



Welcoming Principal Angela Allie to Propel

The new Principal of Propel Andrew Street shares her views on education, and her vision and goals for the 2011–12 school year.

Q: As a new principal at a high school, what are some of the biggest challenges?

A: One of the challenges of being a new high school principal involves establishing a school environment that does not infringe upon the existing culture that students, staff and parents value. I welcome each challenge as an opportunity to grow as a school leader — I have already learned so much! For instance, the first few weeks have helped me to acknowledge the importance of balancing humility and assertiveness while imparting my vision for the school.

Q: What are your goals for Propel Andrew Street in the 2011-12 school year?

A: My primary goal for Propel Andrew Street this school year will be to establish a culture of dignity that will yield student achievement and teacher professional growth. Students will see themselves reflected in the curriculum; staff will be equipped with the tools and confidence to actualize their potential. This year will involve comprehensive efforts aimed at consensus building, teacher leadership, student-directed learning and rigorous, relevant instruction.

Q: What is the best part of working in education?

A: The joy of working in education is partly due to having an impact on the day-to-day lives of students, and support teachers to inspire today's youth into becoming tomorrow's leaders. To be a part of something as transformative as education is to become more fully human, and so ultimately our youth help us to realize our potential.

Q: Why did you want to work at Propel?

A: I was drawn to Propel Schools primarily because of its commitment to educate all students at high levels with no excuses or exceptions — both for students and staff. Propel schools defy the status quo by normalizing excellence for all students, no matter what their life circumstance.

Q: What has been your most memorable part of the school year so far?


A: As I reflect back on my first Open House for parents, I remain awestruck by the level of commitment both adults and youth demonstrated that evening. This event represented total school and community involvement — from the students to the staff. Each and every staff member contributed, and students were eager to showcase their work and welcome parents into a culture they helped to design. We had a wonderful parent turnout, and they were just as excited to welcome us as we were to host them. At the end of the night the staff reflected on our accomplishment, and one voiced our collective thought and promise: "This is going to be a phenomenal year!"

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Propel is a not-for-profit independent public school organization whose mission is to catalyze the transformation of public education so that all children have access to high performing public schools.



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Propel’s Promising Principles

When Propel first opened its doors in 2003, our “pioneers” did not have the benefit of this articulated framework that successful experience would provide. Instead, Propel founders began with a vision of operating high-performing public schools, and providing choice to families who would not otherwise have it. Today, that vision is a reality. In 2010, Propel embarked upon an internal journey of self-discovery, looking to record, describe and express the daily organization practices that are Propel Schools. Since then, we have been able to articulate the answer to the question “what makes Propel so successful?” as a result of a deep exploration of Propel’s internal culture and practices. The answer can be found within our Promising Principles:

- Agile Instruction
- Embedded Support
- Culture of Dignity
- Fully Valued Arts Program
- Vibrant Teaching Communities
- Quest for Excellence

Although these Promising Principles are recently named, the practices themselves have been taking place within Propel classrooms since 2003. “It required a deeper look at what we were already doing internally — examining our strengths, building upon them, and figuring out ways to share what works best,” says Powerful Practices Dissemination Coach, Lauren Hinish.

The goal is simple — and can be broken down into two parts. First, Promising Principles will help newcomers to Propel understand our environment and methods, whether they are new teachers, new staff or new families! Second, the Promising Principles allow us to provide a basis for discussion with people interested in applying what Propel has learned to their own settings. These goals will be reached through intense research, documentation, and discovery.

Dr. John Lozosky, Director of Replication and Expansion Efforts, remarks that specifying each Promising Principle helps create a unifying common language throughout Propel. He explains that, “Each Propel school has its own individuality, yet each is able to implement the Promising Principles through methods that work best for them. We are excited to continue to expand the Propel model, whose foundation is built upon the accomplishments of our existing schools.”

Propel Braddock Hills Elementary’s got rhythm — and music!

The addition of the new music program run by instructor, Colin Milne, has already started to fill the hallways of Braddock Hills Elementary with song. Beginning the 2011-12 school year with a blank slate and supportive staff, Mr. Milne explains that building the enjoyment of music and exploring individual student talents was his main focus. “It may sound cheesy, but I want to bring kids together in appreciation of music,” Mr. Milne said. Peering into a music class, visitors can see Mr. Milne has captured students’ attention — from learning new songs to hearing different versions of classics.

“Music class is fun — my favorite part is learning songs, like *Yakkin’ on the Cell Phone!*” 5th grader, DeVon McCoy, says. Music class started off with some piano, music literacy, voice and basic rhythm. After the basic elements are mastered, Mr. Milne hopes to create an honors choir and have students participate in state-adjudicated singing events that give local schools a chance to share — and showcase — their skills.

“It was an easy adjustment, introducing music to the kids’ routine. Mr. Milne is very aware of students’ needs. We love hearing music when passing by — you can see how excited the kids are,” says Principal Marsha Burlison. From an honors choir to school performances and talent shows, the sound of music already has established a presence throughout Braddock Hills Elementary. The best thing about music is its’ inclusivity, allowing student with any range of experience to participate. As Mr. Milne puts it, “Everyone can be musical.”



Marshall Brennan Program Brings the Law into Propel High School Classrooms

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A new collaboration between the Marshall Brennan Program and Propel High Schools has brought local University of Pittsburgh Law students into classrooms three times a week.

The law students — “Fellows” — from the University of Pittsburgh will be teaching Law throughout the school year, focusing on the most relevant and relatable topics to high school students. Through discussion, debates, and class exercises, students will develop critical thinking skills, consider ethical codes and consequences of actions, and gain a better understanding of the legal system. As high school student Avery Coles puts it, “Everyone should take Law class — it opens up our eyes to the world around us.”

The core of the class also happens to be the foundation of our country: the Constitution. Sections of the Constitution that are most important to students – freedom of speech, search and seizures and various privacy rights - are explored. “Once students begin to study the law and see how it works- they see they can have a role in that. We want this knowledge to empower them,” said Law Professor Jeffrey Shook. “That’s really the heart of the Marshall Brennan Program and what we’re doing here.”

The Marshall-Brennan Program, originated at American University, has been active across the United States since 1999, but has just established itself in Pittsburgh in 2011. In fact, Propel High Schools are the first schools in Pittsburgh to welcome the Marshall Brennan Program!

“We were excited to work with Propel from the beginning. The flexibility, support and excitement the faculty has shown has been very encouraging,” said Associate Dean of Students, Kevin Deasy. Four Fellows at Propel Braddock Hills High School and two additional Fellows at Propel Andrew Street High School were chosen from over 700 law students at Pitt to have the opportunity to be involved in this program. “This is a unique opportunity to share in a way that is meaningful to young people,” Fellow Joshua Charles said. “The best way to master something is to teach it. That’s just one of the many benefits I’ve noticed since becoming involved.”



There are two Fellows in each class, in addition to a Propel teacher, to maintain individualized attention and allow everyone to verbalize their opinions. “The students are excited to talk about these issues. They offer great insight, whether they are talking from their own experiences, or just reacting to what they think is right or wrong,” said Fellow Jessica Michael. Principal Joe Oliphant agrees, calling this first group of Fellows “trailblazers.” He affirms that on a daily basis, both at school and at home, students can use skills explored in Law class to help make better choices for themselves and grow as contributing members of society. Fellow Ashley Wood states, “Our main goal is for our students to understand that the law is a tool they can use for the rest of their lives.”





New Director of Strategic Initiatives, Derric Heck, tells us about his role at Propel, and impressions so far!

When I initially met with Dr. Wooten for a tour of Propel Homestead, I was encouraged, motivated, and challenged by what I saw in the classrooms. I witnessed students beating the odds and a staff that fosters an environment to facilitate an unashamed excellence. What I saw inspired me to change my career path from architecture, and do what fed my spirit. The focus of my position at Propel is on our expansion efforts. Over the next five years, we've been challenged to expand by at least five new schools. As we grow, we continue to introduce ourselves to new communities, families, and organizations. My job is to make sure we make the proper connections with those we intend to serve.

Propel will continue to play a major role in the transformation of education in Western PA, but the boundaries of our impact will be felt through the opening of new schools and the innovation of other programming. The challenge comes with the realization that we can't expand quickly enough to meet the needs of people who are desperately seeking alternatives. No matter how hard we're working, the number of families on our waiting list grows. However, when I see students pushing beyond circumstances, stereotypes, internal and external doubt, I am inspired to keep advocating on their behalf. Helping young people put some academic 'wins' on their scorecards is a great reward. When one gets to know the stories behind any Propel student, one can't help but to be inspired. We will see our graduates, program participants, and staff as they successfully meet the challenges put before them. Where they go, so will Propel.

Anything Else?

Not being from here, I want to add that Pittsburgh is a great city. Winters may require the purchase of a 4x4, salads may come standard with French fries, and Pittsburghers may flip your car whether a team has lost or won, but it has quickly become a second home. Pittsburgh has promise and I look forward to strengthening my roots in the Steel City!

400 Paper Cranes at Propel Montour

Those who walk through the front doors of Propel Montour will be greeted by a beautiful burst of color, as they stand underneath 400 Paper Cranes, displayed in the entrance of the school.

Joel S., a former student, created this amazing piece of art as a thank you to Propel Montour before he moved out of the area. Not only is it beautiful, but, like all art, its inspiration is what makes 400 Paper Cranes special. 400 Paper Cranes was created as a symbol of the most important part of the Propel Montour — the community of students, faculty and staff:

- **Invisible Strings:** The teachers and staff that work behind the scenes
- **400 Individualized cranes:** 400 individual students
- **Wooden Frame:** The foundation of Propel's administrative team.

Thank you, Joel, for this inspiring gift!



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