

Music is at the heart of Plainfield's new charter school

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PLAINFIELD -- Students studying the civil rights movement in a history class at the Ellen G. Pressman Charter School could wind up enhancing their studies by singing soul music from the era.

The new public charter school, which shares a building with the YWCA at 232 E. Front St. in Plainfield, will use a "music-centric" model to teach students, even in subjects thought to be more technical like math and science. They will participate in chorus groups and other musical ensembles to accompany their coursework.



Alexandra Pais/For The Star-LedgerThe new Dr. Ellen G. Pressman Charter School will open in Plainfield in the fall.

"We learn everything faster through music," said Harry Powers, who sits on the board of trustees for the school. "It's tied into our history."

The school, which will accommodate 6th and 7th grade children, is scheduled to open its doors in the fall. The school is named after Ellen Pressman, a multilingual educator and public school administrator in New York and New Jersey, who died of cancer in 2007. She worked as a consultant in Plainfield and was an advocate of charter schools.

Students who apply for the first-come, first-serve enrollment at the school do not have to be musically gifted to be admitted, Powers said. In fact, the school administration is expecting the challenge of a diverse student body with varying skill levels.

"There's always a youngster who isn't the best athlete, but there's always a role if you seek it out," he said. "We will be crafting individual learning plans for each student at the school. So, there's 160 students, and there will be 160 individual lesson plans. We'll assess everyone's progress regularly and make necessary adjustments.

Plainfield has four middle schools, including two other charter schools. The city's school system has been ranked among the lowest in New Jersey.

In the 2007-2008 school year, about 20 percent of 6th graders in the Plainfield school district were proficient at language arts, compared to a state average of 57 percent, according to the New Jersey Department of Education. And about 42 percent of Plainfield's 6th grade students tested proficient at math, compared to 72 percent state-wide.

Powers said he is hoping the staff at Ellen Pressman will offer parents a good, tuition-free alternative to expensive private schools in the area.

"We want a school where it's OK to be smart and work towards academic goals," Powers said. "It used to be that only people with money had choices, but what we're saying now is everybody has choices."

The school will employ eight full-time and two part-time teachers. And parents are expected to play a big role in their children's experience at the school by meeting with teachers regularly to discuss individual learning plans.

Lillie McNeill, a Plainfield resident who held positions at various corporations for 15 years, joined the staff at the school as a math and history teacher.

"It's really brings a unique environment to the middle school age," McNeill said. "There's a great need for education reform in Plainfield. I'm excited to use music to enhance an already challenging environment. It gives us an opportunity in Plainfield to offer something that was difficult to obtain."

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