



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>

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Unused Indoor High School Pool Converted to Dance Studio

Oklahoma City- Students from Oklahoma City's Harding Fine Arts Academy will return to a new dance studio and drama room this fall thanks to the renovation of an abandoned, unused indoor swimming pool and funding support provided by the Oklahoma Board of County Commissioners and the Kirkpatrick Family Fund.

The school's charter, sponsored by Oklahoma City Public Schools, allows for a non-selective, tuition-free public high school for grades 9-12. But according to school Principal Barry Schmelzenbach, due to a lack of classroom space the school has not been able to serve all the students who had hoped to attend there. Harding Fine Arts Academy and Harding Charter Preparatory High Schools share the building that was once Oklahoma City Public Schools' Harding High School.

"The fact that we have had to turn away students who truly wanted to attend Harding Fine Arts Academy is very difficult for us," said Schmelzenbach. "Our school is unique because it is college-preparatory school that focuses on fine arts and arts-integration into our core classes. Creative and talented students from all of the Oklahoma City metro area benefit from our unique approach to education," he said.

In addition, Harding Fine Arts Academy requires that six arts electives be taken by each student over a four year period. However, many classes could not accommodate the demand for them due to space limitations.



To help combat the lack of space, Harding Fine Arts Academy began to map out a renovation strategy in early 2014. This plan involved three phases. Phase One, which is now complete, involved the conversion of the existing fourth floor library into three much needed new classrooms.

During Phase Two, the old indoor pool natatorium was completely renovated to make room for a brand new drama room and dance studio.

At one time, most of the Oklahoma City Public School high schools had indoor pools and swimming was a major part of their physical education programs.

“As far as we know, the indoor pool had not been used in years,” said Schmelzenbach. “As much as we hated to cover up something so beloved to many Harding High School alums, this new space is making a world of difference to our students and our fine arts programs,” he said.

Phase Three has involved the conversion of the old Harding High School band room into a beautiful, multi-functional media center complete with computers for student and parent use, a conference area, and counselors’ offices.

By Oklahoma State law, charter schools do not receive any money as part of the state funding for facilities maintenance or improvements as do district public schools. In addition, charter schools are also prohibited from issuing bonds or incurring debt. This leaves highly competitive grants and private donations as the only permissible source for funding.

Harding Fine Arts Academy, a public charter high school in Oklahoma City, was presented with grants to assist with the much-needed renovation and expansion efforts. One grant is from the Oklahoma Board of County Commissioners, spearheaded by District 1 Commissioner, Willa Johnson, in the amount of \$250,000. Another grant, given by the Kirkpatrick Family Fund, was for \$50,000.



Because of this support from our community, we have been able to add an additional 40 students to our school,” said Schmelzenbach. “In addition our students feel so proud to have our new, beautiful classroom and media center additions,” he said.

“We are honored to partner with Harding Fine Arts Academy and provide the funding support needed to renovate this historic Oklahoma City building, while empowering the academy to enroll more students and reach its fullest potential,” said Elizabeth K. Eickman, Director – Kirkpatrick Family Fund.

“We are so thankful for both the grant from Oklahoma Board of County Commissioners as well as from the Kirkpatrick Family Fund,” said Sally Bentley, Harding Fine Arts Academy Board President. “Our faculty and staff have always made the best of our existing facilities, but our renovation plan will address the need for more classroom space, improve the existing learning environment, and allow for growth over the next several years,” said Bentley.

Additional funds for this project were also raised through Harding’s Annual Fundraising Campaign and Leadership in Arts & Education Awards dinner which honored Sonic’s Cliff and Leslie Hudson.

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

Harding Fine Arts Academy was recently named as one of the nation’s top 500 schools by Newsweek magazine for their work with low-income students.