



For Immediate Release

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CHIARTS FOUNDATION TO SUNSET OPERATIONS AS CHIARTS TRANSITIONS TO DISTRICT MANAGEMENT JULY 1, 2026

Honoring a legacy of community-built investment in Chicago's first public arts high school.

CHICAGO, IL — May 7, 2026 — For more than 21 years, a community of donors, artists, educators, civic leaders, and supporters have come together to build and sustain The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts), creating a nationally recognized model for accessible, high-quality arts education in Chicago. As ChiArts prepares to transition to a district-managed school with Chicago Public Schools on July 1, 2026, the ChiArts Foundation today announced that it will sunset operations on June 30, 2026, marking the conclusion of its role as the school's philanthropic partner.

The transition to district management also reflects the strength and impact of the model that philanthropy helped build. For more than two decades, private investment has supported ChiArts' pre-professional arts conservatories, demonstrating what is possible when rigorous arts training is made accessible to young people across Chicago. The district's decision to formally integrate ChiArts as a Fine and Performing Arts high school represents an important milestone—one made possible by the success and sustainability of the model that a community of supporters helped bring to life.

As part of the transition to district management, Chicago Public Schools intends to leverage its existing partnership with [Children First Fund, the Chicago Public Schools Foundation](#), to support philanthropic efforts at ChiArts moving forward. The ChiArts Foundation was created to support the school's pre-professional arts conservatory model through dedicated, community-based philanthropy. As the structure of the school evolves within a district-managed framework, the Foundation's role as it was originally designed is concluding.

From its earliest days, ChiArts' pre-professional arts conservatories have been sustained by philanthropy. This philanthropic model was intentionally designed to direct private support to conservatory-level experiences, ensuring that donor investments directly supported arts training, productions, instruction, and student opportunity. Long before the creation of the ChiArts Foundation, fundraising efforts led by dedicated development staff within the school, and a volunteer board, made it possible to launch and grow Chicago's first public arts high school—a model grounded in access and equity. Over the next two months, the ChiArts Foundation will focus on raising the remaining critical funds needed to fully support ChiArts' five arts conservatories through June 30, fulfilling its fundraising goal for the current year and ensuring



continuity for scholar-artists and a strong, thoughtful end of the school year.

“We are incredibly proud of what ChiArts’ philanthropic community has made possible,” said Mirja Spooner Haffner, ChiArts Foundation Board Chair. *“For more than two decades, donors, civic leaders, and advocates have stepped forward to ensure that young creatives, regardless of background, have access to rigorous pre-professional arts training. That commitment has shaped everything ChiArts is today.”*

“From the beginning, the vision was to ensure that Chicago had a public high school where young people could access high-quality, pre-professional arts training regardless of prior experience or financial means.” said Johnny Merrifield, Executive Director of the ChiArts Foundation. *“The philanthropic community didn’t just support ChiArts—they proved the model. The school’s transition to district management is, in many ways, a reflection of that success. It is something this entire community can take pride in.”*

ChiArts exists because a community chose to believe and invest in its mission to provide pre-professional arts training alongside a comprehensive college preparatory curriculum. The first class of students enrolled without a permanent building. The school grew to hundreds of students, eventually establishing its permanent home in Humboldt Park and expanding to include a fifth conservatory in Creative Writing. Each milestone was made possible by sustained philanthropic investment in the belief that rigorous arts education should be accessible to all young Chicago creatives.

That work began in 2004, when arts and civic leaders came together to address inequities in access to arts education across Chicago. Central to this vision was the belief—championed by the school’s founding Executive and Artistic Director José Ochoa—that students should be admitted based on passion and potential, not prior access to training. In 2009, that vision became reality when ChiArts opened its doors as a tuition-free public high school grounded in both artistic excellence and academic rigor. Since then, philanthropy has not only supported the school’s arts conservatories, it has defined and sustained a model of accessible arts education giving novice artists access to pre-professional arts training. Over the years, more than \$40 million has been raised to support donor-funded arts conservatory programs, and more than 65% of each freshmen class entered with little to no prior arts training. ChiArts graduates consistently outperform citywide benchmarks and go on to careers across the creative industries, from Broadway stages to international galleries, national tours, and Billboard charts.

The ChiArts Foundation extends its deepest gratitude to all ChiArts donors, philanthropic partners, scholar-artists, families, teaching artists, academic educators, support staff, administrators, and board members, including its founding leaders, whose belief and investment made ChiArts possible.



While this marks the conclusion of the ChiArts Foundation's role, the impact of more than two decades of philanthropic investment will continue to shape the lives of ChiArts students and alumni—and the future of arts education in Chicago—for generations to come. The Foundation's leaders, supporters, and broader community remain deeply committed to championing ChiArts students and celebrating the school's future impact as part of Chicago Public Schools.

ABOUT THE CHIARTS FOUNDATION

ChiArts Foundation was established in January 2021 to support arts education opportunities for, and inspire and nurture current, future, and former students of The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts). As ChiArts' arts conservatories are donor-funded, the Foundation's key objectives are to provide annual fundraising support for ChiArts' five arts conservatories, support outreach through community partnerships, develop marketing and public relations activities for ChiArts, and increase alumni engagement and build community through alumni support. For more general information about the ChiArts Foundation, visit chiartsfoundation.org and ChiArts Foundation on [LinkedIn](#).

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS (CHIARTS)

The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts) is Chicago's first public high school for the arts. With disciplines in Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theatre, and Visual Arts, ChiArts provides its scholar-artists with a donor-funded pre-professional arts training program paired with a CPS-funded college-preparatory academic curriculum. ChiArts opened its doors in 2009 and has graduated 13 classes of scholar-artists at a rate between 92-100% each year. ChiArts is the only public arts high school in the nation that actively recruits novice-level students. Learn more at chiarts.org. Learn more about recent ChiArts news and performances on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [YouTube](#). For more general information about ChiArts, visit chiarts.org.

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Please note: The Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts) is Chicago's first public arts high school, distinct from the similarly named private arts school, Chicago Academy for the Arts (The Academy).