

Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts

Akron City School District

Akron, Ohio

Superintendent: Sylvester Small

Principal: Kathleen Ashcroft

http://www.akronschools.com/studentschools/schools_millersouth.html

The only one remaining of ten magnet schools that began in the Akron City School District 12 years ago, Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts, a school for grades 4 through 8, requires that students audition to be accepted. The school opened following a parent, student and staff interest survey that indicated community support for a visual and performing arts school.

To take part in the open enrollment at the school, potential students must demonstrate proficiency in an arts area based on prepared work and must carry out assigned tasks

during an audition. Eligibility is based on the applicant's talent, potential abilities and evidence of commitment to education based on the student's most recent report card. Competition is strong. Last year there were 300 applicants for 130 spots available in the school that serves grades four through eight. The total student population of 443 comes from throughout the greater Akron area. Families provide their own transportation to the school, and the school consistently has the highest attendance in the city at an average of 97% each month (out of 60 buildings).

Students with disabilities are active participants in the school, both academically and artistically. According

to the principal, Kathleen Ashcroft, "Miller South is all about the kids and their art. When they need special services, we provide them. We teach to the students' strengths as the academics are imbedded into the arts."

Miller South boasts having a talented and creative staff who offer in-depth study in five arts areas: visual art, vocal and instrumental music, dance and drama. Academic content standards are a given. It is the belief of the school that the power of the arts and academics program at Miller South is in the quality of thinking and the communication skills that their approach fosters. The philosophy of the school is that an arts-infused foundation will help students to perceive, interpret, invent and create, going beyond art production and performance.

The teacher turnover is low even though faculty is expected to go above and beyond the 8 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. school day. Teachers at Miller South are willing to put in the time because they are committed to the students and to the arts. Over three-quarters of the faculty members have master's degrees or equivalent. Staff is almost equally divided, with personnel who have more than 11 years of experience and those

SCHOOL PROFILE	
2003-2004 Building Rating	Excellent
Enrollment	443
Grade Levels	4-8
Economically Disadvantaged Students	18.1%
Students with Disabilities	5.6%
Black Students	29.9%
White Students	66.3%

AKRON CITY DISTRICT PROFILE	
2003-2004 District Rating	Academic Watch
District Enrollment	28,097

with three to ten years of experience. Ms. Ashcroft, new to the school this year, replaced the retiring principal. She has one year of previous experience as a principal, two years as assistant principal, a year and a half as a curriculum/instruction specialist, and she has also taught the first, second, and fourth grades. The principal and the staff all have a strong interest in the arts and have extensive connections with the art world around Akron and elsewhere.

The culturally diverse learning environment of Miller South is located in a beautifully maintained facility that is enhanced by a neon wall sculpture and a tile wall mural exhibiting student artwork. The building was constructed in 1956 as South High School, had additions in 1971 and 1975, closed in 1980 and reopened in 1992 as Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts. In addition to the students' work being displayed throughout the school, there is a separate room that is lit appropriately to display the beautiful framed artwork that has been done by the students. The school is equipped with large classrooms, six fine arts studios including a dance studio equipped with a dance floor and mirrors, an art studio with six graphic arts computers, a 900-seat renovated auditorium that includes new seats, acoustic treatment, sound system and a state of the art computer light system, a Little Theatre and a 25-unit Yamaha Piano keyboard lab.

Students in performing ensembles have the opportunity to perform at many events as well as various state conferences, competitions and entertainment events. Visual arts students participate in numerous community, state, and national competitions and entertainment events. Work done by students has been published in national publications. Drama students perform three major productions a year in addition to various improvs, skits and short plays. Students also participate in collaborative projects with local artists both in school and throughout the community. Miller South has received many awards for arts including a "Creative Ticket" award from the Ohio Alliance for Arts Education, an organization that recognizes schools with outstanding arts programs.

Students at Miller South are also doing very well academically. The 2003-2004 Ohio Proficiency Test (OPT) scores follow:

Subject	Fourth	Sixth
Citizenship	93.9%	88.6%
Reading	95.5%	87.6%
Math	95.5%	93.3%
Science	92.4%	85.7%
Writing	98.5%	98.1%

Student Responsibility

The staff is committed to the success of every child; however, they are adamant that the students at Miller South must also make the commitment to succeed. They believe that each student's (1) attitude, (2) pattern of attendance and tardiness, and (3) level of responsibility and commitment greatly affect his or her academic and artistic success. So everyone will understand what needs to be learned at each grade level, the district rewrote the Ohio Content Standards to be student- and parent-friendly (I/I can). The district is now focusing on rewriting the Fine Arts Standards.

The Akron City School District has implemented the 100 Book Challenge Reading Program in all of the middle and high schools to assist at-risk readers with

increased time reading books through the supervision and instruction by tutors. Students are selected based on Ohio Proficiency Test/Achievement performance, teacher referral, and parent request.

Fourth Grade

Students in the fourth grade don't change classes but are in self-contained classrooms. Fourth-grade teachers give a beginning of the year assessment in math and language arts, but instruction is not based strictly on those assessments. The teachers note that the students who come in from other Akron schools are familiar with the testing format, but they find that kids coming in from parochial schools, from being home schooled, or from other areas are not familiar with them so the assessments may not discover the needs of all the students. The philosophy of the fourth-grade teachers is that they are repeating similar concepts but at a deeper level and complexity, and they make every effort to bring all students up to speed.

According to fourth-grade teacher Lori Galambos, the Akron School District Pacing Guides are designed for students who change schools often. As that is not an issue at Miller South because their students tend to stay at the school once they are accepted, she finds the Pacing Guides helpful to gauge if she is accomplishing what is called for in the standards. She further notes, "Proficiency tests have been part of my life forever because I am a fourth-grade teacher. The Pacing Guides don't allow a lot of time for re-teaching or expanding. Our kids aren't as strong in math at this grade level, but music and dance bring out their math skills later on. They tend to be stronger in language arts at this grade level. For instance, I use the concept of choreography to teach long division. I tell them that it is a process that you do the same way every time. I think their understanding is a lot deeper when you bring in the arts."

She continues, "I have 22 kids in my room from 20 elementary schools and five or six different districts. My job is to be the big equalizer. I need to get everybody on the same page. I do this by assuming nothing. As they all come with one particular talent, I focus on whatever their expertise is. That is their strength. I allow them to use their strength to show me what they know – even with my special education students who often have tried to be invisible their whole lives. Once kids are recognized as an expert in something, they become more confident. Everything we read, we do multiple ways, oral, silent, other – differentiating and scaffolding – to make meaning of things in multiple ways. It's not about grades. It is about what each student can contribute to our classroom. As a teacher I want to know whether they understand, not that they can robotically recite. Kids can demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways."

Mrs. Galambos reported, "I had a hearing-impaired student in my room this year so we used a microphone, which was a real hit. We tap into the idea that the kids like to perform, so that comes out in everything we do." The fourth grade teacher illustrated her philosophy about the value of using the arts to teach with a personal story. "The arts are the equalizer. My daughter went here because she's very nontraditional and did not feel comfortable in other public schools. She thrived. She has two older brothers who are very traditional who would not have been comfortable in this school."

For the first period, fourth graders have math for fifty minutes. Depending on the concepts in the lesson, they may continue to do math for another twenty minutes after Arts Exploratory class. There is no grouping in reading. It is assumed that everyone can read at a higher reading level. However, this past year a number of students had

difficulty with reading fluency, so that was worked on during class time. One special education student needed extra help and went to the tutor while the other students were given enrichment activities. While the academic curriculum is infused with the arts at every grade level, students also receive ninety minutes daily of arts instruction. Students are shown the inter-relatedness of the arts to each other and to other subjects. For example, the fourth-grade teacher conducts a creative dance experience of the Westward expansion for the social studies class. She uses Readers' Theater Scripts for project or group-based learning with activities that bring the concepts through. For a history lesson on representation, the students read and acted out a script, *Laying Down the Law!* created by John Carroll University. All the students were engaged in the class and had ready answers as the teacher questioned concepts throughout the lesson.

Mrs. Galambos explains, "I have special education students take tests with everyone else. If they have trouble reading the tests, they just come to me. However, I don't grade the tests until they go over them with the tutor. Most of the time they have done very well on their own, and it is a very uplifting experience for them. Success breeds success. I was originally trained in special education so that helps a lot. Special education kids are all different anyway just like the other kids are all different. I teach kids that it's no fun to be in a group with all experts."

Special Education

According to Ms. Ashcroft, many times parents do not initially tell the school that their students have a disability. Because the main admittance criteria to Miller South are based on talent, the need for extra support is often discovered only when classes begin. Some parents do write letters of introduction about their children as they have a need to let the school know more information about their children. Due to the school's inclusive environment, the parents of special education students, like other parents, are very involved and are willing to work with their students at home.

"The special education kids don't even know they are special ed because they are like everyone else here." A teacher

The principal reveals that the district has made a commitment to more inclusion in the middle schools, and Miller South is working to fulfill that commitment. She and the teachers praise Mrs. Harris, the resource room teacher. Ms. Ashcroft reports, "Mrs. Harris is phenomenal and so dedicated to the success of every student. Through the inclusion model she will be able to work with more kids. This year was the first time for Mrs. Harris to be a full-time resource teacher because our number of special education students has increased. We also have a part-time intervention tutor who works three hours a day/four days a week. Last year they were both part time." Mrs. Harris had served as a tutor for the previous seven years. The present tutor works primarily with sixth grade special education students on math. Ms. Ashcroft, Mrs. Harris, and appropriate grade level teachers are involved in the IEP meetings for the special education students.

This past year, most of the special education students enrolled at Miller South were learning disabled, with three others cognitively disabled, one hearing impaired, and one autistic. Mrs. Harris explains that special education students are usually more interested in the visual arts and have more difficulty with language arts, so that is the area of her concentration. She also works with the regular education teachers on modifications and accommodations. Mrs. Harris reports that if special education

students are two years behind, she uses *Language: The Comprehensive Literacy Curriculum* from the Sopris West Educational Series. Although aware of the value of pacing charts for most teachers, she reports that she really doesn't have time to use them because she is too busy helping the kids keep up. Mrs. Harris finds the Wilson training she went through with the Mid-Eastern Special Education Regional Resource Center (SERRC) very useful for working with special education students, as it is based on Orton Gillingham and is phonetically based.

The good news is that special education students are making academic progress at Miller South. This is reflected in their performance on the Ohio Proficiency Test during the 2003-2004 school year where 83.3% of the sixth graders scored proficient or above on mathematics and 83.3% passed reading. A seventh grade special education student who has been in the school since the fourth grade reported, "I didn't used to like the proficiency tests, but now they're fun!" She went on to say, "Two weeks ago I got 105 on my math test. It was the highest score in the class."

Parents

Strong parent support contributes to the success of Miller South. Staff members appreciate the support and make a point of keeping parents informed about everything related to their students. In Mrs. Galambos' class, every Thursday parents receive a packet along with a letter that includes everything that that has been done that week and what is planned for the following week. School-wide, assignments and homework are posted on the web site at schoolnotes.com, and every teacher has e-mail communication. Students use a daily planner that they are encouraged to bring home for parents to see. A parent of a special education student noted, "What I really like is that parents have access to the teachers 24 hours a day by e-mail. Teachers post homework and assignments on the web. There is no reason for any child to fail." Another parent noted that she appreciates the opportunities to talk to the teachers informally after school when she picks up her child.

In addition to conducting an active PTA, parents at Miller South are also very active in booster clubs that support each art area. Booster clubs are compared to the typical high school sports boosters programs. Several parents also work as aides in the classroom.

Parents Know Best posters are hung in various offices throughout Miller South. They are part of the Akron District public awareness campaign that uses the testimonials of parents in the district. In addition to the posters, the testimonials are shown on television spots, heard on radio spots, are included in print ads, are in the district's public relations handbook and are up on the district Web site.

A grandmother of a special education student stated that the school had been a lifesaver for her granddaughter, who had come out of an extremely difficult environment. She credits the Miller South teachers for the vast improvement in her granddaughter's outlook as well as her grades. Once extremely withdrawn and shy, she now was doing well academically and was eagerly looking forward to going on the school trip to New York with her classmates and teachers.

Behavior and Retention

A great example of the type of student behavior exhibited throughout Miller South is found at the daily morning assembly in the auditorium. Prior to students being called

to order, the noise level in the room was extremely high, with many greetings and animated conversations. However, when the opening bell sounded, the room quieted without hesitation. The principal was immediately able to proceed with announcements. Teachers followed the principal to the microphone to acknowledge students who had performed in various events. Students made other announcements such as reminding students to get missed assignments if they had been on field trips the previous week. When they were dismissed, the students quickly moved to their classrooms with a minimum of noise.

While Akron Public Schools have a district-wide code of student behavior that Miller South supports, Ms. Ashcroft reports, "We have very few discipline problems because the kids are engaged. This applies even to students who had significant behavior problems earlier." Also, she adds, "The kids are very happy here but they are also very tired." They are also taking classes after school in their area of art, which is required by the school. Parents financially support this extra effort.

If students do commit infractions, the seventh and eighth grade teachers give out detention cards. After so many, the principal assigns an after-school detention. She is happy to report that this does not happen often. However, this past year she did have to suspend one special education student. A behavior plan had been in place for him; unfortunately, he hit another student. He has had no other problems since the suspension.

Miller South's retention policy is as follows. In the event that a student does not meet the academic and/or artistic requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade level at the end of the school year, the student will be returned to the student's home school. Specifically, students who at the end of the year are failing in at least two academic subject areas and/or are not performing at the artistic standards as outlined in the arts' graded course of study and grade level objectives, will be returned to their home school at the end of the year.

Highlights

Performing arts students at Miller South have the opportunity to participate in a variety of ensembles and groups. These include Commedia Del Arte Troupe, Competition Dance Troupe, dance ensembles, Steel Drum Band, Jazz Band, Concert Band, Concert Choir, Orchestra, Strolling Strings, Show Choir and Electronic Keyboard Ensemble. Visual arts students get an intense education in the studio arts: fibers, printmaking, painting, sculpture, ceramics, jewelry, photography, design and drawing. All students regularly participate in local, statewide and/or national competitions, contests, conferences, festivals and exhibits.

A district-wide, one-week Creative Challenge Camp, coordinated by the gifted and talented coordinator, is held at Miller South every summer and is always well-attended.

An eagerly anticipated Miller South highlight is a yearly May trip to New York that is organized by Mrs. Galambos. All fourth and fifth grade students who want to go are able to because of fundraisers and some scholarships that help support the \$475 cost (includes everything, including shows). A minimum of one adult accompanies every two children. Many parents go on the trip, and, for many, this is their first trip to the city. Prior to the trip, the New York City theme is integrated into the academic studies so by the time they leave, the students are eager to learn and see new things in a city well

known for a variety of cultural experiences. The trip is planned so students go to museums, attend shows and expand their knowledge of the arts in general. In May 2005 five tour buses took 266 people on the trip that began on a Wednesday and ended on a Saturday.

This culminating New York trip that provides students the opportunity to personally see professional displays of the varying arts of their interests is considered both an incentive and a reward to the Miller South students. Those who participated in previous trips still speak of the experience with great enthusiasm.

What does the data say?

