

# The Power of Dignity

## Propelling Change in Public Education

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## Abstract

In an era of struggling public educational systems, the Allegheny County Propel Schools organization has made great strides to improve academic performance while producing students who are also great citizens. From their founding less than a decade ago, a clear vision and approach to education, captured in a handful of Promising Principles, has been an unquestionable part of their success. As the organization grows and new schools are planted, Propel must find effective means of replicating their model to ensure that each Propel school is as successful as the others.

With this project, the author aims to prove that design and designers have an important role to play in helping this type of organization reach their goals without approaching the situation from a problem-solving, artifact-based angle. Instead, the author deliberately departs from a discipline-specific design approach to engage strategically with an organization devoted to social impact; through this relationship she uses design methodology in a non-traditional setting to show that the power of fully immersive collaboration is greater than the power of design alone.

The result is a set of design recommendations for a systemic model of replication that is both sensitive to the organization's culture and forward-thinking in its approach. This model, paired with the introduction of a new job position and virtual assistant, is a comprehensive proposal for helping the organization plan for future growth. It is meant to provide a foundation for what is possible, a framework for visualizing the potential, attainable next steps.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of my collaborators at Propel Schools. Without their cooperation and encouragement this project would never have happened.

I would also like to thank my adviser, Kristin Hughes, who, through her constructive feedback and ongoing support, contributed to the success of this thesis work.

And many thanks to my loving husband who has been by my side through this experience.

# Introduction

## *Groundwork*

Despite far-reaching attempts at educational reform, including the No Child Left Behind act of 2002, performance of the nation's traditional public schools has remained stagnant for decades. However, amidst the educational depression shine a number of remarkable schools and school systems that defy trends in public education. Many of these schools are charter schools—tuition-free, public schools offered as an alternative to existing district schools—which attempt to raise the standard of education partially by eliminating much of the bureaucracy traditional schools face. Each charter school operates relatively autonomously in exchange for increased accountability for the performance of the school and its students. Although not all have succeeded at improving the standard of education for the children they serve, many charter schools have been enormously successful. Unfortunately, their methods of success are not easily transferred to and implemented by other schools, and sometimes are not even effectively identified and shared within their own schools or school systems. Consequently, the benefits are relegated to the few students fortunate enough to be enrolled.

In their infancy, charter schools were set up as research and development institutions within existing school districts. They existed to test and prove that innovative strategies could foster academic achievement, even in economically and academically troubled dis-

tricts. Unfortunately, partisanship and limited funding have placed many charter schools into a contentious position. Instead of working alongside their districts, charter schools are often pitted against the existing schools in a battle for money and recognition. As a result, many charter schools are seen as invaders in their own school districts, not allies. While this reaction is understandable, resulting from the structure of the nation's public school systems and funding stratification, we often forget that there are children at stake in this equation. When the educational system remains tied up in partisan battles, we lose sight of what might actually be best for the children in the system.

## *The Local Situation*

In the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, Propel Schools has spearheaded the effort to, “catalyze the transformation of public education in Southwestern Pennsylvania so that all children have access to high performing public schools” ([www.propelschools.org](http://www.propelschools.org)). Their six schools primarily serve underprivileged students, many of whom have previously had to attend failing schools. The reasons parents choose to send their children to a Propel school over their current school are varied—some choose Propel for its growing reputation while others choose a Propel school simply because it is not their child's current school, and this perhaps says something about the kind of environments these children are used to. Once enrolled at a Propel school,

however, all students encounter a unique set of expectations, structure, and vision of education. These unique facets are arguably the foundation of success for Propel students, and the foundation of success for the Propel system as a whole.

It is this vision and culture of practice that Propel Schools has collected as their Promising Principles. These six principles, Embedded Support, Culture of Dignity, Vibrant Teaching Communities, Quest for Excellence, Fully Valued Arts Program, and Agile Instruction, which are broken down further into Powerful Practices, consist of actions, ideas, values, and ideals that have made Propel Schools effective in creating and maintaining highly effective schools. One of Propel's goals is to make this information public in a way that both sparks conversation and questions and can be used by other institutions so that individuals, educators, and other districts are able to learn from and act upon Propel's success. While the intent to share is genuine, there are distinct challenges in taking highly intangible concepts, values, and ideals and translating them into a form that can do more than just explain what works, but rather can allow others to take action.

Therefore, if Propel's desire is to be a change agent, helping to provide a means for other public schools to replicate the success they have had, can their system

and culture of practice be translated into something concrete, actionable and transferable, and, if so, how?

#### *Why Design?*

Typically as designers we are wont to start each of our projects by framing a problem and then working toward a solution. From the start I knew my project would not succeed if I approached it in this way. Having never worked with a designer in this capacity, Propel was originally reluctant to engage fully with me because they saw me as an outsider, someone unfamiliar with education, an unsolicited adviser looking to poke holes in their model. Why go looking for problems where there need not be any? The issue with approaching the scenario as an opportunity to problem-solve was perhaps one of attitude more than anything. When we work with clients, often times we look for ways to “fix” things, and, to be fair, are frequently hired to do just that. This approach, however, has a tendency to create designers who are eager to say, “This is what I can do for you. This is how it will fix your problem.”

But what if there is no problem, real or perceived? Is there still a need or a place for designers? Can designers be more than just problem solvers?

I answer with a resounding yes; designers have a very important place, even when the need is not felt

acutely. From what I knew of the organization and situation at Propel, it was clear that Propel did not need the guidance of a problem-solving designer. However, knowing what I did of the design approach to assessing situations, evaluating systems and services, and proposing future scenarios, I felt there was an appropriate place for design within the organization.

There is a small but growing school of design philosophy and practice that has been questioning the traditional design mentality and approach. Authors, designers and thinkers like Richard Buchanan, Harold Nelson, Emily Pilloton, and companies like Australia's 2nd Road have begun to broaden definitions of design and have probed at questions of necessity, ethics, place, dignity, and holism within the practice of design. Nelson's focus on systems thinking as it relates to design is a clear example of taking the broad view, of looking at design not as the answer, but rather an indispensable part of a larger whole. His systems approach suggests that designers no longer work in closed systems doing "design work," a field separate and removed from the rest of the process, but rather that design ought to be cross-disciplinary, that designers need to be accountable to more than just themselves. Therefore design cannot be self-serving; designers and clients must work in to truly achieve the best outcome (*The Design Way*).

Many of Richard Buchanan's writings touch on similar themes, that designers cannot be separated from the things they design or the people for whom they design. This is most poignantly articulated in his essay, "Human Dignity and Human Rights: Thoughts on the Principles of Human-Centered Design," in which he states, "Human-centered design is fundamentally an affirmation of human dignity. It is an ongoing search for what can be done to support and strengthen the dignity of human beings as they act out their lives in varied social, economic, political and cultural circumstances" (37). He goes on to say of design that, "We are under no illusion that design is everything in human life...What we do believe is that design offers a way of thinking about the world that is significant for addressing many of the problems that human beings face in contemporary culture" (38). Design, therefore, is not some magic bullet, but could provide a way of approaching a daunting scenario, like the American public education system, that other disciplines may not be equipped to provide.

So, why design? Why not just a straightforward marketing or management solution? Marketing might simply look at how to package and sell what Propel has developed in their Promising Principles, overlooking some of the more foundational questions that might affect the outcome of such a project. And management certainly needs to be involved in the

allocation of resources and personnel down the line, but neither a managerial or marketing approach would take a broad, holistic, strategic systems view from the beginning. I wanted to address much broader questions:

What must we know to truly understand the Propel organization?

What kind of impact is Propel looking to have and with whom?

What can Propel provide to others based on what they have learned about themselves?

Perhaps most importantly I kept returning to the question of whether or not their Principles actually could be transferable. A marketing approach would, I fear, ignore this question completely and proceed under the assumption that it can, and therefore should be done. As a designer, though, I felt the need to probe further before making any judgments about how to proceed, to truly attempt to take a holistic approach. I wanted to focus not just on the question of what I could accomplish as a designer, but rather what the organization ought to do to further their mission.

Design, in this case, would be less about a final artifact, and more about the process and potential

of design to understand a whole system. I saw my role more as a strategist than executioner; it would be my job to determine, alongside the Propel team, the most appropriate focus and direction of my project in order that it help drive the organization toward development and growth.



## Familiarization

### *Literature*

Since I was going to be working with an educational institution and do not have a background in education or teaching, one of my main areas of interest and focus was education and educational theory. Within this field, I devoted my time to a few prominent and highly regarded thinkers including John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Eleanor Duckworth of the Experienced Teacher's Group at Harvard University. Through these and others I began to develop a basic understanding of educational theory, especially as related to educational reform.

Dewey and Darling-Hammond were especially useful in establishing my own framework and approach to the educational environment. Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, suggests a holistic approach to schooling, one that regards each pupil as an individual, but also recognizes that individual's significance in the larger system. He speaks primarily of the role of the environment on the individual and his or her propensity to learn. By "environment" Dewey is not just speaking of the setting in which the individual finds himself, but also the people with whom he must interact in that space, and how the interactions could be orchestrated (Dewey "Education as a Social Function").

Darling-Hammond's book *The Right to Learn* deals with the struggles of public education in America and presents a number of possible systemic solutions that

would help reform individual schools and, ideally, the entire educational system. Among the most salient points is an insistence on structural change, saying that schools, as they are currently and traditionally conceived, will not be able to sustain new, progressive practices without it ("Structuring Learner-Centered Schools"). Darling-Hammond introduced me to some of the current and ongoing problems permeating public education, which helped me to contextualize Propel's place in the overall milieu.

### *Preliminary work*

My initial work with Propel centered on the idea of becoming familiar with and fully engaged in the organization over a short period of time. What I set out to do was to develop a grasp of the Promising Principles as they manifested themselves in a fully-functioning educational context.

Since my goal was to explore whether a system and culture of practice could be translated into something concrete, actionable, and transferable, I was essentially interested in the possibility and challenge of making something intangible more tangible. My original inclination was to look at developing some kind of tool kit that would enable institutions to comprehend and employ the Propel model, as evidenced by the Promising Principles, in their own contexts. I set out to observe these principles in action, and to begin to develop a sense of what could be quantified and packaged.

## Exploratory Research

I spent the first few weeks of my research touring each of Propel's six schools here in Allegheny County. Although I did not ask many questions during this phase of research, and allowed the tours to be directed by each school's principal, I was able to gather a good deal of observational data. As part of each of these tours I was allowed access to classrooms, briefly glimpsing a snapshot of teacher-student interactions.

These initial observations did not lead toward any particular conclusions about Propel or about my project, but what became very clear through these observations was that the intangibility I was hoping to make tangible was going to be a more difficult challenge than expected. There was something about the culture at Propel that I was not going to be able to bottle, no matter how hard I tried, because the experiential nature of the environment was so important.

### *Interviews*

With my second step, a series of interviews with Propel principals, my intention was to begin to pull out the tangible aspects of the Promising Principles, hoping to narrow down and focus my efforts on just one of the Principles to use as an example of what could be done for all six. During my second interview, I received the piece I had been looking for to help me reach a conclusion about where to go next. When probed about expectations at her school, how

the expectations were determined and how they are managed, this principal stated, "During the first year I did not think much about instruction – culture came first. Now that the culture is solid that is a large part of our academic success. At Propel in general, Culture of Dignity is one of the principles. We want people to be able to feel and see it." What this did, more than anything else, was validate for me exactly what I had experienced in my short time with Propel. The culture, what Propel deems one of dignity, was indeed the very backbone of everything at Propel.

The subsequent interviews I conducted, with the remaining three principals (or pairs of principals in some cases) and with the superintendent and executive director all focused specifically on the Culture of Dignity. It was my intent to find a way to tease out the tangible aspects of the culture, or at least those things that could be named, defined, and ultimately replicated. I was going to use this one principle as a blueprint for the five others. I firmly believed it was the crux to understanding the entirety of Propel.

The Culture of Dignity interview consisted of questions that allowed the individuals to tell their personal stories and relate their experiences to the greater Propel culture. For example, one of the questions asked was, "How do your students learn about dignity?" One of the principals responded, "I think from

the moment they walk in, they're greeted at the door with a 'good morning, how are you?'—they're treated like human beings. They see that every day, how we respect each other. When there's a disagreement we talk about things...We empower them to have a voice. They buy in. They come directly to me and want to talk to me about home life, personal things they're going through, schoolwork, etc. They know we care about them. I think it starts right when they walk through the door in the morning...It goes on throughout the day. The goal is that they begin to treat each other how they're treated, and then it branches out into the community." This single answer, even apart from the supporting responses of everyone else with whom I spoke, said an enormous amount about Propel's Culture of Dignity.

But how would it possible to communicate this to others? How could the design process, and I as a designer, find a method that would make it clear how closely correlated the message and the delivery of a culture need to be in order to be successful? Could a tool make it clear to someone that Propel's success is not based on a magic solution or process, but rather on the strength and vision of the organization to shape and maintain a culture?

### *Journals*

For further research I developed a journal aimed at Propel classroom teachers. It covered five working days and asked that individuals respond to four questions each day, with an overall reflection at the end. Twenty teachers completed the activity, which provided me with a wealth of information and insight into the daily lives of the teachers and how the culture of dignity was manifest in twenty different classrooms. The data further confirmed, however, that there was not going to be a clear and definitive way to bottle up the culture of dignity any more than Propel already had. It appeared that the amount of flexibility within the system (rigid flexibility, you might say) made a prescriptive method of dissemination and replication impossible.

So, as far as the initial research question—can Propel's system and culture of practice be translated into something concrete, actionable and transferable?—it seemed the answer would have to be no, at least not in any way I originally intended.

## Toward a Solution

I was put in contact with a woman at Propel who had been hired to fill a brand new position. She had been an art teacher at one of the Propel schools for a number of years and was selected to take on a role that would come to be known as Powerful Practices Dissemination Coach (PPDC). As it turned out, while I had been tackling the challenging questions of replication and dissemination, Propel had been awarded grants from the United States Department of Education to work on just that: dissemination of Propel's Promising Principles school model.

The PPDC was paired with part-time employee of the Propel Schools Foundation, a retired superintendent, to carry out the terms of the grants. He was hired as the Director of Replication and Expansion (DRE) and was tasked with focusing on Propel's growth strategy. Together these two individuals were to set up a plan, design and create a system or tool, and implement the replication and dissemination model per the terms of the USDOE grants. We briefly discussed the work I had done to-date and they gave me a general overview of the work that lay ahead. We agreed that our individual endeavors overlapped and that collaboration would benefit both my thesis project and Propel.

During the initial meetings, they confirmed what I had spoken with the superintendent and executive director about shortly before break. As Propel looked

toward future growth and expansion, there were four audiences to consider: 1) existing Propel schools and new teachers that would join those schools each year; 2) future Propel schools in Allegheny County (Propel was awarded a separate grant in 2010 to assist with opening five new Propel schools over the next five years); 3) future Propel schools in other geographies (Propel has been approached by groups from other states looking at the possibility of using the Propel model and name for charter schools in their geographies); 4) other schools and school systems not looking to adopt a Propel model but might be looking for ways to learn from and implement some of what Propel has done successfully.

At the time of the December graduate poster session, it seemed most appropriate to move forward by focusing on the most immediate need, current Propel schools. By selecting a specific audience, and one that was ready-made and captive, I assumed my work would be most beneficial to Propel as well as allow me to target my design research and implementation to an easily accessible audience. However, after my initial meetings with the PPDC and DRE, I began to offer alternate suggestions based on their scope, and how my project would best complement their work.

I presented three options for how I could move forward:

- 1) Help to create a long-term design and implementation strategy for the expansion of Propel Schools, focusing on replication of the schools' culture. Included in the strategy would be the development of an internal evaluation guide as a self-assessment tool for the educators and administrators. Goal: Present Propel with a viable basis for next steps in the expansion process. Focus question: what is the most ideal plan for creating, testing and implementing a system of dissemination?
- 2) Dig deep into the Culture of Dignity. Show what the implementation of a tool to help others understand how to replicate this Promising Principle would look like and how it would work. Goal: Provide the umbrella structure under which the other five Promising Principles would fit and use the development and implementation of this tool as a blueprint for the other five. Focus question: Can the idea of a Culture of Dignity be disseminated via a prescriptive tool?
- 3) Develop a method of replication and dissemination as a guide for what could be done with the whole system, keeping the Culture of Dignity as the backbone. Goal: depict how an entire system of replication and dissemination of a single Promising Principle could work. Focus question: What are the actionable items in the system and how are they best introduced to

those unfamiliar with the Propel model so as to allow for replication?

After a few meetings and conversations regarding the direction of my project, including meetings with my thesis adviser, I concluded that the audience I intended to address, current Propel schools, was being more appropriately and immediately addressed by the replication and dissemination team. Therefore, I switched my focus to the more hypothetical, but highly possible, idea of Propel opening schools in other locations outside Allegheny County. Although perhaps less immediately beneficial, since Propel does not currently have concrete plans to open a satellite school, the ideas and concepts presented in the model would provide fresh insight into what it might require and how Propel might consider approaching the idea of future growth. I felt like my best input would come in the form of next-steps and recommendations for future growth.

# Prototype

## *Background*

As mentioned, Propel currently operates six schools, all of which are located in Allegheny County, the newest of which opened in the fall of 2010. So far in Propel's history, when new schools have opened, much of the "new" staff has been comprised of teachers, coaches, and administrators from other established Propel schools. This has allowed for consistency of operation as well as organic growth of the Propel culture. Close proximity, or a "cluster" of schools, has made this type of growth possible. Teachers new to the Propel system are surrounded by veteran Propel teachers, which has meant that there has always been someone close by who knows how Propel operates, what is expected, and where Propel has been. In opening new schools in Allegheny County, Propel has been able to nearly seamlessly transfer their culture and practices to the new buildings.

A key to making this possible has been through the use of coaches. Coaches, who are master teachers or experts in a particular discipline, aid and support each school's operations. By having these coaches, teachers' and students' learning is highly supported, adjusted, customized, and honed to best suit the students and the environment; therefore, these literacy, math, science, technology, and behavior coaches are an essential part of the Propel model and an indispensable part of Propel's success.

So, when considering the idea of replicating Propel in a new location, and perhaps starting a new cluster of Propel schools, I realized that any proposed design must accommodate for the things that can and cannot be replicated and also supplement the current expansion model with new ideas. As a system for planting a new school, this design would need to reflect the current method and structure as well as the differences that would need to be implemented in the new system. The biggest difference would be the struggle to create the organic growth that happens quite naturally in the geographically bound Allegheny region. However, despite the physical distance of a satellite school, this experiential learning environment clearly had to be part of any replication system that had a chance of success. Based on the work I'd done to this point, it was clear that an unquestionable part of replicating the Propel culture comes from experiencing it firsthand. I learned this myself as I explored the Promising Principles. I'd read about them, watched the videos and heard people talk about them, but until I was able to truly immerse myself in the culture and interact as part of a Propel team, I never quite grasped or felt what the culture was like. So, as an "outsider" to the organization, as all teachers in a new geography would be, the only way to have them understand the culture would be to experience it.

### *Design Recommendations*

Since recognizing that the desired result—a transfer of culture from one location to another—could not be obtained through artifacts alone, I knew that my design would have to be a service or system in order to accommodate the necessary flexibility of the replication and dissemination process. Obviously, this would not be as straightforward as simply designing an artifact or set of artifacts, but it would be more appropriate to the organization. A system design would require an understanding of the organization's current state, the desired result, and all the steps necessary to achieve the outcome.

Designing a system would involve creating a plan, identifying the right people to be involved in the process, and the creation or identification of tools to support the execution. Instead of digging deeply into one particular tool or application, it would be my responsibility as the system designer to think broadly and holistically about the entire process.

My recommendations, therefore, focus on a system of integration that requires firsthand experience, in the form of a residency, for all new teachers and staff. The overall integration model can be seen in Figure 1.

In this replication process, a brand new job position will be necessary: the Culture Coach (see Figure 2). In addition to the coaches that already exist in the Propel

system, the Culture Coach will serve an important role in monitoring and maintaining the Propel culture. This individual will be relocated from an existing Propel school and will be chosen based on her ability to demonstrate and articulate each of Propel's Promising Principles. She will support Propel's growth and sustenance by working alongside teachers and administrators, identifying areas of strength and improvement, and acting as a resource for all things related to Propel's culture.

The replication and integration has four phases: orientation, immersion, cohesion, and retention. Orientation for all new employees of the new school will begin in late February of the year preceding the opening of the new school. Teachers and staff will spend a week participating in orientation activities, which will be led by the school administrators in conjunction with the PPDC and Culture Coach. One of the tools used in this process will be a Prezi, a digital presentation platform, which will contain a comprehensive explanation of the Promising Principles, as well as discussion questions, activity ideas, and supplemental materials. The Prezi, which is currently being created and populated by the PPDC, will be a resource for all members of the Propel community and will serve as a learning and support tool.

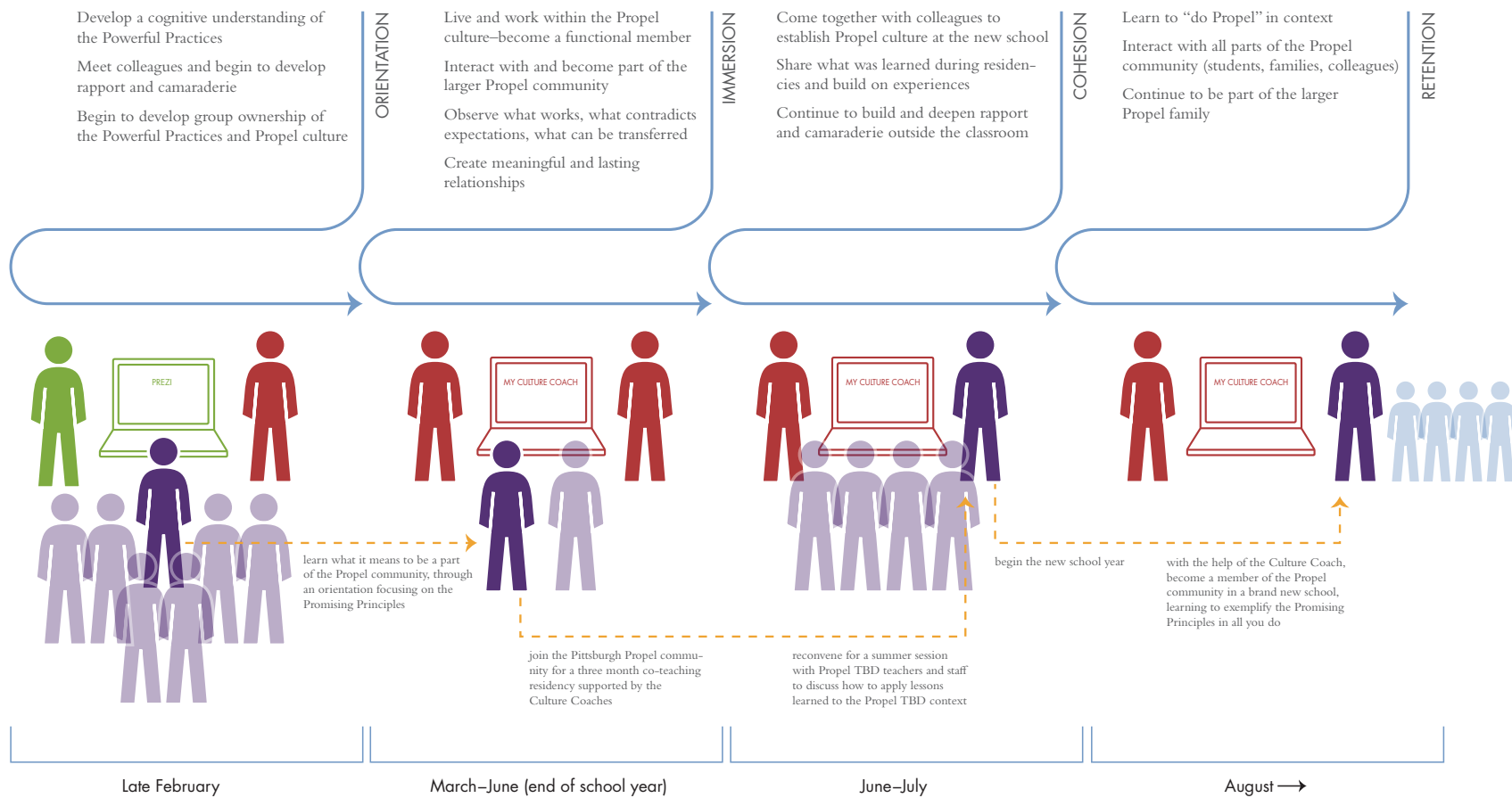
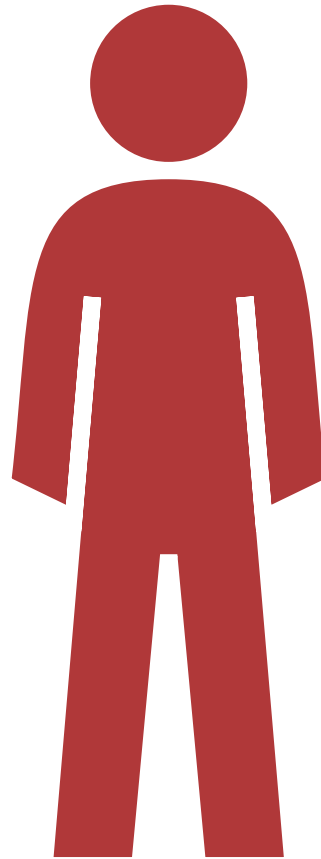


Figure 1: Replication Model





## CULTURE COACH

Expert on Propel's Promising Principles

An aid to teachers and staff

- Evaluates the operations of each school and helps raise the standard of practice; maintains balance and growth
- Educates when necessary to help develop consistency of language and practice
- Identifies strengths of individuals and schools; helps to transfer successful practices from school to school
- Current on emerging strategies, methods, and ideas and introduces them into the Propel system where appropriate

**CREATIVE:** able to see new ways of doing things and apply knowledge in new ways

**EXPERIENCED:** exemplifies the Propel culture in word and deed

**DRIVEN:** willing to take on responsibility and seek out opportunities to learn and grow

**A LEARNER:** not satisfied with the knowledge he/she has; is always learning from others, from experience, and from study

**SELF-AWARE:** knows what he/she does not know; open to input, criticism, and feedback

Figure 2: Who is the Culture Coach?

Following orientation, each member of the new school will be assigned to an existing Propel school in Allegheny County for a three-month (March–early June) residency. During this residency, new teachers will be paired with veteran teachers and will co-teach for the final three months of the school year. Similarly staff, coaches, and administrators will be paired with their respective counterparts and will work alongside the Propel veterans in a team-like fashion. This complete immersion will allow teachers, administrators and staff to experience first-hand Propel’s Culture of Dignity, and begin to develop a sense of how the entire system operates with the culture as its backbone. New Propel members will be expected to assume the role of both learner and expert, by actively participating in the Propel community in partnership with their partner, essentially learning by doing.

During the residency, all Propel staff will be required to keep weekly journals to record the week’s happenings and allow for reflection on the experience. These journals will feed into the next phase, cohesion. At the end of the three-month residency, all new Propel staff will return to their new location to begin a period of cohesion. To be most effective, this cohesion period will occur directly after the residency so learning is fresh. In small and large group settings, the new Propel staff will reflect on their experiences, and begin to determine how to best build on those experiences

in the new environment. Together, the staff will set up school mission and success statements, goals, and plans for the upcoming year, which will have been developed based on the models they each experienced the previous three months.

Finally, after a brief summer break and standard Propel teacher initiation and staff in service, the new school year will begin. Amidst all the newness of a brand new Propel school, this will begin an important period of retention. This phase truly has no end, since retention and ongoing learning will be a continual process. Instead of floundering on their own, however, the retention will be supported by the Culture Coach and the coach’s virtual assistant, My Culture Coach. The virtual platform will be available to all members of the Propel community, customized for each school or cluster of schools based on the knowledge of their own Culture Coach. The site content, which will contain resources dedicated to supporting the Propel culture, will be monitored and updated by each school or region’s individual Culture Coach. The site map can be seen in Figure 3.

These two new resources will provide necessary ongoing support for all new Propel staff, which is especially important in the brand new satellite schools, filled with an entirely new Propel population. The Coach will be on hand to observe classrooms, respond to

requests and questions, and will be the expert on all things related to Propel's Promising Principles.

#### *Proof of Concept*

In order to insure that the Culture Coach and virtual assistant were indeed going to provide a necessary service and be a valuable asset to the new (and existing) schools, I presented the idea to eight teachers at the existing Propel schools and asked for their input and feedback. In order to make the sessions interactive, I created a paper prototype of the virtual assistant and worked with the superintendent to articulate six separate scenarios in which this type of assistant might be of use to teachers. During each prototyping session, I briefly presented my project and explained the idea of the Culture Coach and virtual assistant to the participants. After answering any questions, I asked each participant to read through the scenarios and choose one or two that resonated with her. She then used this scenario to walk through how she might interact with the virtual assistant. This allowed me to gain a perspective of the types of interactions people expect, and fill the gaps where my prototype may not have met their needs. Through these hands-on sessions I was able to develop a system map that depicts the flexibility of the tool and the different options users would have to help make decisions and find answers.

The feedback I received from participants was overwhelmingly positive, and each said that she would definitely have use for the tool if it were implemented in her own school. Therefore, I felt confident in recommending that the Culture Coach, along with the virtual assistant (My Culture Coach) be a necessary part of any future expansion into new geographies.

### My Culture Coach: Site Diagram

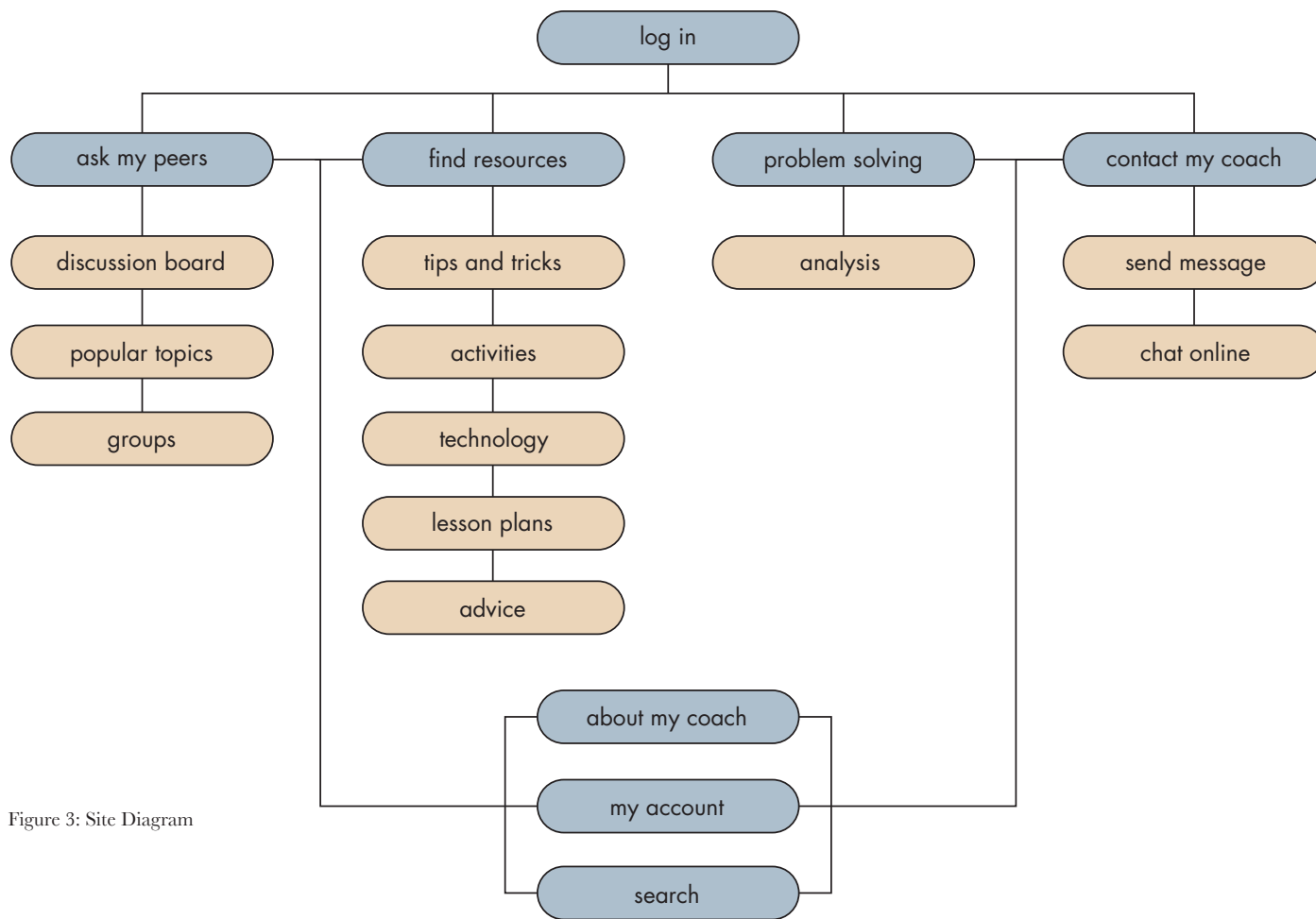
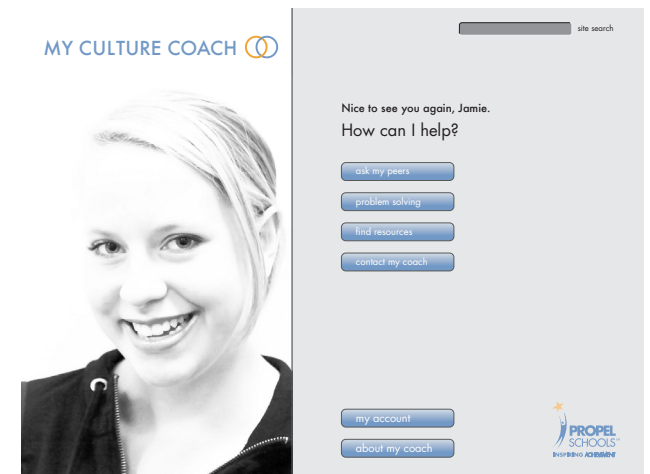
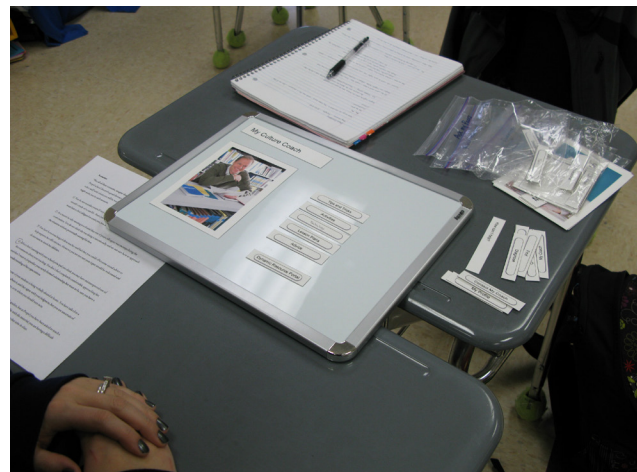
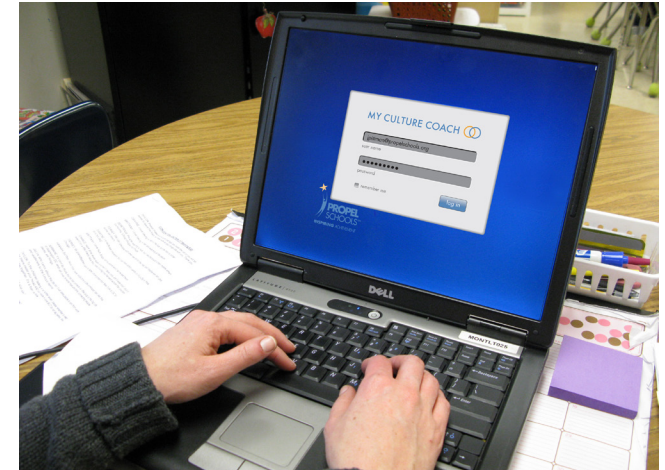
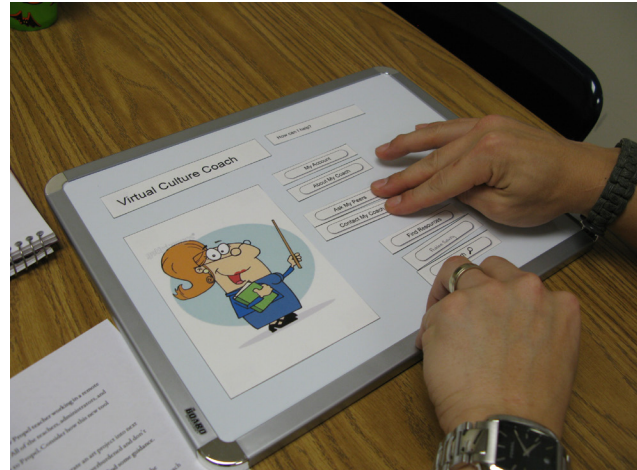


Figure 3: Site Diagram

These images document the development of My Culture Coach, the virtual assistant intended to aid and support Propel's Culture Coach as Propel expands to new locations.

My Culture Coach image courtesy of flickr user jpotts



## Conclusions

It is not always the designer's role to identify problems and attempt to solve those problems through "the power of design." While design is, in fact, a powerful discipline with the opportunity and capability to affect large-scale change in the world, it is not always appropriate to seek a solution, as it were. It is my contention that instead of being opportunists, looking for places where design can make a visible, tangible difference in the world, designers might be more effective contributors to the practice of human-centered design from within organizations. By this I mean that designers could be more than consultants and masters of particular skills who are called on to come and make things, but rather, when possible, ought to become an integral part of the team or organization within which change could happen. In my experience, design is often sold as a commodity, following the philosophy that, "we can do this for you and your business will profit from our expertise, input, and production." In some situations this may be appropriate, but I'd like to contend that there are just as many instances in which a different approach would produce more meaningful results, especially in the long run.

This type of mentality is most appropriately applied to the realm of wicked problems, the types of problems that will likely never be solved, per se, but can be approached and examined from varying angles. These wicked problems are ever changing and do not have a simple right or wrong solution. Each approach is an

attempt to affect the situation, perhaps improve it or set it on a new trajectory, perhaps even just infuse a new idea into the mix. But no approach is *the* solution, just as design isn't *the* solution, and anyone looking for the solution is chasing an impossible goal. Wicked problems, as defined by Horst Rittel, are, "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramification in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Buchanan, "Wicked Problems" 15). Rittel's commentary on wicked problems can be summarized with the phrase: what the problem is depends on how you look at it. Consequently, what you do about it depends on what the problem is. It is, therefore, a recursive and reflective process. It is in this space that we ought to treat design as something other than an opportunistic problem-solving endeavor.

But what is the alternative? If what we are trained to do as designers is locate opportunities for solutions, improvements, and enhancements, what do we do when one solution will not suffice? What do we do when the problem is too big or complicated for one comprehensive solution? Some of the most influential literature I read during the course of this project has been in the area of what can be best described as care in design. Much of this writing focused on the topic of health care, and design within health care, but the ideas are easily transferable to any wicked problem,

which, in my case, is public education. This project has allowed me to enter a situation of care, a functioning set of public charter schools founded on the virtue of the dignity of each individual. I have witnessed the theories and philosophies of these authors come to life at Propel.

In Annemarie Mol's *Logic of Care* she draws the conclusion that the interactions in care must be ongoing and that all members of the care team must be fully engaged and involved in the process ("Customer or Patient?" 21). Care insists that improvement must be a team effort, including all players at all steps, and that care is a process of "try and try again" ("The Good in Practice" 107). Within this model of interaction there can be no separation between the designer and designed-for. What this means is that designers looking to affect change in the world of wicked problems need to become entrenched in the situation. Design is always contextual, certainly, and all designers aim for some sort of empathetic involvement with their clients and the issues their clients care about. I argue, however, that this "empathy"—whether for clients or users—is limited and too often used merely as a tool. However, as Nel Noddings makes clear, "Caring is always characterized by a move away from self," which implies that empathy, as demonstrated in a caring relationship, cannot be self-serving as it often is in a design context (16). One way we as designers might

consider changing this paradigm and move toward care is to become collaborators, authentic members of the organizations on whose behalf we are working. Arthur Frank insists that care is, "an occasion when people discover what each can be in relationship with the other" (Frank 4). Instead of being outsiders attempting to prove our worth, purpose and value to our clients, who often have very different sets of values and world views, perhaps becoming part of the organization and working from a trusted position within is the optimal way to approach scenarios that require long-term commitments.

To be fair and transparent, it is not with this mind set that I originally approached this thesis work. Although I touched on the need to fully understand the organization in my proposal, I spoke of developing a partnership that, "would function much like a designer/client relationship in which the client and the client's needs, goals, and input are highly regarded." It is clear from this wording that I saw myself as a designer who was going to enter this situation, identify potential opportunities through my interactions with individuals at Propel, and then propose some kind of mutually beneficial solution.

Framing and reframing the relationship with Propel has been an ongoing process, but one that without flexibility and a willingness to work within the real-

ity of the organization would not have been possible. When I began my work with Propel I had only my own objectives in mind. Logically this made sense—this was, after all, my thesis project, my academic requirement for graduation—but it did not make complete sense within the context of the overall situation I was about to enter. Propel was an established entity with well-defined goals, methods and philosophy. If I was going to have an impactful relationship, my notion of objectives, and my notion of a designer's role, needed to shift and be sensitive and inclusive of those with whom I would be working. Therefore, instead of approaching the organization with a mind to seek out and solve problems, I was going to have to be attuned to where the organization was and where it wanted to be. I had to let go of my agenda. Instead, this thesis project has been an ongoing conversation, and the work I have done has been relevant and yet flexible enough to respond to the needs and challenges within Propel.



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