

EDUCATION LIFE

Where All the School's a Stage, and the List of Success Stories Is Long

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ AUG. 1, 2017

When Bre-Yanna Cameron was in middle school, singing and acting meant one thing to her: escape. Performing was the only time she felt liberated — no bullies, no fights, no peer pressure, no doubts.

A dedicated drama teacher saw in Ms. Cameron's clear, soulful voice a lifeline out of the inner city and encouraged her to apply to New World School of the Arts, a small, rigorous magnet high school in Miami that draws a diverse group of talented actors, musicians, dancers and visual artists. Auditions (or portfolios) are the only way into the school — grades and attendance are irrelevant.

With lots of coaching and confidence boosting from her teacher, Ms. Cameron beat out hundreds of students for one of 16 spots in the musical theater program. Now, after juggling daily 90-minute bus commutes, study sessions interrupted by stress-induced crying jags and whirlwind school rehearsals, most recently as Ursula in "Bye Bye Birdie," Ms. Cameron is headed for Florida State University on a full scholarship with a 3.7 grade-point average. She plans to major in pharmacy, or maybe switch to a B.F.A. program in musical theater.

"I'm the first to go to university, and my mother tells everyone she sees," she said, smiling one recent afternoon as she headed off to watch the senior dance

group's showcase. Without New World, she said, "it wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have had the grades I have. I wouldn't have been in theater but in band. And my friends in my old school were not a good influence in my life."

Performing and visual arts high schools like New World inspire a fierce devotion among students and graduates. It is no wonder. Many serve as springboards to the professional world. Just as important, graduation and college attendance rates are typically high (100 and 96 percent for New World), particularly impressive considering the schools' urban setting. The best of these schools offer a conservatory-style training ground that helps budding artists win admission to an undergraduate arts program — training that is expensive, requiring a cadre of specialized teachers and money for student performances.

Funding remains a perpetual battle, especially in a climate of cutbacks: The Trump administration has proposed significant cuts in specialized arts programs that could affect state and district funding. This year, New World, which opened in 1987, was bracing for no state funding — until alumni fury on social media pressured the legislature to reverse itself and allocate \$500,000, a 23 percent drop from last year.

Though Democrats and Republicans are at sharp odds over the direction, funding and effectiveness of public education and school choice, schools of the arts often bridge the partisan divide.

Many of them are magnet schools, which grew out of a hard-fought battle: desegregation. The hope was that by removing geographic barriers to admission, magnet schools would attract students with a special interest, be it science and technology or the arts, from both high-performing and underperforming schools.

Most of the schools accept large numbers of minority and low-income students. Of New World's approximately 500 students, about 60 percent are Hispanic and 13 percent black, generally reflecting the makeup of Miami. Thirty-six percent are poor enough for free or reduced-price lunch.

The list of success stories is long.

Tarell Alvin McCraney grew up in one of Miami's toughest neighborhoods, Liberty City, and lost his mother to AIDS-related complications. A 1999 New World graduate, he went on to receive a MacArthur "genius" grant and share a screenwriting Oscar for "Moonlight," the best picture winner based on his semi-autobiographical play.

Robert Battle grew up in the same neighborhood. A graduate of New World in 1990 and then the Juilliard School, he is the artistic director for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Alex Lacamoire, a 1992 New World graduate, is a two-time Grammy and three-time Tony winner (for orchestration for "In the Heights," "Hamilton" and "Dear Evan Hansen"). His father was partially paralyzed by an aneurysm; to pay the bills, his mother had to work odd jobs, including at a grocery store and funeral parlor. But his parents' devotion to his talent was boundless.

Other arts schools advertise their own heady roster of graduates. Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in New York, setting for the 1980 film "Fame," counts Jennifer Aniston, Isaac Mizrahi and Al Pacino as alumni. The Baltimore School for the Arts boasts Jada Pinkett Smith and Tupac Shakur. Norah Jones and Erykah Badu went to Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas.

Graduates remember school days filled with impromptu singing in stairwells, drumming on tables and pirouetting down hallways. Looking back, they point to one crucial ingredient, beyond intensive, daily training: talent. That was the common denominator — skin tone, sexual identity and ZIP code were often beside the point. "If you are surrounded by people who are excelling and pushing themselves to be great, that is infectious," said Mr. Lacamoire, a Cuban-American.

The schools function largely as meritocracies; an admission policy based on auditions offers a nontraditional path for those whose talents lay outside chemistry, math and English, and helps even the playing field for students from low-income neighborhoods.

Evonne S. Alvarez, New World's principal, said students from this year's graduating class of 114 received multiple scholarship offers adding up to \$36 million. They were admitted to numerous Ivies (two are Harvard bound), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford and top-tier conservatories at Juilliard and Carnegie Mellon. About half will pursue the arts in college, be it theater, dance, music or visual arts, Ms. Alvarez said.

New World students can also slide right into its college program, administered with its partners, **Miami Dade** College and the University of Florida, although only a handful take this path.

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Inside New World classes, energy and focus are infectious. In one room, juniors rehearse harmonies at the piano, again and again. A few rooms away, sophomores sit on the floor and listen to classmates taking turns doing scenes from "Romeo and Juliet." Art students paint complicated experimental self-portraits. At wood shop, students build a set for "Anon(ymous)," a play about a young refugee. And in dance, they leap and spin as they rehearse their spring recital.

"To the front," said their teacher, Peter London. "Get in the air. Stay together. Stay together." They gather in a line, tumble to the ground and rise up again.

After school lets out, students spend hours rehearsing or working backstage. They write plays. They plan for art exhibits. When they finally get home, sometimes late at night, they turn their attention once again to academics, a grueling schedule for even the most adept student.

Because grades are not a factor in admission, students from underperforming schools often arrive unprepared, Ms. Alvarez said. They must maintain a C average academically and a B average in arts. It helps that classes are small and students have close relationships with their teachers, tutors and mentors. Teachers, mindful of long rehearsals and performances, will sometimes juggle tests and papers to accommodate their schedules.

“It was so stressful,” acknowledged Ms. Cameron, who woke at 5:30 a.m. to take the bus to school and, during busy rehearsal or performance weeks, sometimes stayed up until 4 a.m. doing homework. “I cried over so many assignments.”

But instead of letting poor grades defeat her, Ms. Cameron pushed harder. She attended long study sessions with classmates. Losing a coveted spot at the school was not an outcome she was willing to risk.

Traditional public schools often don't tap into students' passion and motivation to succeed, whether arts or specific subjects, said Chris Ford, director of the Baltimore School for the Arts, a public school that opened in 1980. At his school, which is 47 percent African-American, 50 percent of ninth graders arrive at below grade level, he said. By the end of senior year, 97 to 100 percent graduate on time and are college bound. This year's 90 graduates were offered a total of \$14 million in scholarships, and many are headed to top-tier colleges, including Juilliard, University of Chicago, Vassar, Middlebury and the Royal Academy of Music in London.

“That is not what you expect in an urban public school,” he said. “Our students do that because our school connects with their future.”

Linda F. Nathan, the founding headmaster of Boston Arts Academy and author of books on urban education, said something else is at play and it is important. Underprivileged students are studying, rehearsing, dancing, painting and having lunch with middle-class or wealthy ones; each group learns from the other. Boston Arts Academy, a pilot school mandated to try new and different approaches to improve learning for at-risk students, is more than two-thirds low income, and most students are black or Hispanic.

“But the fact that you have one-third of the school that is not high-needs changes everything,” Ms. Nathan said. “Rising tides lift all boats.”

Of this year's graduates, 92 percent are bound for a two- or four-year college — Bunker Hill Community College, University of Hartford and University of Massachusetts among them. Because of insufficient financial aid offers, some won't

be attending their first-choice college — one student had to pass on Berklee College of Music.

Mr. McCraney said he went to New World with the children of the Bee Gees and the Cuban-American musician Willy Chirino. That window into how others live and work was eye-opening and helped him embrace the importance of his own Liberty City narrative. “I had classmates whose parents sent drivers to pick them up,” Mr. McCraney said. “I also had classmates who were sleeping at their ‘drag mother’s’ house for protection from their biological family. I knew what it was to struggle to eat, or to worry about clothes — not designer, just whether you had any. But there were many teachers and my classmates who helped me realize that my story was as important as everyone else’s. It took me a minute — but I did.”

Another lesson: The arts command a tremendous amount of teamwork and discipline, skills that would serve in any profession. Students learn to accept and apply a constant stream of constructive criticism. Enter a ballet class and teachers are forever tweaking and adjusting students’ bodies. In theater, students hear feedback on line delivery and character interpretation. “Try again” is everyday vocabulary, and that is one of life’s most important lessons.

“Critique is the key in anything,” Ms. Nathan said. “You learn how to do something very hard: You learn to take criticism.”

Correction: August 2, 2017

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of one of the shows orchestrated by Alex Lacamoire. It is “Dear Evan Hansen,” not Hanson.

Lizette Alvarez is a correspondent for The Times in Miami. For a video visit to New World School of the Arts, go to nytimes.com/edlife.

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