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Governor's School for the Arts campus is consolidated in Norfolk

The six-story, 1915 Monroe Building at 254 Granby St. got a new lease on life when, in 2011, the Governor's School for the Arts decided to consolidate its campus there.

First, it needed a little resuscitation.

That was no easy task, said Andrea Warren, GSA executive director since 2010.

"The top two floors had been condemned. We had to get rid of asbestos, pigeons and graffiti and there was water damage," she said.

The building also needed a new elevator and climate control system, but Warren said a big piece was ensuring individual music practice rooms had proper acoustics.

In addition, the \$9 million renovation included selective demolition, exterior repairs, reconfiguration of spaces, structural repairs, installation of new plumbing, mechanical, electrical, life-safety systems and new flooring, and new finishes. The architectural firm of Tymoff & Moss designed the school's new space and Norfolk-based contractor Virtexco did the construction. GSA leases the building from the city.

According to Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the building was eligible for federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits since it contained many original historic features, particularly on the fifth and sixth floors. Those features include terrazzo flooring, ornate elevator doors, transoms/crank handles and skylights.

The school's new amenities include: a woodshop, three computer labs and an advanced technology room, six server rooms, sewing room, drawing studio, new bathrooms and attractive wooden lockers on each floor, a dark room, sculpture and ceramics room, painting studio, movement room, recording studio, chorus room, four dance studios, instrumental room, costume shop, a number of classrooms and small practice rooms, a canteen, administrative offices and the Black Box Theatre on the first floor.

Warren, whose administrative offices used to be on the campus of Old Dominion University, enjoys now being among the students.

"We love it," she said. "Now we're more a part of the program."

The 52,000-square-foot building's refurbishment isn't quite complete, but the remaining work didn't stop students from beginning their spring semester in the school earlier this month.

On Jan. 7, after a five-month delay, 355 theater, dance, vocal, instrumental and visual arts students stepped through the doors of the historic building to attend classes under one roof.

GSA, established in 1987, admits students from eight area public school divisions: Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Suffolk, Isle of Wight, Southampton and Franklin. Each school district pays tuition to GSA for an allotted number of students. Admission is competitive and includes an audition. Each year, about 600 students apply for approximately 130 available spots.

Students typically attend their neighborhood "home" schools in the morning and then are bused to the Governor's School for about three hours each afternoon. Previously, the Governor's School was spread out at various locations throughout the city, which was a transportation nightmare, according to Warren. Now, students are transported to one location, where they stay for all their classes.

One exception is the dance program, which is primarily still housed at nearby TRDance Center on Granby.

"It really feels like a conservatory now," said Warren, a 30-year educator who has a personal as well as professional connection to the program. Warren's daughter, Adrienne, graduated from GSA in 2005 and now performs professionally in New York City.

Besides easier logistics, a consolidated campus offers students a more immersive educational experience by giving them an opportunity to interact with peers from the different arts programs, Warren said. The school's location in downtown Norfolk also offers proximity to the city's other cultural resources.

Sandy Short, parent of third-year GSA student, Taylor Short, 17, who moved from Charlottesville to Norfolk to attend the school, is overjoyed with the new facility.

"I can just anticipate how synergistic it's going to be," said Short, who recently toured the building. "The students can interact with each other and watch each other's performances. That's an exciting aspect. They can take advantage of the strengths of the other departments."

Taylor echoed her mother's feelings.

"I've met so many more people from my school. I used to only see them twice a year when we came together, but now I see them every day," Taylor said. "It's inspiring to be around people who are passionate about their art."

Upon graduation, Taylor hopes to attend Carnegie Mellon University with the goal of performing professionally on Broadway.

About 10,000 square feet of the building's space is utilized by the Wells Theatre and Virginia Stage Company as a dressing room and set-building area.

The building's renovation is expected to be fully complete this spring.

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