



The Times

A symphony of young talent

Tuesday, March 04, 2008

BY LISA RICH

TRENTON -- It's time to get busy learning, and get busy plucking.

At the recently opened Foundation Academy Charter School -- a college prep institution for middle school students -- music is being embraced in full crescendo.

Foundation Academy, which has 90 fifth- and sixth-graders from Trenton, is launching a \$60,000 orchestral program, giving students personal instruction in violin, cello and viola, among other instruments.

Located at 333 S. Broad St., the school plans to expand to eighth grade, with a college-bound theme and more recently, an emphasis on music.

"From the get-go, we always planned to have a really terrific music program," said Benjamin Dale, director of the orchestral program. "And with these great quality instruments, we feel it's going to be an amazing benefit for the whole culture of the school."

In many school districts, when times get tough financially, the music program gets sent packing, Dale said.

At Foundation Academy, that's not a problem, thanks to a federal charter school start-up grant.

"Because of that grant, we now have more than 100 instruments for the 90 students who attend the school," he said.

But how can middle school students be trusted with such costly instruments?

Before Dale would give any student an instrument, they had to pass a series of tests.

First, the students had to achieve a B-grade or higher on a written music exam. Then, the students had to successfully carry a Styrofoam cup for seven days without scratching, bending or breaking it.

"They had to bring it everywhere they went and show it to me on a daily basis," Dale said. "If they could take care of the cup for seven days, they proved to me they're responsible enough to care for an expensive instrument."

Foundation Academy is not the first charter school in Trenton to implement a serious arts program, but it is one of few successes thus far.

Two months ago, the Mercer Arts Charter High School -- which emphasized all performing arts, including music -- shut down after less than a year. The state forced it to close in light of grave problems, such as a projected deficit of \$2.5 million and an out-of-control student body.

The Foundation Academy has no such problems, according to the state Department of Education.

Rich Vespucci, a department spokesman, said the Foundation Academy is not on any type of academic probation and has not been warned of problems by the state.

A co-founder of the academy, Carla Hill, has said the charter school is based on other high-achieving schools in North Jersey, such as Newark's North Star and Team academies -- renowned for their strict rules and near-perfect graduation rates.

"They are phenomenal schools, and we're modeling after (them) and their successes," she said. "Our rules are very strict and they will not waver. We want to make sure parents and students really know what the expectations are."

Unlike typical public schools, which run 180 days a year from 8:30 a.m. to 2:45 p.m., the Foundation Academy requires students to be in school for 200 days from 7:30 to 4:30.

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