

# Performing Arts Academy Moves to OCC

By: Victoria Ford



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In a historic move that will give some of Ocean County's most talented young students an even greater advantage in pursuing their postsecondary degrees and entering their chosen professions, Ocean County Vocational-Technical Schools' Performing Arts Academy will relocate from Lakehurst to the campus of Ocean County College next year.

Since it opened in 2001, PAA has been located at the OCVTS Lakehurst Center at the Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

The upwards of \$30 million project is being funded in part by the state of New Jersey, in part by the college, in part by the Jay and Linda Grunin Foundation, and in part by the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders. About a year and a half ago, state funding became available, which made it easier to get the ball rolling. The state's share is 39 percent, according to Freeholder John Bartlett. The project is currently out to bid; Hoey said they hope to break ground before summer. OCC will set the actual schedule for construction and opening. Meanwhile the schools' staffs are working together to ensure a smooth transition for all.

Foundation President Jeremy Grunin said it's been an ongoing discussion for some time among the parties involved. Statewide, there's been a push to move academies onto community college campuses, he noted. Monmouth County Vocational School District's High Technology High School, a pre-engineering academy, is

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a cooperative venture with Brookdale Community College, for example.

OCVTS Superintendent William Hoey explained a lot of high schools are partnering with community colleges, both as a way to streamline the educational pathway for students and for parents to spread the cost of a two-year degree over four years. The students “get a real solid education in the arts, plus access to a degree that will make it easier to move into a four-year program.”

That’s right – Performing Arts Academy students can graduate not only with a high school diploma but an associate’s degree that enables them to feed right into an OCC or Kean University program.

“It takes a lot of work, and you gotta put your nose to the grindstone,” Bartlett said, but for motivated students the opportunity is there. And with OCC tuition “very affordable already,” he added, combined with scholarship opportunities, it’s an unbeatable deal.

“We’ll be designing our courses to meet college requirements,” Hoey said.

The design of the new building has been a joint effort of the college and academy and will include some shared spaces that enable cross-usage and opportunities to use them together.

Visually the new building will meld into the existing structural landscape, according to Bartlett. And its location on the edge of the campus will make it easy for high school buses to load and unload the students every day. He doesn’t foresee any issues with the mixed age range of academy students and college students.



*Future Performing Arts Academy.*

Photo credit: Grunin Center for the Arts

Hoey described it as “a very modern facility.” It will have a large black box, a second, smaller black box the college can access, specialized classrooms for the four disciplines of voice, dance, theater and audio engineering, as well as traditional academic classrooms. The PAA will use the college’s library, gym, student center and other common spaces.

“It’s a real partnership,” Hoey said.

The benefits are mutual and far-reaching.

“We have two blue-ribbon high schools in Ocean County,” Grunin said, referring to PAA and MATES (Marine Academy of Technology and Environmental Science). “We believe this is another step forward in establishing Ocean County as a leader in the arts and culture.”

The entities “work hand in hand together very nicely,” Bartlett said. The arrangement also helps the vocational school save on operational costs and makes use of existing utilities and parking lots, unlike new construction on an empty lot.

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The PAA is a full-time, specialized and comprehensive public high school developed specifically for the young artist-in-training, offering intensive studies in the

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four disciplines, plus concentrations in technical theater, acting techniques, musical theatre, dialect coaching, directing, ballet technique, modern technique, jazz technique, choreography, music theory, vocal technique and physiology, song preparation, microphone technology, live sound, Pro Tools industry-standard software, and hands-on studio performance and arts history (music, dance, theater, audio engineering), along with all of the academic requirements for a high school diploma. Students leave equipped with practical skills to either continue their arts education and/ or audition for professional companies. The PAA teaching philosophy incorporates the arts into all educational areas by integrating curriculum and interaction with arts professionals.



*Future Black Box.*

Photo credit: Grunin Center for the Arts

the foundation identifies and invests in organizations that will help it reach its various programmatic goals, by collaborating on innovative projects that have measurable impact and create meaningful, transformative change within the community.

The PAA draws from public and private schools from every district in the county, Hoey explained. Admission is a competitive process, 50-percent based on academic performance (middle school grades, standardized test scores, an admissions test) and 50-percent on the strength of an audition in a specified discipline.

The school guarantees at least one opening for every district within a freshman class. On average, the academy receives 150-160 applications and accepts about 70. Total enrollment as of September 2016 was 281.

Hoey anticipates an increase in applications after the move to OCC.

Additionally, in line with the Grunin mission “to increase community involvement and economic development opportunities” is the idea that attracting young people and families to the area leads to economic growth and development. The arts help mold the creative minds that may become tomorrow’s leaders, he said.



*Future Performing Arts Academy dance space.*

Photo credit: Grunin Center for the Arts

According to Hoey, the current PAA freshman at the academy are thrilled to be among the pioneers of the new chapter in the academy’s history.