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Students Pursue the Arts with Passion

From Duke Ellington in the District to Fairfax Academy to private school offerings, students have intense options.

By Julia O'Donoghue
The Connection

If Tommy Wilson had been a cartoon character, his parents would have been picking his jaw up off the floor as he walked out of the theater at Duke Ellington School of the Arts on the evening of Nov. 5.

The eighth grader who attends Saint Mark's School in Vienna had just sat through performances by Ellington's vocal department and orchestra on their Georgetown campus. Teenagers from the D.C. public high school had just run through several pieces from George Gershwin's famous American opera, "Porgy and Bess."

"I have been to a lot of high schools so far and I was just blown away by the performance. I mean, in eight weeks, they can put that on? If you gave my school a decade, we couldn't come close to doing that," said Tommy, who has a passion for the performing arts.

The middle school student has sung with the Children's Chorus of Washington and performed in several theater productions with the McLean Community Players and Elden Street Players.

TOMMY LIVES in the Oakton High School district but his family has been shopping around for other educational options.

Tommy's mother, Kerry Wilson, is looking for a school with a strong performing arts program that could nurture her son's artistic talent and interests. That is what led them to Ellington for the Friday night student performance. It is the only high school in Metropolitan Washington where the entire student body is enrolled in a "pre-professional" arts curriculum.

"There is really nothing else equivalent to this," said Tommy of Ellington's program.

Ellington students follow their traditional general education classes every school day with three hours of training in dance, instrumental music, theater, vocal music, visual arts, technical design and production, museum studies or literary media and communication.

Students applying to Ellington must audition or submit a portfolio of work directly to one of the school's eight departments. Competition for slots in the



Colin Cook

school is steep, particularly in departments like theater and vocal arts, where more than 200 people can apply for only a handful of slots.

Last year a little over 530 students went through the initial audition and portfolio review and there were approximately 120 seats available in the freshman class.

Those who make it past the audition or portfolio review are required to have a family interview with Ellington staff, to ensure the school is a good fit for the student. With such a specialized curriculum, Ellington also prohibits students from transferring into the school after freshman or sophomore year, so students are forced to make a decision early on in high school about whether they want take

their artistic endeavors that seriously.

"This is a place for kids who need to do this and who couldn't do anything else. Art is definitely not a hobby for our students. It is hard work, even when they are in a department that they love," said Barbara Power, head of Ellington admissions.

FOR MANY, a Fairfax County family that would consider sending their child to a D.C. public school over Oakton would seem ludicrous enough.

Oakton is one of the highest-achieving high schools in one of the country's highest achieving school districts. Ellington, on the other hand, admits on its Web site that some of its students arrive as freshman reading and doing math at an elementary school level.

While Oakton offers about 30 Advanced Placement courses – which can earn students college credit and are frequently a boost to students' college applications – Ellington offers only eight, about half of which are specific to the visual arts or music theory.

The D.C. public high school teaches no Advanced Placement math courses at all, according to the classes listed on its Web site.

Still, about four percent of Ellington's approximately 420 students live in Virginia and six percent live in Maryland. Those parents have not only chosen D.C. Public Schools over better-regarded public and private options but also pay

about \$10,400 in out-of-state school tuition every year to send their child to Ellington.

"Artistically, it is the best. You get things here that you can't get at any other

schools in the area. There is nothing like this in Northern Virginia," said Laurie Cook, a McLean resident who is head of Ellington's instrumental music group in the Parent Teacher Association.

COOK'S SON Colin, a junior, is in his second year at Ellington after attending elementary and middle school at the private Flint Hill School in Oakton, and freshman year of high school at the local public high school, Langley in McLean. When it became obvious Colin wanted to pursue a career in music in ninth grade, Cook started looking at more rigorous music program options.

She and her husband even considered sending their son to boarding school at one point, when the local options appeared to be limited. At the time, the couple had reservations about the D.C. Public School system.

But Cook decided to give Ellington a chance after the Flint Hill fine arts director and others raved about the quality of the music instruction. A site visit only confirmed that Ellington was the right place for her son.

The arts school was certainly a departure from what her son was used to at Langley, a school where the 2,060 student body was just over 73 percent Caucasian and less than one percent of the students came from low-income households the year Colin attended. Ellington, by contrast, has only 470 students, approximately 9 percent Caucasian and 85 percent African American. At Ellington, about one-third of students are considered "economically disadvantaged" by the D.C. Public School system.

But Cook's son had never felt so comfortable anywhere else from the moment he walked through the door.

"When Colin and I walked into this school for the first time, I won't forget it. He turned to me and said 'This is where I need to be. These kids speak my language,'" said Cook.

Colin is not the only Fairfax County teenager to have that reaction when visiting Ellington.

Becky Stewart's son Jonathan called Ellington "a haven of like-minded people," the first time the family visited the campus at the end of last year.

Jonathan had spent his entire freshman year of high school begging his mother to let him apply to Ellington. Up until that point, Jonathan had only attended private schools, Herndon's Nysmith School for the Gifted through elementary school and St. Andrew's Episcopal Day School in Potomac, Md. for middle school and ninth

grade.

Becky Stewart finally caved and said that she would visit Ellington if Jonathan could manage to get an audition last spring. When Jonathan, who plays the upright bass, was accepted to Ellington, Stewart was still very skeptical about letting him transfer to the school, until her visit.

"All the kids just seemed so happy. There is three hours of instruction every day so you know every child that goes to school here wants to go to school here," said Stewart, whose son started at Ellington as a sophomore this fall. The Stewarts live in Herndon.

BUT THIS IS not just about Jonathan or Colin's happiness. Both students and their families said the quality of music instruction and guidance they receive at Ellington is head and shoulders above what they got at their previous high schools or through private instruction.

"My [musical] prowess has probably doubled in the short time that I have been here," said Jonathan.

And although there were several good musicians at St. Andrew's, a general education school could never reach the critical mass of talented students he works with every day at Ellington, according to the student.

"Students who come here because they have a strong interest in that area and are exploring it as a possible career option."

— Gwen Plummer, Fairfax Academy

anyone into the band regardless of talent. But at Ellington, the teachers are focused on trying to make her son the best performer he can be, which means they are quicker to criticize. It is a given that Jonathan and other students at Ellington are talented. The goal is to make sure the young adults will be able to make a career out of playing music and the teachers expect nothing less than professional quality performances from the students.

STEWART AND COOK both admit that Ellington might lack in academic rigor in traditional subjects but the public high school is the arts equivalent of attending Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology when it comes to placement in the country's top conservatory or fine arts programs.



Photo courtesy of Fairfax Academy

Professional TV production students at work in the studio at Fairfax Academy for Communications and the Arts at Fairfax High School.

and computer technology, graphics, musical theater, acting, photography and television production.

They then return to their base high school for other classes for the rest of the day.

About half of the academy students either go to a conservatory program or major in a subject related to the classes they took in the arts and communications program.

But unlike Ellington, not all the students enrolled in the academy programs have made up their mind about pursuing a career in the arts. "There is a significant percentage of students who come here because they know that is where they are headed in life. There is also a significant percentage of students who come here because they have a strong interest in that area and are exploring it as a possible career option," said Gwen Plummer, the academy's career experience specialist.

Plummer said academy graduates have attended several of the top art programs in the country including Berklee, Emerson College, Columbia College in Chicago, Parsons School of Design, the Fashion Institute of Technology, Savannah College of Art and Design and Virginia Commonwealth University.

But attending the academy can take some early academic planning, especially if the student wants to enroll in more than one course.

In order to free up enough time to make it to and from Fairfax High School during the school day, some students take classes over the summer or online courses to help complete their other course requirements.

"Students make this happen. They make their schedule work so they can get to Fairfax," said Plummer.

MANY PRIVATE schools, camps and instructors in the area also promise to help students serious about pursuing a career in the arts improve their craft.

Approximately 95 percent of Ellington's graduates go on to a post-secondary education at either a college or a conservatory and many others, particularly dancers, are hired directly by professional ensembles.

Currently, the school has former students at most of the country's top arts programs including those at Yale University, New York University, Harvard University, The Juilliard School, Smith College, Parsons School of Design and Pratt Institute.

FAIRFAX COUNTY offers pre-professional arts courses through the Fairfax Academy for Communications and the Arts at Fairfax High School.

High school juniors and seniors from around the county come to the academy for a special 90-minute class each day in the areas of dance, fashion design, music



Reed S. Albers

Clearview Elementary student Christopher Randolph receives his swine flu shot at the Fairfax County Government Center. "It wasn't that bad ... didn't hurt at all," he said.

Students Sidelined by Swine Flu

By Reed S. Albers
The Connection

Stay Home

Attention students, H1N1 or the "swine flu" doesn't care if you're preparing for the big game, have an important practice to attend, or need to cram for an upcoming test. The flu is here and it's affecting everyone.

Like their counterparts at other schools, the Marshall High School varsity football team has been dealing with a small outbreak of the illness.

"We've had players miss practice over the past two weeks due to flu," assistant coach Joe Vargo said. "It's been a revolving door. We're not really sure how many have been sick."

West Potomac High School's cross-country team endured a swine-flu outbreak before its District Championship race, and when flu hit the St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School's field hockey team, another player had to take on the goaltender role for a week.

"Swine flu is widespread in the community and we're certainly seeing that reflected in the kids coming into the schools," said Esther Walker, assistant director of patient care services at the Fairfax Health Department.

According to the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Web site, the daily absentee rate for Nov. 5, was 4.3 percent of the county's 175,000 public school population. It has been above 7 percent.

"The highest number we've seen countywide has been 7.2 percent," Fairfax County Public Schools spokeswoman Lori Knickerbocker said. "We were seeing the numbers in the six, sevens and sometimes eights at

The Fairfax County Health Department (FCHD) recommends that anyone with influenza-like symptoms (fever with a cough or sore throat) stay at home until at least 24 hours after they are free of fever without the use of fever-reducing medicines.

If students have flu-like symptoms, they should not participate in any school activities or be out except to seek medical care.

If a child appears to have an influenza-like illness when he or she arrives at school, a parent or guardian will be notified and asked to pick up the child.

Parents should ensure that their emergency information is up to date and that they pick up their children when notified.

SOURCE: www.fcps.edu

select schools, but it has come down a bit."

During the week of Nov. 4 for example, Knickerbocker said Lake Braddock Secondary School reported 6 percent of its students absent while Chantilly High School's absentee rate was 4.3 percent and Westfield High School's just 3.62 percent.

To combat the spread of swine flu, the Fairfax County Government has been offering immunization shots and nasal sprays to select groups.

At the Fairfax County Government Center on Nov. 7, the main office building was transformed into a massive swine flu immunization center.

Fairfax County resident Anne Hanover brought her 8-year-old son Ethan to the Government Center. "It's been in the schools and he hasn't had it yet," Hanover said. "It's the flu, it's free and you might as well get protected."

Clearview Elementary student Christopher Randolph one of the students who survived the swine flu shot.

"It wasn't that bad," he said. "Didn't hurt at all."



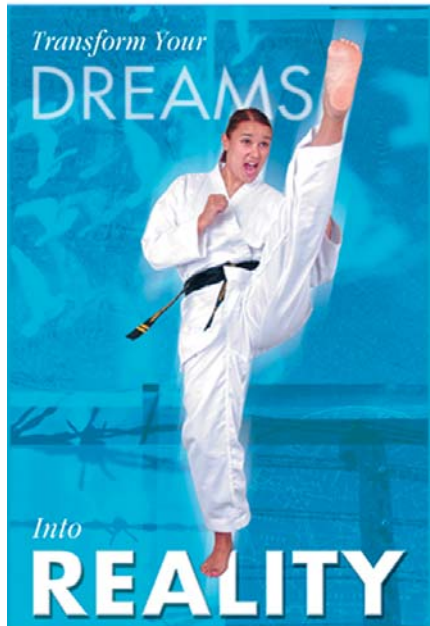
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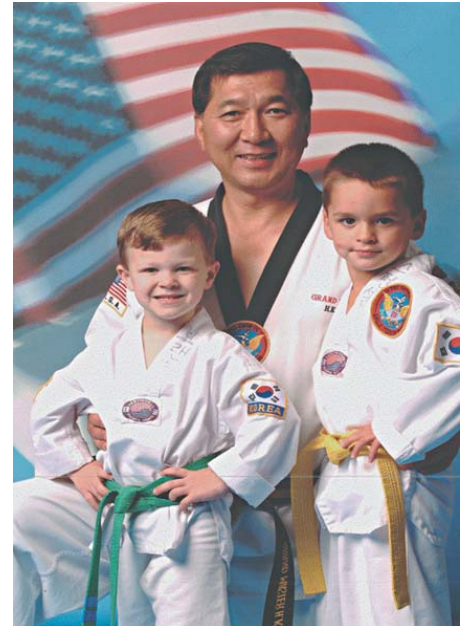


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