

# ★ PROPEL POST

A NEWSLETTER FROM PROPEL SCHOOLS ISSUE #3

Don't miss  
the new WQED  
documentary about  
Propel Schools!

Airing for the first time  
OnQ — Wednesday,  
October 21st at  
7:30 p.m.

## In This Issue

- PSSA Results
- An Interview with Dr. Wooten
- Propel Scholars
- CMU & Propel Collaboration



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

## Making the Grade Propel Shines on Pennsylvania Assessment Tests!

We are incredibly proud of our students. We think you'll agree that their results on the most recent state tests are a testament to their hard work and motivation. Of course this level of achievement would not be possible without our great teachers and parents who are the foundation for their success.

- Propel had the **highest levels of student achievement** among the 20 Pennsylvania school districts serving high concentrations of students living in poverty (70% or greater).
- Propel is dramatically **outperforming the district run schools** where most of its students live. **Students are 22% more likely to be at grade level than their peers** in these districts — up from a 14% advantage in the prior year. Propel students are also on track to outperform students in more *affluent* Allegheny county districts within a year or two.
- Propel's **African American and economically disadvantaged students performed significantly better** than the typical student (regardless of race or family affluence) in Pittsburgh, Woodland Hills, and other school districts where Propel students live. Compared to the seven school districts from which Propel draws 86% of its students:
  - **African-American students were 32% more likely to be at grade level** if attending Propel;
  - **Economically disadvantaged students were 28% more likely to be at grade level** if attending Propel.
- **Students at Propel McKeesport were star performers in math**, with 97% scoring proficient or advanced on state tests. These **performance levels are consistent with much more affluent school districts** such as Fox Chapel, North Allegheny, Mt. Lebanon and Upper St. Clair. In contrast to these districts, 85% of Propel McKeesport students are eligible for the free/reduced price lunch program and 73% are a minority.

*Data is based on 2008-2009 Pennsylvania System of State Assessments (PSSA).*



## Fast Facts About Propel

- 1,700 students currently attend Propel and more than 1,500 students are on Propel waiting lists.
- 75% of students qualify for the federal free/reduced price lunch program, 65% are a minority, and 15% have special needs.
- 92% of parents give Propel an A or B compared to just 74% in the most recent public school survey.



## An Interview with Dr. Carol Wooten, Propel's Superintendent Extraordinaire

Behind Propel's impressive track record is a woman whose leadership and vision motivate and inspire us.

### Q: What is the secret behind such a high level of student achievement?

A: Multiple factors contribute to the high level of student achievement at Propel. One is the high level of adult achievement — administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals all receive (and often provide) rigorous embedded professional development. Data sets are immediately in the hands of adults and students and instruction is regularly revised and individualized.

### Q: How critical is parent involvement?

A: Propel parents have made a choice in the education of their children. Their continued involvement is a critical component of school success. Propel expects and achieves a high level of involvement at all levels (primary, intermediate, middle and high school.) This is sustained through frequent personalized communication, opportunities to attend cultural and other performance events at school and daytime and evening events that guide parents in providing academic assistance for their children.

### Q: What makes Propel innovative?

A: Propel is innovative in its capacity to individualize instruction, much of this occurring in small flexible grouping and the creation of learning centers. Lesson design is carefully planned and implemented by teams that include instructional coaches, regular and special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. The use of time is critical; this is because of intense attention to the beginning and end of classes, pacing and varying activities during class, and all transitions throughout the day—time is neither lost nor wasted making Propel's longer school day and longer school year even more productive.

### Q: What is your biggest challenge as a superintendent?

A: A challenge always exists in finding a balance among time spent in schools (in classrooms and with principals), time to complete office work (emails, paper work, phone calls, attend meetings, etc.) and time to read the professional journals, online communications and books that continue to inspire and educate.

### Q: What makes you want to come to work every day?

A: I truly love to come to work every day. This has been the case in my over 35 years as an educator, and is especially true at Propel. I have a sense that I can make the process of teaching and learning more effective and meaningful for both children and adults; this is as I personally continue to teach and learn.

### Q: What's in store for the future of Propel?

A: Propel will continue to show growth in all of its indicators for success: student achievement, stakeholder satisfaction, school climate, and strong commitment to the arts. We will continue to open K–8 and 9–12 schools and find ways to do this without compromising quality for quantity. But, most importantly, we will become a "lighthouse" for research and development continuing to expand our capacity and open our doors to universities, K–12 educators, representatives from business and policy makers at all levels.

## Perspectives from Propel

After six years of delivering quality public education, we think our experiences would be instructive to our state's education decision makers. So, we have decided to produce a series of essays titled "Perspectives from Propel." These essays will be distributed electronically once per month.

Some of the topics we intend to cover in the next year are:

- Why parents are drawn to charter schools
- How school districts are relating to charter schools
- What it takes to turn around low performance and produce high achievement

If you are not already on our email list, and want to receive our *Perspectives*, please let us know at: [adappolonia@propelschools.org](mailto:adappolonia@propelschools.org).





Photo from left to right:  
Melinda Smith (Angelo's mom), Angelo Vaughn  
Robert Bischoff, Principal, Propel HOMESTEAD,  
Desiree Anderson, Kimberly Anderson  
(Desiree's mom).

## Propel's Scholars

The FAST Scholarship is propelling another two students towards a very bright future.

**2009 recipients were Angelo Vaughn and Desiree Anderson.** Both students are part of Discovery Aces, Propel's gifted program. Desiree is described by her teachers as a mature, self-directed young lady. She has a quiet grace about her that makes her a role model for her peers. She takes her academics very seriously and her open mind is evident in her creativity. Angelo is described as hard-working and inquisitive. He has a love for animals and an interest in pursuing a career in zoology. His teachers tell us that he consistently beats them at Quoridor, a strategy board game. Desiree is attending Propel ANDREW STREET High School this fall; Angelo is enrolled at Central Catholic. Both students were absolutely thrilled to be chosen for this scholarship and have very bright futures ahead.

*The FAST Scholarship was made possible by a generous founding gift from architect Tasso Katselas. The scholarship annually awards two Propel eighth graders with \$16,500 to be used for post-secondary education.*

## Carnegie Mellon and Propel Schools Team Up – And You're Invited!

When Kristin Hughes, Carnegie Mellon Design School Professor and Propel board member came up with the idea to incorporate Propel into her fall Junior Communication Design class, we were all for it.

The assignment for students was to create a series of posters, short videos and other artifacts, all themed around the mission and vision of Propel—*transforming public education*. The project partnered 25 CMU students with 25 Propel students who became friends and pen-pals over the semester, sharing personal stories and academic experiences. Carnegie Mellon students had the opportunity to visit a Propel school (many seeing Homestead for the first time), and likewise, Propel students had the opportunity to visit Carnegie Mellon (many seeing a college campus for the first time).

Their designs will be on display at Pittsburgh Center for the Arts on Tuesday, October 20th from 6–8 p.m. This collection presents a powerful commentary on public education and the systemic impact that high-performing public schools have on transforming the lives of children.



...Propel students had the opportunity to visit Carnegie Mellon (many seeing a college campus for the first time).

**Join US** for this special evening. All are welcome!

Propelling Public Education:  
*A Carnegie Mellon Design Exhibition Inspired by Propel Schools*

**Tuesday, October 20th  
6–8 p.m.**

**Pittsburgh Center for the Arts**  
6300 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15232  
Light food & drink

Please RSVP by Oct. 12 to  
[adappolonia@propelschools.org](mailto:adappolonia@propelschools.org)

## Propel's NEW School

Propel expects to have a new home in Braddock Hills. A vote by the state Charter School Appeal Board is expected this month. The charter approval would overturn an earlier decision by the Woodland Hills School Board to deny a charter to Propel to open a second school within the district's boundaries.

We anticipate opening Propel BRADDOCK HILLS in August 2010. The school will eventually serve about 800 students in grades K-12. Propel EAST, our existing school in Turtle Creek, serves 400 students in grades K-8 with a waiting list of over 500 children.

More than 1,200 residents of the Woodland Hills School District signed a petition saying they support a second Propel school in their community. We are so grateful to the MANY parents and community members who have supported us through this long process. We hope to have good news to share very shortly!

## Propel EAST Students Gifted A Green Learning Lab

Propel EAST students have received a special *gift of green* to start off their school year. On September 18th, employee volunteers from Direct Energy Business helped staff and students build a greenhouse, as part of an energy efficiency and green-themed day. Following the build, students learned about energy saving tips at a special assembly with guest speaker Dave Walton, Direct Energy's Efficiency Expert. Dave flew in from Toronto *just* to visit Propel!

Propel EAST plans to use the greenhouse to study plants, grow vegetables, house a butterfly garden, and conduct solar energy experiments. The greenhouse was made possible through an energy efficiency grant from Direct Energy. This is the second year Direct Energy has recognized Propel through its community giving program. In 2008, Direct Energy supported Propel through the Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program.



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