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Local News

PLAINFIELD: New charter school opens



STAFF PHOTO: KATHY JOHNSON

Teacher Nichol Sanchez speaks to her students on the first day of school at Ellen G. Pressman Charter School in Plainfield on Tuesday.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

By **MARK SPIVEY**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — The school year at the Ellen G. Pressman Charter School wasn't an hour old when the unique challenges facing Steve Berger became unmistakably clear.

Berger, the chief music teacher at the new city charter school that aims to balance academic excellence with music education, during orientation treated students to an excerpt of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, penned by the legendary composer in 1824.

Berger then asked students what pieces of music they recently heard that they had never heard before. The first student to raise a hand cited Jamie Foxx's 2009 hit single "Blame It."

"They will listen to enough music they find on their own . . . and if they choose to apply what they learn here to popular music, that's their choice," Berger said when asked about the considerable differences between the two pieces. "But they'll be getting an education in music here. The goal is to have every student reading music."

The school, which occupies part of the city YWCA

"I heard they teach you music, and I really like music a lot."

— Sixth-grader
Jabril Thompson

building on East Front Street, held its first day of classes Tuesday. The city's fourth active charter school, one of six new ones statewide, is expected to serve about 160 students in grades 6-7 this year before expanding to serve 240 students in grades 6-8 next year. Charter schools feature their own boards of directors, operating independently of public school districts despite being funded by them.

Berger's presentation, also featuring the jazz stylings of Louis Jordan, was the highlight of an orientation that included discussions on music that bounced from The Beatles to Michael Jackson and everywhere in between.

Beethoven received a lukewarm reception, but most students said they were excited to learn more about music.

"It looks like a pretty fun school," said Jabril Thompson, a sixth-grader who said he considered Beethoven's Ninth was "all right."

"I heard they teach you

music, and I really like music a lot," Jabril added.

Fellow sixth-grader Matthew Sanford said he believed he will fare better academically in a charter school environment than a public school environment, where he said he had "too much freedom."

"I get bad grades when I have that," Matthew said.

Parents largely shared the students' enthusiasm. Anthony Hall, whose son Anthony Jr. is a seventh-grader, said his family recently moved to the city's West End from Jersey City and was impressed by the school's small class sizes.

Valerie Wright had more personal reasons to be optimistic. Wright's daughter Andrea, 12, an avid actress, singer and pianist, lost her father when Ainsworth Wright died in a 2008 motorcycle crash in South Brunswick.

Andrea penned a song memorializing her father, "If You Were Here," and performed it at her former school before discovering that Pressman was opening, Wright said.

"I really wanted her to be somewhere that would help her foster her talent," said Wright, who added that she hopes to send her other two children to the school. "This was heaven-sent."