



HITTING HIGH NOTES

Las Vegas Academy wins money and acclaim for music programs

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Nearly 30 students at the Las Vegas Academy stood on bleachers Wednesday and talked to one another during a break in class instruction.

The recess was short-lived.

"All right, all right ... back to the music," said choir teacher ShaunAnthony Williams.

"We have a show on Friday and another one next Wednesday," he told his students, who followed his instructions and belted out a rendition of "Danny Boy."

The magnet school's emphasis on music helped earn it a Grammy Signature School Gold Award, which is accompanied by a \$7,000 grant, for having one of the top seven public music programs in the country. The academy has been ranked in the nation's top seven schools four times since the Grammy Foundation began its program in 1999.

School officials and students will be presented with the award at a reception Friday at the school.

The academy is also one of four schools in the nation to receive a \$5,000 grant from Gibson Guitars for its guitar program.

Principal Stephen Clark said the school year is packed with student performances.

"We have 110 nights of events," Clark said. "It's just one day after the next."

Some members of the choir recently returned from a festival in Boston with numerous first place awards.

Jazz band members recently returned from Southampton, England, where the academy had an exchange program with a local high school band.

Auditions determine who can enroll in the school and partake in specialized areas that include choir, orchestra, band, guitar, dance and piano.

Students who pass the tryout phase choose a performing specialization. Those classes are then required every day. Core subjects such as math and English can be taken every other day, but still meet the state's requirements in number of hours, Clark said.

Katie Scott, a senior at the academy, said the competition can be fierce, even among the school's own students.

"It's definitely positive to work with musicians, but there is competition between departments," Scott said, specifically referring to the choir and theater students

"We kind of one up each other."

Teachers said the school plays an important role.

"This school is important simply because Las Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world," Williams said. "What better place to train performers?"

The academy's main facility is at Bridger Avenue and 7th Street. The campus of more than 1,400 students encompasses nine buildings spread over three downtown blocks.

Guitar teacher Bill Swick said that although the school places heavy emphasis on recruiting, the academy has certain drawbacks.

Swick said the prospect of a long commute and the lack of a sports program might not be appealing to many students.

"We take the talent as it comes to us," Swick said. "Our goal is to create the talent, not necessarily to attract it."

Senior Zach Porter honed his abilities on six instruments. He will attend Western Illinois University in the fall, where he will study jazz. He hopes to one day be a recording artist as a saxophonist.

Porter was working on a project at the school's recording studio, which consists of computer stations hooked up to mixers and microphones.

Drums, record players, keyboards and amplifiers were also scattered throughout the room.

Porter's assignment was to record a song simply using a few sounds of swirling water and a thunderstick, a baton-shaped instrument that rattles when shaken.

Porter's assignment typified his experience at the academy.

"You can apply everything you know to your assignments," he said. "Being around great musicians just makes you better."