



Address: 3333 N. Shartel, Oklahoma City 73118

Contact: Linda Lightner

Telephone: 405-702-4322

Email: llightner@hfaaokc.org

Website: <http://hardingfinearts.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/hfaaokc>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OKC Charter School Marks 10th Year, Celebrates Successes

An innovative Oklahoma City charter high school marks its 10th anniversary this year, growing from one man's vision to become one of the nation's top-performing high schools.

In those 10 years, Harding Fine Arts Academy has been distinguished by numerous honors: a Top 10 high school in Oklahoma by US News & World Report, a Top 500 school nationwide by Newsweek, a National Blue-Ribbon School by the US Department of Education, A+ School by the Oklahoma Department of Education and the first high school in the nation to be named an OKA+ school by the Oklahoma A+ Schools organization at UCO.

In 2002, John L. Belt had an idea to create a fine arts-oriented charter high school in near-downtown Oklahoma City, close to his beloved Paseo Arts District. Belt, who was an attorney, arts advocate and city visionary, was fondly dubbed "The Father of the Paseo" for his work to revitalize the historic arts district that began in the late 1980s and continued until his death in 2013. He gathered a group of can-do leaders to serve as the future school's board of directors, and set about making his dream a reality.

The old Harding school building at 3333 N. Shartel was to be the site for the school. Built in 1924 and serving alternately as a middle school and high school, it had been shuttered for some time, but soon would re-open and be shared by Harding Fine Arts Academy and another separate school, Harding Charter Preparatory High School.

In 2005, Harding Fine Arts Academy opened its doors to 65 freshmen. Today, enrollment has grown to 364 students in 9th through 12th grade -- with a waiting list.



"We're now at capacity," said Principal Barry Schmelzenbach. "That's a good thing, and it challenges us to find ways to make room for more kids."

According to Schmelzenbach, the school's "culture and approach to curriculum" are two of the most powerful forces owing to its success.

"Our teachers and leadership believe every student has great potential and we try to foster a culture of high expectations, while providing supports for students and families," he said. "We focus on their needs as individuals."

The school has indeed succeeded despite formidable odds. It is a Title I school, meaning it is federally recognized as serving a large population of socially and economically disadvantaged students. Admission is open to all 9th through 12 graders who live in the Oklahoma City metro area. As with all charter schools, HFAA is tuition-free and non-selective. It admits incoming freshmen through a lottery held each spring.

"In other words," said admissions coordinator Linda Lightner, "we don't hand-pick our students based on how well they did academically at their previous or their level of talent. Our kids come to us because they want to be here, and we want to invest in them and make the most of who they are."

The school currently has a graduation rate of 98 percent, and more than 90 percent of graduates pursue a college education.

As a charter school, HFAA receives no public funding for building maintenance and improvements and must rely solely on grants and donations.

Recently, the school raised funds to build a new dance studio, a drama room, and a media center, which also opened up room within the building to add about 40 more students. Major donors for the projects included the Kirkpatrick Family Foundation and the Oklahoma Board of County Commissioners. Private donations included gifts from Cliff and Leslie Hudson, Jackie Danker, who is the sister of longtime principal Dr. Sherry Owen, and Dr. Ellen Oakes of Edmond.



Oklahoma City Planning Commissioner John Yoeckel has been the school's treasurer and on its board from the beginning. "Today, Harding Fine Arts Academy is thriving. We have an excellent head of school, a fine staff and wonderful young people who come every day to be inspired, create and learn. That they are inspired and learning is demonstrated not only by the scores on mandated tests but also by the art they create and the performances they put on. They are graduating and going on to college; many the first in their family to do so."

In addition to the traditional required academic subjects including math, English, science and social studies, students choose as many as three elective classes each year in dance, music, theater or visual arts programs. Oklahoma City artists and musicians serve as instructors, advisors and artists-in-residence.

The school will mark its 10th anniversary with a reception and recognition event Nov. 19 at the school. Parents, teachers, and community members will be honored for their support of the school. The event is open to the public and will be from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. For more information, contact Lightner, 405/702-4322.

Harding Fine Arts Academy is a tuition-free, non-selective Oklahoma City charter school that prepares high school students for college in an academically challenging, arts-integrated environment.

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