Noah Smith, seventh-grader and animal lover, Propel Hazelwood Charter School.
“Welcome to science,” Harold Schmidt told every seventh-grader entering his classroom at Propel Hazelwood Charter School one morning earlier this year.

Noah Smith and his nine classmates each took a Post-it note from Mr. Schmidt to answer “do now” questions—a class warmup. But first Noah had his own questions about the periodic table on the wall, particularly about a recently discovered element. Then he wrote on the Post-it the explanation for why water is considered a pure substance even though it is a compound. (Answer: It’s pure because it has chemical properties different from hydrogen alone or oxygen alone, making it a totally new substance.)

At the beginning of the class discussion, Mr. Schmidt gave each small group of students a choice: Would their table like to have one of the classroom animals with them? The decision was easy for Noah. His favorite is Sir Hiss, an adult male python about four feet long. While the other two tables each chose a guinea pig, Noah reached carefully into Sir Hiss’s glass home, gently took him out and replaced the lid.

As Mr. Schmidt and the class talked about the differences between chemical and physical changes, Noah shared the snake with his teammates. He petted Sir Hiss and, at one point, was following the lesson with the snake over his neck and shoulders. When the tables switched animals, Noah made sure that the guinea pig, Rosencrantz, got some hay. Before the class was over, Mr. Schmidt had Sir Hiss draped over his own neck.

“I love animals,” Noah said, and given his care for those in the classroom, it’s not surprising that he would like to become a veterinarian.

He has a similar fondness for Propel Hazelwood, which he began attending as a third-grader in 2014, the year it opened.

“It’s a great place to go,” he said. “You really learn a lot.”

Eleanor Chute is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. Her last articles in h were part of a special project in which writers recorded, compiled and edited first-person narratives in our second 2017 issue, which looked at how to create “a community of we.”
Noah’s high praise comes as the school is still trying to find its footing in a community that is slowly rebuilding after decades of seeing its economic and social fabric unravel, which included the loss of its local schools. Before Propel Hazelwood opened, the neighborhood had watched its public schools disappear one by one: Gladstone Middle School in 2001 and Burgwin Elementary in 2006. Even the Catholic elementary school, St. Stephen, closed in 2005.

The absence of a school—any school—left a hole.

“Schools are community assets,” said the Rev. Tim Smith, president and executive director of Center of Life, a community organization serving families and youth. With a neighborhood school, he said, parents can stay in touch better with their child’s educators, and residents can use the building for events and recreation.

Lifelong Hazelwood resident Kris DiPietro traveled to Harrisburg with Rev. Smith when she was chair of Hazelwood Initiative to urge the state to approve Propel. “A school brings youthful energy to a community that is vital to its growth,” she said.

Community members encouraged Propel Charter Schools—which currently operates 13 schools in Allegheny County—to open Propel Hazelwood in fall 2014 in the former Burgwin Elementary building. Charter schools are tuition-free public schools, with priority for those living in the chartering district, in this case, Pittsburgh.

The school opened with 185 students in grades K–4 and added one grade level each year. As of the 2018–19 school year, the grade levels are complete, with 304 students in K–8. According to state figures, 86.9 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged; 81 percent are black, 7 percent biracial or multiracial, 4.7 percent Hispanic and 4 percent white.

Propel leases the building from Hazelwood Initiative, a nonprofit community development corporation that purchased it for $475,000 from Pittsburgh Public Schools with a grant from The Heinz Endowments. A $900,000 grant to the Propel Schools Foundation from the Endowments helped with startup costs. These included renovating and furnishing the ivory brick, three-story 1930s building on Glenwood Avenue, four blocks above Second Avenue, Hazelwood’s main thoroughfare.

Part of Propel’s annual rent of $100,000 to Hazelwood Initiative pays for neighborhood grants of up to $2,000 for community-building activities, such as block parties and school backpack distributions.

Although Propel was recruited to Hazelwood, there still was some mistrust in the community that already had seen too many “saviors” who didn’t treat the neighborhood as a partner or lacked commitment, Mrs. DiPietro said.

Early on, Propel was criticized for too little community involvement. But some say Propel improved this past school year under new leadership that included Shala Darwin, who was formerly the school counselor and now is the full-time site coordinator for community wellness, and Danielle Parson, senior director of community affairs for the entire Propel Schools network.

“These two young ladies have been amazing. They have kept the school involved with the community,” Rev. Smith said. “I think [the school is] going to get better. It’s not where it needs to be. I’m encouraged by the leadership. It did need new leadership.”

That new leadership also had included Toni Hurt, who joined Propel Hazelwood last fall as principal. She left this spring at the end of the school year, but that did not prevent the Pittsburgh Public Schools board from renewing the school’s five-year charter in June, allowing it to move forward with projects inside and outside of the classroom.

Propel is planning to open a community wellness center within the next year, serving not only Propel students and families but also providing medical services and a community hub for the entire neighborhood. The hope is that the center will help to address barriers to learning—such as mental health and medical needs—and give back to the community.

For Propel to take on this kind of role, I think they are truly communicating to the larger community that they want to partner with Hazelwood in order to make it a better place for everyone.”

Stanley W. Thompson, senior program director for Education, The Heinz Endowments
COMMUNITY

A city recreation building located across the field behind the school is being considered as the site for the community wellness center, said Pittsburgh City Councilman Corey O’Connor. The recreation building would continue to serve users of the water spray park and other activities, but space would be renovated and used more efficiently.

“This is something everybody needs,” he said, citing a lack of access to medical services in the Hazelwood area.

“For Propel to take on this kind of role, I think they are truly communicating to the larger community that they want to partner with Hazelwood in order to make it a better place for everyone,” said Stanley W. Thompson, the Endowments’ senior program director for Education. “Schools don’t have to do that and usually they don’t.”

Despite the initial impetus to restore a neighborhood school for neighborhood children, many Hazelwood children attend public schools outside the community. The Pittsburgh school district counts more than 700 children in the main Hazelwood ZIP code — 15207 — attending 28 district-operated schools for kindergarten through eighth grade, with more than half of them at Pittsburgh Mifflin, Greenfield and Minadeo. In the same ZIP code, more than 100 children attend 18 other K–8 charter schools, including five other Propel schools, seven other brick-and-mortar charter schools and six cyber charter schools.

About a third of Propel Hazelwood’s students live in Hazelwood. It attracts children from 13 school districts, with about 70 percent of enrollment coming from the city.

And the school has had mixed reviews.

Seventh-grader Carmella Foster began Propel Hazelwood as a third-grader, and was among the first students at Propel. She likes the school so much that when her family moved from Hazelwood to McKeesport about three years ago, she continued at Propel Hazelwood even though Propel McKeesport is near her new home. That means a bus ride of nearly two hours every morning, and pickup by her father after classes or an athletic practice.

“The teachers are really nice. It’s one big family,” Carmella said. “Even when we have arguments, we all come back together.”

Carmella also has a sister, Olivia, in third grade at Propel Hazelwood, and a brother, Eddie, who will start kindergarten in the fall. Their mother, Sara Foster, noting that Olivia has medical issues, said, “I talk to these teachers sometimes more than my own husband. I trust these teachers with her care.”

However, Hazelwood resident Sade Hardman sent her daughter, Sau’ama, to Propel Hazelwood for first and second grades before transferring to Provident Charter School on the North Side where she was a fifth-grader last year. While she welcomed a neighborhood school, Mrs. Hardman disagreed with some school policies and found communication with parents lacking.

As the school does more to reach out in the neighborhood, its involvement has already gone beyond planning a wellness center. Propel Hazelwood hosts monthly community dinners, offers community classes such as hip-hop aerobics and serves as the site for a weekly job training series. Some students have participated in neighborhood
projects, such as helping to build a Little Free Pantry on the school lawn, and singing and making crafts at a senior living center.

Mrs. Darwin has helped to build relationships with about two dozen organizations inside and outside Hazelwood, in part as a precursor to establishing the more comprehensive community wellness center. And some school wellness programs have begun. The school’s Partners in Wellness program provides an intervention specialist, a student assistance program specialist and a therapist. A $350,000 grant from the Endowments helps to support that program and planning for the community wellness center.

As the former school counselor, Mrs. Darwin saw the different issues the children in the school were facing. “There were a lot of needs that needed to be addressed in terms of behavioral support, support with social services, mental health support as well as academic support,” she said.

The school itself also faces many challenges.

Academically, the most recent state report for 2017–18 shows Propel Hazelwood students having particularly low scores in math/algebra on state tests, with just 9.1 percent proficient or advanced. Students do better in English language arts/literature with 43.2 percent proficient or advanced, and science/biology with 44.4 percent. All three are below state averages. The school exceeded the standard demonstrating students’ growth in their English language arts/literature proficiency but did not meet the growth standard in science/biology or math/algebra.

“Many students come in not on grade level,” said Tina Chekan, Propel Schools’ CEO/superintendent. “Our goal is to increase academic growth over time and close the gap.”

Attendance also is challenging. The most recent state Safe Schools report shows a habitual truancy rate of 61.62 percent for 2017–18. The habitual truancy rate counts students who had six or more unexcused absences in a school year. In Pittsburgh district-operated schools overall, the habitual truancy rate was 3.71 percent.

Dr. Chekan said the school has been working with families to help put attendance plans in place as well as incentives, such as recognition of parents whose children come daily.

“We have a long way to go when it comes to chronic absenteeism. It’s more than making basic phone calls,” Dr. Chekan said. “It is a deeply rooted community issue we’ve seen over time. It’s one that many schools are challenged with.”

The school also has a high out-of-school suspension rate. The 2018 A+ Schools Report to the Community states that 21 percent of Propel Hazelwood students were suspended at least once. By comparison, the report put the figure for city district-operated K–8 schools at 7 percent.

Dr. Chekan said the school is training staff in restorative practices aimed at resolving conflicts with fewer suspensions. “With any new school, challenges exist, and part of the suspensions was getting to know our students,” she said. “Over time, we’ve started to build very strong relationships with our students and families in making sure we have structures in place to support those students. Also, suspensions aren’t effective and we need to change our practices to ensure student success.”

She also noted that a culture coach and a student support specialist were added in recent years. “With the consistent structure in place, we’ll continue to see better results for our students,” she said. The Endowments made a grant of $125,000 over two years toward the culture coach.

The school has a goal for teachers to meet twice a year in person with a parent, even if that means meeting at a coffee shop or the child’s home.

As a community leader, Rev. Smith is both hopeful and realistic about Propel Hazelwood and its progress.

“Propel is what we have, but they have to do better. We want them to do better,” he said. “Pittsburgh Public Schools should not be the benchmark. We have to look across the country to models of schools that are helping kids learn. We should be looking at the absolute best schools out there. We need our school, but we need to up the ante and we’re willing to work with them.”

And while Propel Hazelwood tries to meet new challenges of a new generation of students, it retains some of the familiar aspects of the former Burgwin Elementary. With its ivory-tiled walls, the building contains occasional displays of student work, such as first-graders’ colorful drawings showing their foot measurements and fifth-graders’ writings about ways to stop bullying.

Although much has changed since the Burgwin days, student support specialist Justin Peeks, who works with students schoolwide, sees other fundamental similarities to when he was a Burgwin student. “There’s still learning,” he said. “It still feels like family to me.”

Propel Hazelwood seventh-grader Noah’s sentiments reflected a similar sense of comfort and familiarity: “I feel I could trust this school more than any other school.”

“With any new school, challenges exist …
Over time, we’ve started to build very strong relationships with our students and families in making sure we have structures in place to support those students.”

Tina Chekan, CEO and superintendent of Propel Schools