On February 14th we were once again watching the unimaginable unfold on our television and computer screens as word broke about yet another school shooting, this time in Parkland, Florida. Sadly, when the first alerts appeared on my phone, my initial reaction was … well it wasn’t much of a reaction at all. It’s sad to say but somehow we have almost grown accustomed to alerts like that showing up. It wasn’t long, however, before the magnitude of this particular incident became clear. Seventeen killed. Three staff members and fourteen children. Children who probably ran out of their house that morning giving, at best, a carefree “see ya” as they ran for the bus or got in their car. Children who might have, reluctantly, acquiesced to their parent’s peck on the cheek as they got out of the car in the drop off loop. Staff members who died protecting members of their school family, but leave their own families behind. It is all just unimaginable, and yet it is so real as we watch a community that looks an awful lot like ours try to make sense of the unthinkable.

I’m sure that in the coming days, weeks, and months, there will be a number of “lessons learned” from this latest incident in what truly feels like an epidemic of gun related incidents in our schools. Schools all over the country, including ours, will once again - very appropriately - evaluate safety procedures and protocols and tighten up wherever we feel there are gaps to be tightened. We will once again engage in conversations – important and meaningful conversations - about students who may feel alienated or who exhibit some kind of maladaptive behaviors, and what we as educators can do to support those students in making positive and healthy connections to school. We will continue our efforts - already a part of our fabric in Pittsford - to make our schools welcoming, inclusive, and safe places for everyone who enters, and to provide students with experiences that help them to be their best, do their best, and make a difference in the lives of others. That’s our mission.

I suspect, however, that one of the greatest lessons to be learned from the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, may be the lesson that the surviving students are already teaching us. Those students, in the midst of unimaginable grief, fear, and confusion, have found their voices. The teenagers at that school have something to say to the adults in this country, and they are doing their best to make sure that their message is heard. They are impassioned; they are well-spoken; they are articulate. They have experienced something that no one should ever have to experience, and they are creating and using their platform to make their voices heard with the hope that no student will ever again have to bear witness to such tragedy. They never asked to be in the spotlight, but they are using the spotlight that has been thrust upon them to make a difference.

So while our hearts break a little each time we watch the news and really think about what happened at that Florida high school on February 14, I believe we can all draw some inspiration from watching this generation of young people lead us toward a better future. Let’s hope we have the sense to follow them and that we return to a time when the unimaginable truly is unthinkable, and a school shooting is no longer just another alert that goes ignored, even for a moment, on our phones.

Until next time... Melanie

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Mission Statement

The PCSD 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.
Elementary Grade Level Release meetings

Our spring Grade Level Release half-day sessions are just about to get underway. We will be using the time at each of these sessions to involve our K-5 teachers in important work related to the elementary report card. The small Elementary Report Card Committee has been hard at work over the last several months making sense of the survey data collected in October, reaching out to teachers to gather more input regarding specific aspects of our reporting system, and gathering feedback from parents. A brief update regarding much of that work will be shared at the grade level meetings, but the bulk of the time will be spent drafting the ELA and Math portions of a revised report card. Having the expertise of those of you who are charged with teaching, assessing, and reporting on the progress our students make as they learn, grow, and develop their reading, writing, and math skills is a critical part of this process. Being able to identify the most important things to put on a report card, and capturing those essential skills and concepts in language that can be understood by all who pick up the report card, is critical. This will be the work of these half-day sessions. Clearly, this will not be the end of our work together on the report card, nor will it be the last time that we will involve large groups of stakeholders in the work. This will, however, be an important and significant step forward.

As a reminder, the Grade Level Release meetings will be held on the following dates/times:

- February 28th 8:30-11:00  Second Grade
- February 28th 12:30-3:00  Fifth Grade
- March 6th 8:30-11:00  First Grade
- March 6th 12:30-3:00  Fourth Grade
- March 13th 8:30-11:00  Kindergarten
- March 13th 12:30-3:00  Third Grade

All meetings will take place at Barker Road in Room 1. See you there!

Changes to state assessment scoring

Last June, the district piloted the use of a third-party vendor, Premier Assessments, for the scoring of our 8th grade State Science Assessment. By all accounts, the pilot experience was a success. Materials were picked up and delivered on time and in an organized fashion. Scores on the assessment were consistent with previous years’ scores with no aberrations in an individual student’s score noted by teachers. (The fact that this particular test has not changed for the past many years made it easier to look for consistency of scores.) And, a few weeks after the return of all of our materials, we were sent a document summarizing the things that Pittsford students did well on and the areas noted for improvement. This was a welcome surprise!

Given the success of this pilot project, the district has made the decision to move forward with having all of our 3-8 ELA, math, and science assessments scored by Premier Assessments this year. The company uses only New York State certified teachers to score the assessments, and they subject their scorers to the same rigorous training that we have historically provided to our scoring teams. The greatest benefit of making this change is the fact that teachers will no longer have to leave their students and their classrooms to score state tests. In addition, teachers who for the past several years have been scoring during our spring Superintendent’s Conference Day, will now have that day available for professional learning and collaboration.

No more creating sub plans for a scoring day and worrying if your sub would show up; no more scheduling scoring teams around annual review meetings; no more long hours spent reading hundreds of responses to the same question! But best of all, no more loss of valuable instructional time with your students while scoring state assessments. This feels like a “win” for everyone involved!
Dreams really do come true!

I admit it. I am a bit of an “Olympics geek”. I love the Olympics. I love everything about them, except for the too-many commercials shown during prime time coverage. I love the fact that for a few short days every four years, the sport of curling is in the headlines and everyone becomes an expert at what it takes to win the ice dancing competition! I love the fact that we inexplicably find ourselves cheering for a Nigerian bobsled team comprised of Nigerian-American sprinters and a South Korean born American snowboarder. I love the triumphal music that I can’t get out of my head. Mostly though, I love the personal stories of the athletes who are competing at the games. The stories of personal and family sacrifice, of enduring years of physically exhausting training regimens, of the highs and lows that come with being an elite athlete; to me those stories make up the heart and soul of the Olympics.

This year, some of those stories hit quite close to home, as we watched three former Pittsford students compete in the Winter Olympics. Paige Conners (who represented Israel in pairs figure skating), Jonathon Lillis (aerial skiing) and Morgan Schild (freestyle skiing) all achieved their Olympic dreams this month. How many kids, when they are 8 or 10 years old and just beginning to fall in love with their sport say, “someday I’m going to be in the Olympics”? Countless! How many of those kids actually achieve that dream? Paige, Jonathon, and Morgan all did that—they actually achieved that dream! Sure, they are all gifted athletes, but they put in years of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice, with an unwavering focus on their goal. I’m guessing that they all also, gave up some of the things that make up a “normal” childhood and adolescence. With support from their families, they spent far more hours on the ice or the ski slopes than anywhere else. They didn’t “do school” the normal way. But, that was their choice, and clearly, for them, it paid off. They made it to the Olympics!

I suppose if you are from places like Lake Placid, or Sun Valley, Idaho you might get used to having Olympians grow up in your backyard. But for Pittsford, it was a pretty special to see three hometown kids in these Olympics. I don’t know how much credit, if any, we can take for their accomplishments, but I’m hoping that they all felt the support of their former teachers, bus drivers, principals, lunch monitors, and the entire PCSD community, cheering them on as they achieved their dreams!

Which all makes me wonder, what dreams are being pursued by students who are sitting in our classrooms today? What are we doing to encourage our students to believe in themselves and reach for those dreams, no matter how unreachable they may seem to us, as adults? What are we doing to create dreams for our students? Three Pittsford kids just proved to us that dreams really do come true; they weren’t the first, nor will they be the last. I hope that all of our students will always feel encouraged and supported by us as they reach for their dreams.

Resources to inform our grading conversations

Several years ago, as we began to engage in informed conversations and professional learning about grading practices, we created a bank of resources on our website for administrators and teachers to access. This bank of resources includes articles, blog posts, video clips, and access to webinars that the district owns the rights to.

Just as our conversations and work around this important topic have continued to grow over the past several years, so have the number of articles written about grading practices grown. We’ve updated our website with a new page containing links to recent articles that touch on many different aspects of grading practices including the importance of being able to use professional judgment as we assign grades to students, the detrimental impact of zeros in our grading system, the challenges associated with making system-wide changes, and the view from some college admissions offices about changing grading practices at districts across the country.

I would invite you to take a look at these articles posted in the Grading Philosophy portion of our website, by clicking on the link New Articles about Grading. Of course, you are encouraged to explore the other resources that are available on that page as well! Happy reading!!
The current wave of new standards...

A few years ago, all eyes were on the changing standards in math and English/Language Arts. The Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) had been adopted by New York State and our focus, as well as the focus of districts across the state, was on making sense of those new standards and revising our curriculum, assessments, and instruction to reflect the changes. There was a lot of fanfare around these changes, lots of media coverage, and a significant channeling of resources to support these changes. It was a big lift for districts, for teachers, and for students (and their parents!).

Fast forward about six years and we find that, in a much quieter and more unassuming way, the State has now adopted new or revised standards in almost every curricular area, K-12. This includes new standards in the areas of science, social studies, art, music, library, and physical education, as well as revisions to the CCLS for math and ELA, which are now referred to as the Next Generation Math and ELA standards. That is a lot of change for us to absorb and respond to through revisions to our curriculum, assessments, and instruction.

Within all that change, however, there is some really good news. For example:

- The revisions to the Math and ELA standards were made based on educator feedback, most of them are minor, they reflect developmentally appropriate practices, and for the most part they won’t require significant revisions to our curriculum;
- The State seemed to have learned some lessons from the rushed roll-out of the CCLS and they are giving us very generous timelines to respond to the changes in the ELA, math, social studies, and science standards before implementing new state assessments;
- In every case, the standards reflect the need to move beyond memorization of knowledge or rote repetition of skills. Updated standards in every discipline require students to be engaged in their learning as critical thinkers and problem-solvers, analytical thinkers, skillful communicators, effective consumers and producers of information, and ethical and contributing citizens.
- There are significant areas of overlap between disciplines when considering the high level “practices” that each standards area seeks to develop in our students. This is particularly significant when viewing the impact of these changes through the eyes of a student.
- In each and every case, the new or revised standards are well-aligned with the Curriculum by Design work that we have been engaged in for the past few years. In other words, what teachers in each discipline have already articulated as important to us in Pittsford is nicely reflected in what we see as we dig into the new standards for each of those areas. Therefore, our Curriculum by Design work continues to provide us with a strong foundation for moving forward with curriculum revisions in each area.

Standards Leaders will continue to work with their department members to develop our understanding of the new standards and their implications on our classroom practices, and to identify any professional learning needs. Standards Leaders have also been working together to see and understand the connections between all disciplines. Better understanding those connections will allow us to create learning experiences for our students that are stronger, more well connected, and more authentic.

This is good and important work. It’s also challenging work, on many levels. I am grateful for the time and talents of the standards leaders and the many teachers who are invested in this work on behalf of the students of Pittsford.
Budding Scientists

Scientists in Ashley Ford’s second grade classroom and Allison Cimmerer’s first grade classroom learn about buoyancy, sound, and the design process as they work to create flotation devices and kazooos. The second graders were challenged to use what they had learned about objects that sink and float to create a flotation device that would keep an action figure from drowning. After testing their device they had an opportunity to make improvements. First graders took apart kazooos to see what gave them their unique sound and then experimented with different types of materials to create their own homemade kazooos!

Problem solving, design thinking, and collaboration were all part of the learning as these budding scientists worked together to apply what they knew about a scientific principle to create something new!