

'I knew it was the place for me'

CPS' new performing arts high school strikes a chord with students

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"Give me more notes! Bad a doo day doo dooby doo...," exclaimed J.B. Dyas as he burst into a classic jazz scatting melody.

Dyas continued to exhort 14-year-old crooner Cristine Airington -- a member of the first freshman class of the new Chicago High School for the Arts -- to do the same. He even got in her face until the teen hit unbelievable high and low notes.

It was the week before school at the new performing arts high school opening Tuesday at 3200 S. Calumet. Dyas, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Thelonious Monk Jazz Institute, was conducting a weeklong jazz training course for some of the school's 150 newly registered students.

"Ever since I was little, I've wanted to sing," said Cristine, of the Woodlawn neighborhood. "I've always sung in my church choir, and as I grew up, I fell in love with opera and classical. I was looking at Kenwood or Lindblom high schools before we learned this new school was opening.

"I knew it was the place for me," she said, beaming.

One of 19 new or rejuvenated public schools opening Tuesday, Chi Arts, as it is called, is Chicago's first public performing arts school, offering -- like the fictional New York high school depicted in the movie and later TV series "Fame." It offers core courses in dance, music, theater and media and visual arts, atop a college prep curriculum.

When the majority of Chicago Public Schools students return to classes Tuesday, all 430,000 students of the nation's third-largest school system will be back in school. About 90,000 who attend the growing number of year-round schools have already been in class since August.

The 19 new or rejuvenated schools join five newly constructed schools opening this school year, bringing to a total of 92 the number of new schools established under Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 initiative. Daley wants to create 100 new schools by 2010, a goal he is expected to reach.

Chi Arts has a selective enrollment admissions process that includes auditions.

A similar public school opened in 2001 by the Chicago Children's Choir had been modeled after New York's legendary Harlem Choir Academy, with only music as its focus. But the Chicago Children's Choir organization gave up the school after the 2005-2006 school year, deciding it lacked the expertise and funding to run it.

A private North Side school -- the Chicago Academy for Arts -- was founded in 1980 by a group of educators and arts and business community leaders unhappy with cutbacks in arts funding at CPS. The founders of Chi Arts also started their school for a similar reason, said Chi Arts' artistic director, Jose Ochoa.

"In 2004, the Elizabeth Morse Charitable Foundation and its Genius Trust gathered together about 10 musical organizations here to discuss why there's a lack of diversity in professional music in Chicago," he said.

"They met for a couple of years and did research and site visits to understand what the problem was. They discovered a lot of the major arts organizations were putting a lot of resources into arts education in Chicago, but there still seemed to be a missing link. Chicago was the largest city in the country without a public high school for the performing arts."

Many of the area's prominent arts groups -- from the Art Institute and Joffrey Ballet, to Little Black Pearl Workshop and Danceworks Chicago -- joined with area universities to lay the groundwork for such a school.

Approved by the Board of Education in 2007, the new school will temporarily share a building the next two years with Pershing West Middle School, having refurbished its half of the building to include dance and sound studios, instrument storage rooms and other such requirements.

"I'm just ecstatic because I'm a graduate of a public performing arts high school in Washington, D.C.," said Lisa Johnson-Williamson, head of the school's dance department and a former member of the Alvin Ailey dance troupe as well as a choreographer for Steppenwolf and Goodman theaters.

"I grew up an inner-city kid in an underserved community who had the desire to become a professional dancer, but not the resources for private training," she said. "As a product of a school like this and being able to reach my dream of becoming a professional dancer, choreographer and teacher, I know how it changes lives."

Like Johnson-Williamson, many of the arts instructors are professionally credentialed, coming from such esteemed organizations as Joffrey and Second City.

"My daughter's been dancing since she was 3 years old, and throughout her education, we've tried to balance her arts with her academic career," said parent Sandra Kay-Weaver. "When we came here, we were just thrilled."

And while its private counterpart on the North Side boasts many famous alumni -- like movie actor John Cusack, TV actress Lara Flynn Boyle, screenwriter-director Adam Rifkin and composer Alex Wurman -- Chi Arts hopes too to serve as a talent incubator for budding future celebrities.

"I auditioned because I love dance, and I wanted a different experience for high school," said Benjamin Marshall, 14, of Bronzeville, showing off moves that ranged from hip-hop to ballet.

"I did a hip-hop routine for my audition. I didn't think I'd get in," the lithe, soft-spoken teen said. "Words can't describe how I felt when I found out I was accepted. I was like, 'Wow!' Dance is my life, and this school is what I've always been looking for."