

# SMART Showcase School

**EDCompass** newsletter

[smarttech.com/EDCsubscribe](http://smarttech.com/EDCsubscribe)

## Focus on Students Means Success for Pittsburgh School

By **Mike MacKinnon**

When it comes to unlocking potential in students, the staff at **Propel Braddock Hills** takes a unique approach – try anything and see if it works. It's a philosophy they share with six other **Propel Schools**, an innovative set of charter schools serving high-poverty districts in Pennsylvania's Pittsburgh metropolitan area. Propel Schools started in 2003, when a group of educators dedicated themselves to the idea that all children deserve access to quality education, regardless of social or economic factors.

Since then, Propel, a SMART Showcase District, has grown rapidly, with more than 2,000 K–12 students, and 2,000 more waiting for an opening. The reason for its explosive growth is simple – results. Propel students are on par with students statewide in standardized testing, despite higher-than-average instances of economic disadvantage. They are 35 percent more likely to be at grade level than students in districts served by Propel. Propel's African American students are 52 percent more likely to be at grade level than their counterparts in the same areas. These results can be attributed to Propel's innovative **Powerful Practices** teaching methods.

Matthew Strine, Propel's director of instructional technology, says interactive classroom technology is a key component of Propel's methodology. "[Our] vision for technology is to teach 21st-century skills with 21st-century equipment," says Strine. "[We want to] engage young learners with innovative hardware and software, connect users and allow easy collaboration among them, and help cultivate digital citizens.

"SMART products have helped us maintain a high level of student interest and teacher enthusiasm," Strine says. "With a **SMART Board interactive whiteboard** in every classroom, teachers engage students in ways that traditional classrooms cannot offer."

Erin Skelly, a math advisor at Propel Braddock Hills, agrees. Skelly uses a **SMART Board 800 series interactive whiteboard** along with a **SMART Response™ interactive response system**, **SMART Notebook™ collaborative learning software** and a **SMART Slate™ wireless slate** to help keep students engaged and focused. "I have two particular students who, before, would not do anything," she says. "But if I put them up at the interactive whiteboard, they will teach a lesson all day long. They won't sit at their desks and write down anything, but they will go up to the interactive whiteboard and do the problems. They just like being in the front, and they just like being able to use it."

### Success through building relationships

Recognizing students' needs and working to further their interests drives the success of Propel students, says Joe Oliphant, Principal at Propel Braddock Hills. "It all ties in," he says. "We're trying to teach the whole child. It's not just academics. Our priorities need to be geared 100 percent toward our students. My vision is 'If it's gonna make a student smile and if they're gonna enjoy it, then we'll do it.'"

Skelly says student performance is greatly influenced by the sense of accountability that comes from building close relationships with students and their families. "Every morning and every afternoon we have what we call our *Advisory*," Skelly says. "We compare that to a homeroom, where students check in with teachers, but we make it more. Part of that is being a student's advisor, like a mentor, taking time just to get to know the students, sitting down one-on-one."



"With a SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard in every classroom, teachers engage students in ways that traditional classrooms cannot offer."

#### **Matthew Strine**

Director of Instructional  
Technology  
Propel Schools  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



If you would like to visit Propel Braddock Hills to talk with educators about their success and see firsthand how they're putting SMART products to work, visit the [SMART Showcase School](#) section of our website. From this page, you can also find a Showcase School or District in your area.

According to Skelly, the advisory relationship with students, along with smaller class sizes, means teachers can manage students' progress more effectively and better understand how to motivate them. "You get to have a conversation with them," she says. "You get to know the students and what makes them tick. You know what they're going to do, how they're going to react – and you know how to react to them."

Students also gain a better understanding of their teachers' expectations. "In the urban school atmosphere, getting that rapport with students is a big part of it," Skelly says. "They don't want to disappoint us."

### Parental involvement is key

Parents are also expected to be involved in their children's learning at Propel. "[Success] depends on the dedication and work ethic that are being provided at home," says Oliphant. "So when we have parent-teacher conferences, it's not just the teacher saying, 'Here are the grades. Let's discuss.' It's more like, 'This is what you should be doing at home.' And we provide contracts they sign at the beginning of the year that say they'll dedicate 20 minutes of reading time every night. And you can see the difference it makes."

Skelly says persistence with parents is working – staff will even hold conferences at students' homes. As a result, parent attendance at conferences is higher than usual, with about 85–95 percent of parents participating. "It works because they know that we care," Skelly says. "[They know] that we want to get them in, and they know that we're not going to stop until we get them to come in."

Skelly says the focus is squarely on students at the conferences. "It's putting more responsibility on students to come in, tell their parents what they're doing, why they haven't got the grades that they should get or just showing off how well they are doing."

According to Oliphant, parental involvement pays dividends in results. "Once they see how it's transforming their children and how they're one, two, three, four grade levels above where they were before, then they understand that we mean business," he says.

And parents are encouraged to use the SMART products at conferences and open houses. "We want our parents to understand that this is what their kids are working with," says Oliphant. "So when the kids go home and say, 'I used a SMART Board today' . . . they understand they can manipulate things and that's part of the culture and part of their routine."

Using technology products, developing innovative teaching practices, building rapport with students and getting parents involved are all part of Propel's vision to provide the best education for students, regardless of where they live. "We're not trying to be competitive," says Oliphant. "We just want to influence the larger district and say, 'Look, these are the same kids that came from your district that weren't performing and they're performing now.' There's no magic sauce. It's just dedication."

Judging by the remarkable results Propel is achieving, that dedication is paying off. **EC**

© 2011 SMART Technologies. All rights reserved. EDCompass, SMART Board, SMART Response, SMART Notebook, SMART Slate, smarttech, the SMART logo and all SMART taglines are trademarks or registered trademarks of SMART Technologies in the U.S. and/or other countries.