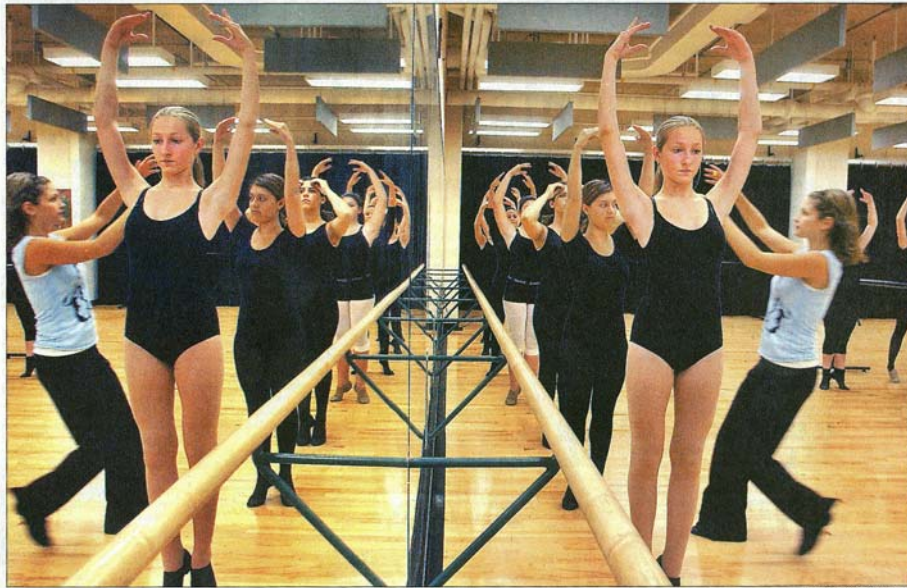


Students reflect on their ballet techniques at this unique Thornhill high school



Dance fever St. Elizabeth Catholic High School mixes ballerinas with biology in an ambitious dedicated arts program that was launched in September. A hundred Grade 9 students in an inaugural class study a core curriculum then spend the rest of their school day focusing on visual art, theatre, music or dance. *Story, B4*

York's arts school a 'magical' place

Cool Schools

Special program for dance, music, art

Inaugural year boasts 100 driven students

TESS KALINOWSKI
EDUCATION REPORTER

How do you set a school on fire?

Make it a hub for the arts and you'll have students burning to get in, with the community clamouring after them.

Only two months into the school year, the new Regional Arts Program at St. Elizabeth Catholic High School in Thornhill is generating excitement beyond its art, theatre, dance and music studios.

"There's a buzz among that group of students that permeates the whole school," says principal Mary Cosentino.

That buzz will turn to applause on Monday when the school holds its first recital of this year. That will give way to drilling and hammering next year when St. Elizabeth starts building a theatre that will also serve as a base for community arts groups such as Opera

York. Although Cosentino says it's too soon to tell how much the theatre will cost, the York Catholic District School Board will be responsible for much of the funding, expected to be in the millions of dollars.

There are about 100 Grade 9 students who successfully auditioned for the dedicated arts program and started classes in September. Another 250 of the school's 1,300 students take some arts courses. The regional arts program will grow by about 100 students a year as the current Grade 9s move up and more students enrol.

Amanda Katchutas, 14, is typical of the new arts students. She wants to be another Christina Aguilera. She never expected to love the range of music she's learning from teacher Michelle Janzen, who is guiding 18 voice students through a contemporary composition with an African beat.

"They give us exciting music we've never heard," says Amanda, who also wants to study drama and dance so she'll be equipped for musicals.

"When kids audition for a vocal program, they think they're going to be the next Canadian Idol, so you have to get them to buy in (to the curriculum)," says Janzen, who tells her students to park their egos at the door before

launching into studies that can range from Renaissance to popular music.

Many arts students have private lessons outside of St. Elizabeth and each student will need to pass the math, English, science and history courses required to graduate high school.

On the polished wooden floors of the dance studio, Janine Dimillo extends her leg straight out in front of her body as a dozen girls stand at the bar studying their teacher's calf muscles in the vast, room-length mirror. The introduction of the arts program means Dimillo's part-time job has become full-time and two classrooms have been converted into a studio complete with dressing rooms, lights and a state-of-the-art sound system.

"There is an electricity that something magical is happening here," says regional arts head John Lettieri, watching Dimillo's precise instruction.

"But with every great facility, something of substance has to be happening," Lettieri adds. "The pressure's here to produce."

Is there an extraordinary program at your public school, college or university? If you have an idea for Cool Schools, please contact the Star's education reporters at education@thestar.ca