for this year, and how the curriculum would unfold over the course of the year. While the roadmaps do not dictate day-to-day instruction or cookie-cutter classrooms, they are intended to allow teachers, and students, to move through coursework in a more aligned manner than perhaps ever before. This work was met with enthusiasm and support over the summer as there was the recognition that this year would be unlike any other year and the roadmaps would allow for consistent focus on the most important aspects of the curriculum, regardless of the learning model.

Now that we are a month into the new school year, it is important to remind ourselves of the good work that was done, and the reasons that it is so important that all teachers adhere to those roadmaps. The roadmaps were created, at least in part, to give you time and space within your curriculum to acclimate students to the use of Seesaw/Teams for the purposes of accessing, engaging with, and submitting assignments. They were created to allow teachers to take additional instructional time with skills and concepts for which students will have developed gaps in their learning based on last year's closure. And they were created to give you the breathing room necessary to establish and maintain a strongly positive classroom culture while assuring all students experience the learning necessary to work towards mastery of the most essential standards and skills.

In addition, the Instructional Roadmaps serve as a critical component for aligning our curriculum, and students' instructional experience, between our fully remote classrooms and our in-person or hybrid classrooms to the greatest degree possible. It is highly likely that at the end of January, we will have students moving between Temporary Learning Models. Some remote learners will return to classes in our buildings and students currently in the buildings, will choose to learn remotely. This could potentially result in a significant re-shuffle of student and teacher assignments. If at that time the learning experiences for students have not been aligned across the district, we will be putting students - and teachers - at a significant disadvantage. There has never been a time when it has been more critical for teachers of the same course/grade level to be working together across all buildings and all Temporary Learning Models to ensure a consistent curricular experience for all students.

Adherence, to the greatest extent possible, to the teacher-created Instructional Roadmaps for 20-21 shouldn't feel optional for anyone; it should feel essential for everyone - most especially for our students.

Some potentially helpful resources...

I continue to be on the look-out for resources that might be helpful to teachers as we adjust to our Temporary Learning Models. Here are a few that I've found recently that some of you might find useful.

◊   Strategies for Promoting Student Collaboration in a Distance Learning Environment, by Larry Ferlazzo. This article not only includes strategies for supporting collaboration in today's learning models, but it provides links to a number of other topics that teachers may find helpful and supportive as we all continue to look for ways to expand our instructional toolbox this year.

◊   How to Prevent Student Cheating During Remote Learning: 4 Tips by Alyson Klein. We all want to believe that our students will be honest all of the time, but recently the topic of academic honesty in the remote environment has come up in a number of settings. This article might provide some helpful ideas.

◊   7 Ways to Make Virtual Teaching Easier from the *Not So Wimpy Teacher* blogpost. This article might particularly resonate with those of you teaching fully remote classes, but it also serves as a good reminder to all of us to "keep it simple" and give yourself a break wherever you can! (Thanks to Kirsten Weeks, remote 4th grade teacher, for sharing this one!)

The fact that there is so much out there in professional journals, blogsites, and on social media about teaching in the remote environment serves as a good reminder to us that the struggles we are facing are not unique to Pittsford! This is a global pandemic and teachers all over the world are doing their best to keep the learning happening in lots of new and creative ways!

Zoom Questions...

It's hard to believe that less than a year ago most of us had never heard of Zoom, let alone used it for instructional purposes. Now we wonder where we would be without it. As we have all come to depend on Zoom, or Teams, for video conferencing and instructing students, some consistent questions have been raised regarding best practices. Here are the two I most frequently hear:

◊   **Can I require students to have their cameras on when I'm teaching?** While it is certainly understandable that you want to see your student's faces, it is not good practice to require them to always have their cameras turned on especially when you are working with a group of students. Some children may not be comfortable with other people seeing the inside of their homes, or wherever they are while they are doing their school work. Some children are uncomfortable with, or distracted by, seeing themselves on camera. You can certainly encourage students to turn their cameras on for at least a portion of the lesson, but if a child is resisting, it's worth a conversation with them and/or their grown-ups to discuss the concerns. Teach your students how to use other tools within the virtual environment to allow you to assess their engagement in the learning if you are not able to see their faces.

◊   **Can I use breakout rooms with my students?** Breakout rooms are a great way to encourage small group discussion, collaborative work among students, peer critiques, and other active engagement strategies that you would use in your classroom. Just as you would do in your regular classroom, however, you should establish norms and expectations for student behavior while using breakout rooms that you will hold all students accountable to. As always, group students thoughtfully and strategically to support your learning objective. You should frequently, and randomly, make the rounds of the breakout rooms checking in for purposes of support, encouragement, and oversight. Teach your students how to alert you if they need you to come to their break out room and how to use the private chat feature if they want to make you aware of something taking place. If a student needs quiet reminders about their behavior in the breakout room, move them back to the main room where you can have a private conversation. For more information about the safe and effective use of breakout rooms, check out this article: Successful Breakout Rooms.

Having students on the screen is not the same as having them in the room with you, but by using the tools that are available to us, we can still promote a safe and quality learning experience for all.

Successes and Challenges

Over the first weeks of the school year there were several opportunities to gather feedback from teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents as to what is going well with our Temporary Learning Models and where we see some challenges that need to be addressed. Hands down, the most celebrated success is being back with our students.

Having our K-5 students in the building every day is an extraordinary accomplishment. It comes with significant challenges but the fact that we can provide face-to-face interaction between students and teachers every day is definitely something to celebrate! And at the secondary level where teachers are continuing to adjust to the hybrid model, I have had numerous teachers say that just being back with kids makes everything else worthwhile. Our students need us, and we need them!

We also have a lot to celebrate when it comes to our remote learning program. After some initial struggles with technology and getting all of the kids connected, schedules and routines have been established and learning is flourishing within the remote environment at all levels.

Finally, the new protocols and routines that we were required to put in place this year have been working well. Our arrival and dismissal routines have become more efficient, students appear to be very comfortable wearing their masks all day, and they have adjusted to the new routines around lunchtime. Our students, once again, are demonstrating how resilient and responsible they are. And, perhaps most importantly, those protocols seem to be working to keep all of us - students and staff - safe and healthy!

Not unexpectedly, some challenges have emerged which will cause us to need to re-think and make some adjustments to some of our plans. Since so much of what we were asking students and staff to do this fall was new, however, it has been important to give some things a few weeks in order to see which challenges would naturally work themselves out, and which are the most persistent concerns that we need to address.

One of those concerns that we are working to address is the taking of attendance for students, grades 6-12 on their "at home" learning days. Despite valiant efforts and some real successes with putting an attendance process in place, we have continued to receive feedback from both teachers and families that our process for period-by-period attendance taking continues to be a challenge. So, that's something that we are looking into in the hopes of making changes that will be helpful to all, while still allowing us to meet our responsibilities as a district.

We are also hearing that, again at the secondary level, "remote Wednesdays" have been a bit challenging, particularly for some of our students who are spending several consecutive hours on the computer involved in full periods of synchronous instruction. Continued work on how to best use the instructional time on remote Wednesdays will, I'm certain, lead to some adjustments and improvements.

Finally, we know that adequate planning time is always a challenge and that is more true this year than ever. Elementary classroom teachers and their podmates should be able to carve out some time together on Wednesday afternoons to plan with each other and with their entire grade level. Secondary teachers also have significant PLC time on Wednesday afternoons to focus on collaborative work and planning with course-alike colleagues. With so many things feeling new and different this year, taking advantage of every opportunity to plan collaboratively for a group of students will hopefully lighten everyone's load!

In the spirit of the value we place on continuous improvement, we will continue to process these, and other challenges as they arise, through our many collaborative problem solving committees.

Congratulations on the many successes we have seen within just the first five weeks of this new, and most unusual, school year! Please keep in mind that this really is all temporary as we, and school districts everywhere, continue to cope with the global pandemic. You are doing extraordinary things every single day, making the impossible possible, and every day that we have students in front of us is another day of success!