

# the Pulse of Plattsburgh City Schools

October 2009

“Innovations”



Lift Off! Page 7

## Having A Ball



If you could find something that improved your handwriting, improved your posture, gave you flexibility, helped build your core muscles and made you better at sports, wouldn't you try it?

It had only been a week in Catherine Hite's third grade class at Momot Elementary, but students there and second graders in Dan Devins' class wouldn't give up their WittFitts for anything.

"Noooooo," was the resounding chorus when asked if they wanted to return to their hard, one-size-fits-all wooden chairs.

"There are so many benefits," said Hite, who introduced the WittFitt Stability Balls to the classrooms at Momot. "It enhances their attention and promotes 'creative' sitting. There is

less fidgeting."

A former teacher, Lisa Witt realized that by sitting her students on a stability ball, they had the opportunity to move around a little, while still paying attention in class. Hite made the connection after an occupational therapist at Momot had several kids sitting on the balls in class. "These were kids with ADHD (attention deficit-hyperactive disorder) and were fidgety.

They seemed to be doing well, so I thought everyone might benefit."

After a lot of research and support from the administration, Hite, Devins and first grade teacher Laura Buck had soon outfitted their classrooms with WittFitt balls.

It has made a tremendous difference. "It really has been great," says Devins. "And the kids have taken ownership. We're posted the rules and they follow them. None of them wants their ball taken away, which we will do if they don't follow the rules."

Different color balls indicate different sizes, depending on the child's height. Fine-tuning is done with the amount of air pumped into the ball. As children grow, so does the ball. Parents were informed early about the change and

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### What's Happening?

City of Plattsburgh senior citizens age 55 and over can use a Gold Card for free entrance to all home athletic events, discounts on Community Education programs and free admission to other district events. To obtain a Gold Card, bring proof of age and residency to the District Office at 49 Broad Street.



PLEASE SEE 'BALL' ON PAGE 5

# Buckets of Respect

Are you a bucket filler or a bucket dipper?

Everybody's got a bucket, it's up to you to decide what you're going to do with it. At Oak Street Elementary, students are



encouraged to fill the buckets of their fellow students with compliments, kind words and deeds. A survey of the students last year found out that wasn't always necessarily the case.

"Eighty percent of the students identified the same issue," said Principal Carrie Zales. "It was a lack of respect among the students. We held meetings and discussed it openly with the students. The Behavioral Intervention Committee then went back to see what we could do."

In their search, they found the popular children's book "Have You Filled A Bucket Today?" by Carol McCloud. In it, McCloud describes each person's invisible bucket, which can be filled with kind thoughts or dipped into with negative comments or actions.

"We got all the students together in an assembly and I read them the book," said

Zales. "I could tell I had their complete attention and they understood what was going on. The kids really love the concept."

Teachers are finding ways to reinforce the message daily and Zales makes it part of the morning announcements, talking about the importance of making good choices. The committee will continue to find ways to continue the initiative throughout the year.

"I think the fact that the kids identified this problem and now they see a solution is important. It shows them that they have a voice, that they can make a difference," said Zales.

The ramifications of dipping in the bucket are swift. Dippers are given a bucket worksheet and must fill it with good thoughts and statements about the injured party, which they then present to the other student.

"We definitely use it as a teaching tool," said Zales of the discussions with the students and, ultimately, the meeting between the two. "They are required to speak to the person they have hurt and fill that person's bucket, instead of dipping. It's not about being the best of friends, but it is about being sincere. You can't just read (the apology) from a piece of paper."

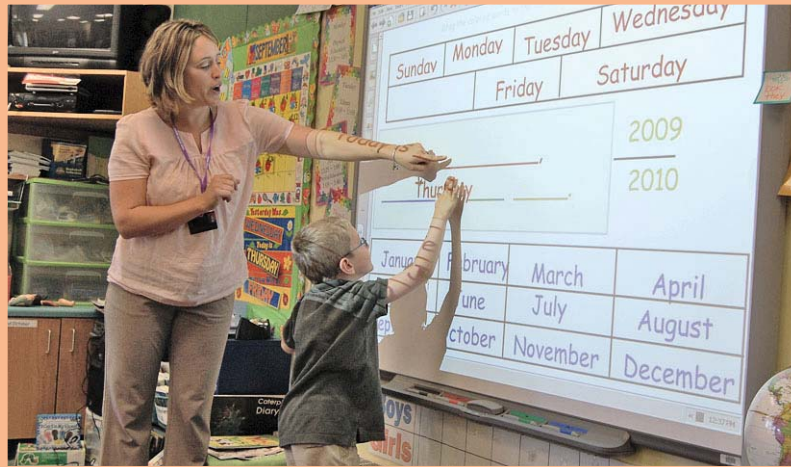
Zales realizes there will likely be repeat offenders of the bucket policy, but hopes to use the worksheets and meetings as teaching tools, where the kids learn valuable social skills that will serve them well in the years ahead, including mutual respect and conflict resolution.

In just a few short weeks, the initiative has taken hold and both children and staff are beginning to speak in terms of buckets, fillers and dippers.

Have you filled a bucket today?



# On Board At Bailey



Sometimes the innovation isn't in the technology, it's in how you use it.

And while SmartBoards have been around a while, the lessons being learned at Bailey Avenue are still stretching the envelope.

When they were installed in the middle of last year there were, of course, some who were skeptical. Longtime teacher Julie Bullis at first mourned the loss of the traditional chalkboard and even the more up-to-date whiteboard, but has since become a huge fan of the computer-based classroom aid.

"I really can't think of anything negative to say about the SmartBoard," says Bullis, now a devout user. "I especially like the sound effects; we use it when we work with letters and we're reaching the auditory learners."

First grade teacher Erin McGill and her fellow teachers have begun integrating them across the curriculum – ELA, science, social studies, math all use the boards.

She says it has definitely changed the teaching profession.

Just down the hall in Lori Regan's room, she uses the technology to create her own lessons and includes student photos and videos. "You can create your own lessons and really personalize them," she said, pointing out the boards' multi-dimensional assets. "We can reach all the learners in the classroom – visual, auditory and tactile."

Danielle Jackson opens each lesson with the Calendar. Students practically jump out of their seats for a chance to come to the front of the class and work at the SmartBoard. They'll talk about the weather, do a little addition and subtraction, and work on money problems; all with technology they seem very comfortable with.

For some, the comfort goes much deeper.

SmartBoards have revolutionized Jan Kinne's classroom. When working with students with Asperger's, a type of autism,

it was sometimes hard to break through.

"These students are very visually oriented," says Kinne. "And the SmartBoards are particularly perfect for them." Kinne can teach a lesson with the visuals needed to hold the students' attention. It also gives them a chance to work on their social skills as they work through problems and build stories. Difficulty with social skills is a trait specific to Asperger's.

"These students work in pictures, the visual aspect is very important to them. I can attach meaning to the lessons through visuals, with pictures and texts. I can take a picture out on the playground and use it in the classroom that day, putting the students in the lesson," says Kinne, who pioneered the use of SmartBoards at Bailey. The first teacher to have one in her classroom, International Paper awarded her grant money and the school matched her funds to bring the technology into the room three years ago.

"It has made such a tremendous difference," she says. "The kids buy into it instantly."

And who wouldn't? It can be fun, even for the adults, to scoot the cursor around and fill the page with yellow smiley faces and rainbows – proving it's not the technology, but how you use it.

## Thumbs Up ...

“It's like magic every time we turn it on. It keeps all the students on the same page, and helps the lessons become more interactive. The kids have responded so well.”

*Erin McGill  
First Grade Teacher*

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the Pulse

# A Risk Worth the Reward

Taking a risk is never easy.

To step outside your comfort zone, to put things on the line takes some courage and some trust. But with every risk there is a reward.

Teachers, administrators and board members in the Plattsburgh City School District think a better educational experience – for everyone – is a reward worth that risk.

“I think the time has come,” says Rod Sherman, PHS mathematics teacher and president of the Plattsburgh Teachers Association, of changes in teacher evaluations in the

mand performance and look good,” said Short. “But that doesn’t help the teacher, the student or the administrator. And, in the long run, it’s not good for the school district.”

The district, teachers’ union and administration are beginning slowly.

Building on a mentor/intern program first introduced two decades ago, the new Peer Assistance Review (PAR) program is beginning year one of a two-year pilot. The confidential relationship between the veteran educator and new teacher is designed to improve performance. That will now be coupled with peer review.

“And we’re going to tie the evaluation to professional development. We want each classroom to be the best it can be,” said Sherman.

The evaluation process looks very different under the new model. Teacher evaluations will be reviewed by a panel, which will include other teachers and administrators from all levels. “Eventually,” said Short, “we’ll get to the full Toldeo Plan where there’s a panel that decides if people will stay in the school system and stay on a tenure path.”

The Toldeo Plan is the model for the Plattsburgh program. Created in 1981 in the Toledo Public Schools, the Plan is a system of peer assistance and review based on the premise that a collaborative decision regarding teacher quality is always better than a unilateral decision and that great teachers have the ability to help their peers.

“I love the idea of teachers helping teachers in a professional learning community,” said Lamberti. “I’m excited that we will be getting (evaluations) at a deeper level. It will have much more impact.”

Plattsburgh is out in front on PAR. Sherman and Short will be part of a panel discussion at the January

“I love the idea of teachers helping teachers in a professional learning community.”

*Mary Louise Lamberti  
Elementary Principal*

district. “The relationship between the school board, the superintendent and the unions is such that I think the risk can be taken and we should do it.”

The “risk,” according to Sherman, Superintendent James Short and Plattsburgh Administrative Unit President Mary Louise Lamberti, is a fundamental change in the way teachers, and eventually administrators, are evaluated in their performance. While still in its early stages, the district as a whole soon hopes to shelve the “principal sitting in the back of the classroom for 40 minutes taking notes” scenario and substitute a comprehensive, multi-person look that includes use of available materials; skills in planning, communication, and assessment; motivational techniques; effective interaction with students; attendance and adaptation to change, among many other things.

“Most anybody can do the com-

2010 annual meeting of the Labor and Employment Relations Association in Atlanta. They'll join officials from the Toledo Public School District for "Educational Reform from the Inside: Teachers' Union-School Administration Partnerships."

Additionally, the district is part of an American Federation of Teachers grant-funded consortium of five New York State United Teachers Locals that are working together to build the PAR program at each district. Union and District leaders have also been invited, as one of 25 districts in the nation, to participate in the Albert Shanker Institute's Good Schools Seminars in Washington, D.C.

This year, the district will focus on refining the system. Now that the evaluation forms have been redesigned,

two evaluations will be reviewed by the committee with an eye toward the instrument itself.

"We want to look at the process that we are using and make sure that it works," said Short. Additionally, said Sherman, they will be looking at evaluations to find common elements that may lend themselves to opportunities for professional development for all teachers.

“I think the risk can be taken and I think we should do it.”

*Roderick Sherman  
Teachers' Association  
President*

“It is definitely a change in accountability,” said Short. “There is a much greater focus on the practices in the classroom instead of the person.”

“In the school setting, we spend a lot of time on the growth and development of the kids, it would be disingenuous of us if we didn't do the same for all the people in the school district.”

## Having A Ball

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eagerly jumped on board. “We had them available at the open house and parents sat on them. All of the parents have signed permission slips for the children,” said Hite. It had also become a safety issue as some students continually leaned back in their wooden chairs, risking a nasty fall. While they can still tumble off the ball (as Hite found out first hand), there is much more stability as the child's own motion can counteract the movement of the ball, unlike the chair. Hite and Devins report no injuries from the balls.

It has also become a learning tool for the kids – they are taking care of something they care about; something that is uniquely theirs

“All the children are taught to respect the ball, with the four “Bs” that we have here at Momot – Be Responsible, Be Cooperative, Be

Safe and Be Respectful,” she says. “They know they can't bounce around on the balls, both feet have to be on the floor at all times and they can't be disruptive in class. They are cleaned every Friday and we check to make sure they are just the right height.”

Hite has also formulated lessons specifically for the balls that incorporate exercises for student fitness, working the core muscle and improving balance and coordination, as well as posture.

The fact that it's fun is just a bonus.



# Gaining Experience

After you've spent four years in college, fought your way through the application/resume/job interview process and settled down into a new job is not the time to find out that it's really not what you're looking for.

Wouldn't it be easier to spend a few days on the job, find out what it's all about and actually work in a job before making that decision?

The Career Exploration Internship Program at PHS gives students that chance – the opportunity to find an employer and give it a test drive before planning the next step in their lives.

"They could very well find out that they don't like that profession once they get an idea of what it's all about," said Karen Rock, the school's work experience coordinator.

The program is open to students 14 and older, although most are seniors with early release schedules. They'll alternate days between the job site and the classroom, with a lot of flexibility built in for student and employer schedules.

"Students have the option to do four sites a year; it gives them the opportunity to try out different careers, to see what they would really like to do," said Rock.

Rubinel Chrysostome is a senior, hoping to work in the investment banking or financial field. He sees both short- and long-term benefits to the opportunity.

"This will provide experience in the workplace, but it will also give me a networking opportunity to meet people," he said. "It will really give me an edge later on."

For Zach Ayotte, it's the opportunity to fulfill a dream.



He has his sites set on the mixed martial arts. The experience he's received two to three days a week at Villari's Self-Defense Center in Plattsburgh has been invaluable.

"I want to be able to compete in tournaments and to do that, you have to have a lot of different skills," said Zach.

For the interns, it's not just time out of the classroom. They are constantly evaluated by both Rock and the employer, as well as completing their own self-evaluation. Before they even get to the employer, they are taught interview skills – and not with the mock interviews you often find in the classroom. These sessions will ultimately determine whether or not they get their internship.

"I help them prepare for the interview and then go along and sit quietly in the back and do an evaluation," said Rock. "We'll also get an evaluation from the employer."

Of course, none of this would be possible without the support of the North Country business community. Rock says it's a rare moment when an employer refuses to participate or doesn't fit into the program. And already, after three years, she's seen the fruits of their labors.

"We had a business with a job opening and called one of the former interns to see if they would like the job," said Rock. "In this economy, that doesn't happen very often, someone calling you to see if you want a job."

Students interested in the program can contact Mrs. Rock in Room 106.



# Engineering a Future

In most of your high school classes, paper airplanes would be discouraged; taken away, wadded up and thrown in the wastebasket.

But Wendy DeMane encourages her students to build more, rebuild them until they're just right and even takes them outside for the launch.

And their computer time? Some of it is spent on flight simulators, taking off at the Plattsburgh airport and successfully landing the plane in Burlington

Rocket launches, Boe-Bots, marble sorters – they're all part of the technology program at Plattsburgh High School. Although still in its infancy, these four classes have already earned some students college credits and helped others make career choices.

Drawing and Design for Production, Principles of Engineering, Aerospace Engineering and Digital Electronics all give students hands-on experiences in the sciences.

DeMane says the curriculum grabs the students' attention and holds it.

"There is a lot of 'design, build and test' in the classes," she says, pointing to the model gliders, rockets and robots. "I also introduce a lot of competition."

Students start with a problem and are encouraged to first solve it on paper. They quickly move to the computer with state-of-the-art CAD (Computer Aided Design) programs, finally building airfoils, light wooden gliders and robots that will bring the ideas to life. Many times, they'll take them in to the school's wind tunnel, one of only a handful in the North Country.

"It's part of Project Lead the Way,"

said DeMane. "We are one of 3,000 schools around the country to participate."

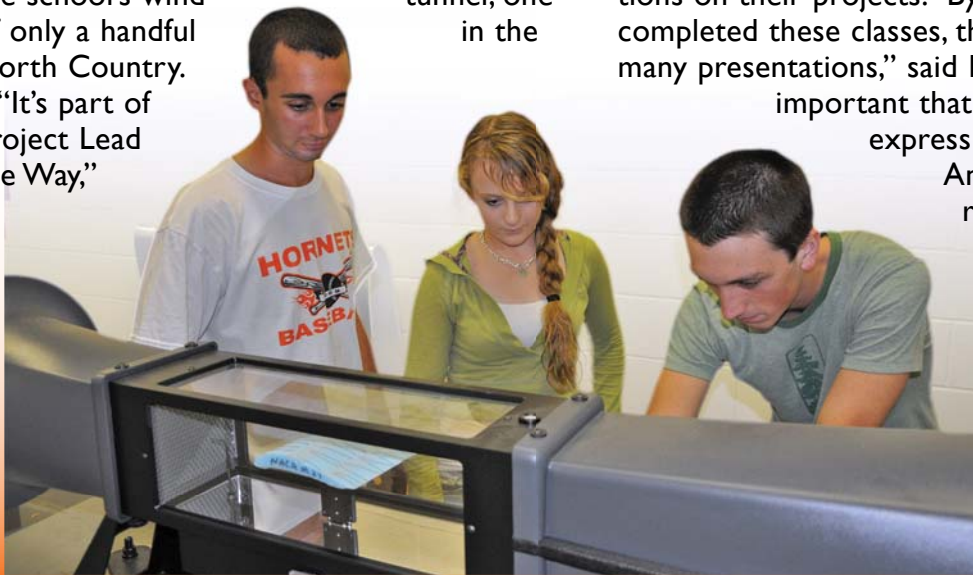
Project Lead the Way is a non-profit organization that promotes pre-engineering courses for middle and high school students. The fully-developed curriculum emphasizes math and science which give students a head start should they choose engineering as a career, which, according to DeMane, some have already done.

As part of the project agreement, DeMane attended a summer training at Rochester Institute of Technology for certification to teach the curriculum. PHS was certified last year. In return, her students can receive college credits from RIT which she says, will "transfer virtually anywhere." Last year, 24 students took the college level courses and all received full credit. If a student plays his cards right, he can leave high school with 12 college engineering credits, not an inexpensive endeavor!

The Aerospace Engineering course is especially relevant in Plattsburgh, where the new Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute has just opened its doors. The PHS classes, which begin in the freshman year, can lay the groundwork for a student interested in then moving to the airframe and powerplant program there.

In addition to honing their science and math skills, DeMane says the curriculum also focuses on presentation skills, as students are required to prepare and present presentations on their projects. "By the time they've completed these classes, they will have given many presentations," said DeMane. "It's so important that they are able to express themselves."

And launch an accurate glider.



# Electing to Learn

We all anticipated our high school electives; a chance to be a bit creative, or study something that had long interested us. It was usually something during the day that we looked forward to and enjoyed. And we learned at the same time.

Staff and administration at Stafford Middle School realized, however, that students shouldn't have to wait until high school to find that creative moment or look forward to a favorite class. In the past couple of years, the staff has been offering electives and students have really responded.

The staff has also stepped up to the plate.

In their "other lives" Marjorie Light and Kate Messner love to write. As published authors, they had a lot to offer students outside the classroom. The elective "Creative Writing," gives them both a chance to bring it into the classroom.

"I love this class," said Light. "I'm so excited to be able to do this."

"This" is to open the world of creative writing to young students, teaching them about plot, first pages, research and the love of writing.

"We're so grateful to be able to work with the students on something that we're so passionate about," said Messner. "I remember when I was in school, there was a difference between my 'real world' writing and my 'school writing;' how much I enjoyed that 'real world' writing. We're hoping to bridge that gap."



According to Messner, the class also fits into the school's 6 + 1 writing curriculum, "All of the things we talk about are relevant to the curriculum and they are all things that editors focus on," she said.

Their 'real world' writing brings an irreplaceable element into the classroom.

"We both attend writers' conferences and bring back an awful lot of ideas and share them with the students," said Light. The students soon learned how much research there is in "creative" writing, visiting the library and learning why it's important to know the character and its voice.

The elective program at SMS is still in its infancy, but has been a focus for the past couple of years.

"We spend a lot of time looking to support the kids who are not doing well," said SMS Principal Patricia Amo. "We really wanted to expand our offerings for students looking for more."

In addition to Creative Writing, the middle school elective curriculum includes Art with Scott Given, Computers with Kym Duffina and Environmental Science with Barbara Napper.

## Pulse of Plattsburgh City Schools

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*Published by Plattsburgh City Schools  
in cooperation with Champlain Valley Educational Services  
Matthew Smith, Editor • Paula Piatt, Graphic Design*

Plattsburgh City Schools  
49 Broad Street  
Plattsburgh, NY 12901-3396

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