December 2025 | Issue 27

TOGETHER PCS

KEEPING PACE WITH PINELLAS COUNTY SCHOOLS

We are excited to share this year's Pinellas County Schools Principal of the Year, Assistant Principal of the Year, Support Employees of the Year and top 10 Teacher of the Year Finalists!

Principal of the Year: Kristy James, Ponce de Leon Elementary
Assistant Principal of the Year: Brooke Crandall, Madeira Beach Fundamental
Support Employee of the Year: Carlos Childs, Campbell Park Elementary School

Top 10 Teacher of the Year Finalists:

- Bobby Coston, Jr. - Campbell Park Elementary
- Kathleen Earle - Dunedin High Middle
- Kira Guyotte - John Hopkins Middle
- Adam Kersey - Palm Harbor University High
- Christine Marr - Shore Acres Elementary
- Brian Minkin - Pinellas Technical College St. Petersburg
- Jennifer Narkier - Ozona Elementary
- Gina Sciolino - Ponce de Leon Elementary
- Mariangelie Vazquez Llanis - Garrison Jones Elementary
- Denise White - Sanderlin K-8

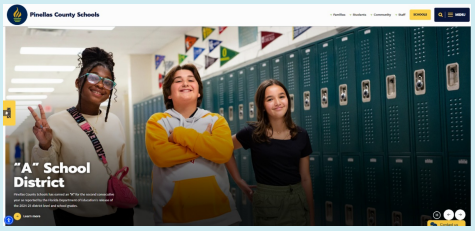
Welcome to TogetherPCS, the district's monthly newsletter featuring students, staff, alumni, coaches, curriculum, community partners and so much more!

In this issue, we celebrate our Principal and Assistant Principal of the Year and our 10 2025-26 Teacher of the Year Finalists. We also highlight the new partnership between Pinellas County Schools and the James Museum, where second graders from 20 pilot schools are taking field trips this year as well as introduce you to Luke Loucks, a Clearwater High School graduate who is now the head men's basketball coach at Florida State University.

If you know someone who should be featured in TogetherPCS, please click the "Nominate Here" button below.

NOMINATE HERE

WHAT'S INSIDE



District Launches New Website

Pinellas County Schools officially launched new district and school websites on Dec. 8.

Designed and hosted by Finalsite, our updated sites feature a modern, accessible layout, making it easier to find what you need. You'll also notice new tools, including icons to enroll, donate to Pinellas County Schools and quick links for families, students and the community. Although the new sites are now live, we will

Duke University Head Women's Basketball Coach Kara Lawson, whose well-known video on handling hard better, resonated so much with New Heights students and staff that she came for a visit.

New Heights Elementary learns to 'Handle Hard Better'

When New Heights Elementary Principal Chris Boulanger first reached out to Duke University head women's basketball coach Kara Lawson about how her "Handle Hard Better" speech had impacted his school community, he was hoping for a short note in return or, at best, a video message he could share with students and staff.

But Lawson blew his mind when she instead scheduled an on-

continue to enhance the online visitor experience to ensure families can easily access the information they need. We welcome your feedback **here**. This new online experience will help us communicate more clearly and efficiently.

Discover our new district and school sites at **pcsb.org** and explore all the updated features!

campus visit just ahead of testing season.

"This is surreal, to have her on this campus and showing our scholars that she is invested in them," Boulanger said after a campus-wide dance party to celebrate Lawson's visit. "We've watched her on the video so many times. To have her here— it means the world."

The visit was almost two years in the making. Boulanger first showed Lawson's video – a completely unscripted chat with her team after a practice in the summer of 2022 – to third through fifth graders ahead of state testing. The "Handle Hard Better" catchphrase that stemmed from Lawson's videographer posting the speech to social media became a mantra for New Heights.

"It was one of those moments where you just listen and think, '*those are the words I needed*'," Boulanger said. "Even if they'd seen it six times, they hung onto every word. You could see it click."

Watch the video and read the full article

ACHIEVE TOGETHER

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Luke Loucks graduated from Clearwater High School, went on to play at Florida State University and overseas and coached in the NBA. Loucks is now the head coach at FSU.

Before he was a rising star in the coaching world — European contracts, NBA front-office meetings, or ACC record-breaking games — Loucks was simply a kid in Clearwater chasing a dream.

"Some of my earliest memories were being the water boy for Dunedin High School," Loucks said of helping his dad's team when he was an assistant football coach. "I just remember how exciting it was – the stands were packed, and those teams were incredible."

Loucks wanted a taste of the action, and it wasn't long before he was developing into a promising dual-sport athlete himself, making the varsity basketball team as a freshman at Clearwater High School — and going on to become one of the top 100 basketball recruits in the nation – while also setting records as Clearwater's starting quarterback.

"Pinellas County Schools gave me a great foundation for life," he said. "Plumb Elementary, Oak Grove Middle, Clearwater High — I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Read the full article

Warhawks Win!

Congratulations to the Seminole High Marching Band, which won two Class 4A Championships.

On Nov. 8, the Warhawks secured a win in Class 4A at the Florida Marching Band Championships in Miami. Then on Nov. 15, the band won the FFCC Class 4A State Championship in the Villages.

District forms new partnership

District Application Period Program Dates

with James Museum

Pinellas County Schools is proud to announce the launch of a new districtwide partnership with The James Museum of Western and Wildlife Art, giving all 2nd grade students the opportunity to experience a world-class museum—many for the first time.

The inaugural visit took place Nov. 4 as students from Tarpon Springs Fundamental Elementary School explored the museum's collections of Native American, Western, and wildlife art. During Mildred Helms Elementary School's visit on Dec. 4, the official kickoff celebration included an address from the museum executive director Robin Nicholson.

"It's a joy to gather in celebration of a partnership several years in the making," Nicholson said. "We set out on this venture with Pinellas County Schools because we know that the arts are transformative at any age but are especially critical in early learning."

Michelle Anderson, K–8 Social Studies Specialist, also spoke at the event, sharing how the idea was born. She recalled a conversation with PreK–12 Art Specialist Jonathan Ogle during a meeting last spring where Ogle asked for ideas on an additional art museum field trip.

Read the full article

In addition to your neighborhood school, Pinellas County Schools offers more than 85 magnet, fundamental, and career-focused programs. through the District Application Program (DAP). You can also apply for a Special Assignment Request (SAR), which provides your child the opportunity to attend a non-DAP, non-zoned school.

DAP Application Period:
January 6-16, 2026

How to Apply for a District Application Program Facebook/YouTube Live Event
Jan. 5, 2026: 5:30 p.m.

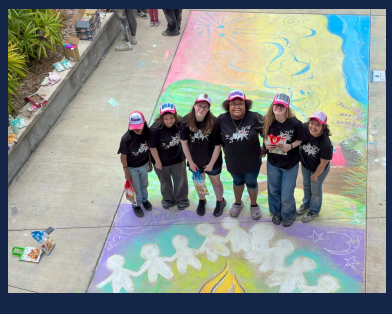
Special Assignment Request Application Period: Jan. 19-30, 2026

Navigating the DAP Acceptance Period Facebook/ YouTube Live Event
Feb. 9, 2026: 5:30 p.m.

DAP Acceptance Period:
February 10-20, 2025

For more: Visit pcsb.org/DAP

Experience PCS



Watch the video on Experience PCS here

The Superintendent Says...

"I want to express my sincere gratitude to our students, teachers, families and community for coming out to give your input during our 'Planning for Progress' community meetings hosted across the district the past six weeks. We have received your feedback on declining enrollment, building repurposing, school choice, grade configurations and more. We will use this valuable input to continue to make informed decisions on how to propel our schools forward. As we close out 2025, I hope you are able to take a well-deserved, restful and restorative holiday break. I look forward to all we can accomplish together in 2026."

To help spread the word, please forward this newsletter to community members who are interested in public education. Sign up by clicking the button below.

SIGN UP HERE