



BRINGING THE CONCERT HALL TO SCHOOL

Propel Uses Partnerships in the Arts to Educate and Inspire

Among the many reasons Pittsburgh ranks consistently high in national “livability” assessments are the numerous arts groups that enliven the city’s cultural life. But for many area children, a visit to a play, opera, or dance recital is a rarity. What role can schools play in bringing the arts into the lives of these children?

Charter schools, autonomous public schools run by their own independent board of directors, are demonstrating that the role can be significant.

One good example is Propel Schools’ CreativeArts program. Propel operates a group of five charter schools surrounding Pittsburgh and has forged partnerships with more than a dozen local arts organizations. Propel’s many partners include—Civic Light Opera, Studio J (a hip-hop musical troupe), Prime Stage Theatre and the Pittsburgh Dance Ensemble, to name a few. Each sends visiting artists into schools for six-week modules. The artists work closely with Propel’s art faculty to train students intensively in their given art form. At the end of the six-week module, students put on a performance. Those working with Civic Light Opera visiting artists produce a musical, karate students demonstrate their newly learned moves, and so on.

All 1,500 students at Propel’s K-8 schools—located in McKeesport, Turtle Creek, Montour, and Homestead—have one hour of arts a day. There are 50 visiting artists, including 35 who work in the schools on an almost daily basis.

The wide variety of programming—which includes African drumming, Latin dance, shotokan karate, and yoga along with more traditional music, visual art, and drama studies—exposes each student to the

possibilities that the arts hold for them. Since most Propel students come from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, many of them are discovering for the first time what the arts, and the region they live in, have to offer. Bringing in this incredible variety of arts programs is a considerable undertaking, but Propel Superintendent Carol Wooten says unhesitatingly that the effort is worthwhile.

“We know that many children don’t always get exposed to the arts,” says Wooten. “Not every child is going to like karate or hip hop. But by bringing a variety of different groups and disciplines, we give more opportunities for students to find their niche, to find something that they love doing.”

While many public schools are scaling back their arts offerings to focus more on reading and math, Propel has instead expanded its programming. This arts emphasis has intrinsic value, but it can also contribute to success in core academic areas. It should perhaps be no surprise that **Propel McKeesport has posted some of the highest math achievement scores anywhere in Allegheny County.** Propel’s commitment to a longer school day and year, of course, also helps these pioneering charter schools incorporate multifaceted arts instruction without neglecting core academic instruction.

It all adds up to further evidence the energy, innovation, and quality provided by charter schools are raising the bar in public education.

This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.



Charter Schools.org