



Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts

Bethlehem, PA | Diane LaBelle, executive director

Grades Served: 9-12 ■ **Enrollment:** 472 ■ **Year Opened:** 2003-2004

Instructional Strategies: Fine arts, college prep

Student Demographics: 72% White; 13% Hispanic; 7% Black; 7% Other; 1% Asian; 25% FRL eligible; 11% Special education

A Mission to Serve

The Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts (Charter Arts) serves the community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a historic seat for U.S. industry and former home to Bethlehem Steel. Its mission is to provide “a unique environment that fosters a creative academic approach to learning and a development of talent in the arts.” In addition to a rigorous academic course load, Charter Arts currently offers six artistic majors—dance, figure skating, instrumental music, theater, visual art, and vocal music—and will add literary arts in the 2015-16 school year.

During their four years at Charter Arts, each student receives 2,000 hours of intensive artistic instruction. That same amount of private art lessons could cost \$60,000. Access to Charter Arts’ tuition-free, arts education helps economically disadvantaged families support the creative talents and aspirations of their children. Charter Arts exposes students to professional artists through field trips, participation in national competitions, and “Master Classes” offered in every artistic department to enable students to learn directly from accomplished artists.

The arts-enriched education shows great academic results. Charter Arts is top-rated on statewide standardized exams and outperforms the state-wide average on end-of-course and Advanced Placement passage rates. Charter Arts graduating senior classes of about 105 students earn an average of \$2.5 million per year in college scholarships at top academic and artistic programs.

From Vision to Reality: How CSP Funds Enabled Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts to Open

Charter Arts received a grant through the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) in 2003 to help the charter school with startup costs. Executive Director Diane LaBelle said, “The school would not have been able to be opened without the CSP funding. We received almost \$300,000, which allowed us to purchase the textbooks, the furniture, and the equipment that we needed to get the school operational. That funding was critical to having the school open.” In addition to providing the school with initial funding, the CSP grant also opened doors to the philanthropic community. Ms. LaBelle described funders’ reaction to Charter Arts’ CSP grant as, “if the CSP believes you can do it, then we believe you can do it, too.”

Ms. LaBelle believes that there are ways the federal government can support Charter Arts and other successful public charter schools. She says, “We really appreciate the support of Congress and the U.S. Department of Education with charter schools. Pennsylvania charter schools receive

STATEWIDE IMPACT

- Students from 46 different Pennsylvania school districts across a 12 county area attend Charter Arts
- Charter Arts is one of only two regional charter high schools for the arts in Pennsylvania
- In 2013-14, Charter Arts scored an 88 out of 100 for overall academic performance based on statewide data metrics. Scores above 70 percent are proficient.
- Charter Arts has a 99 percent graduation rate

“I was the crazy mother who slept in my car because Charter Arts was two hours away from my home. Instead of going back and forth, I slept in my car [for the duration of the school day] because I believed in what they had to offer here.”

— Selina Cordero, parent



75 percent of the funding that the traditional public schools receive. Additional funding, especially in the area of technology—which is changing at the speed of light—and helping high-performing charter schools to continue to be successful, would be so helpful to our school and other charter schools like ours.

Looking to the Future

The start of the 2015-16 school year will raise the curtain on a new facility for Charter Arts. When Bethlehem Steel closed, the community repurposed the area to build an arts community. The newly constructed Charter Arts facility is in the heart of the South Bethlehem arts and cultural district, and will feature much-needed additional classrooms and studios, a digital laboratory, a resource library, a 'green' roof, and a 350-seat performing arts theater. The new facility will allow more students to enroll; the facility that Charter Arts has used for the past decade was a renovated factory building that had almost no windows and its tiny Black Box Theater could not accommodate the more than 90 performances the school hosts throughout the year. Although the new facility is twice the size of its current building, the school will pay the same rent per year by replacing the annual rent increase with a fixed mortgage payment.

It took tremendous fundraising efforts and community support to open the new facility, and its successful launch is a testament to the school's impact. Ms. LaBelle stated that the Charter Arts programs are "not something that you can get in your traditional public school. These students are in need of a space where they can blossom, and really develop their passion."

Heard in the Halls: Teacher, Parent, and Student Perspectives



"What the students really get here is a way to think differently, and to be creative in the way they think. They take on just about anything that's out there, because they really believe they can."

—Diane LaBelle, executive director



"I've been supported 100 percent by my administration. I'm lucky enough to have a lot of freedom. I think that's another thing that's the difference between a traditional public and a charter school. I don't need to teach out of a binder."

—Paul Walsh, English faculty



"As cliché as it sounds, I can be an artist. I can walk down the street as an artist and that's who I am. And only because of this place."

—Michael Velez, 12th grade

IN THE COMMUNITY

- Each graduating class of 105 seniors has earned close to \$2.5 million in college scholarships
- Charter Arts has many community partnerships, including: the ArtsQuest performance space, PBS39 local TV, Touchstone Theater, Godfrey Daniels music venue, and Northampton Community College

