

# Plainfield academy takes flight

BY MARK SPIVEY • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 4, 2009

**PLAINFIELD** — By the end of the 2009-10 school year, Justin Branch will have spent about 250 more hours in the classroom than most other city middle [school students](#).



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Student Ajai Beckford works a camera in the TV Production Class of the Plainfield Academy for the Arts and Advanced Studies.

The fact that he's looking forward to it may have something to do with the school he attends — not to mention the type of student he is.

"You don't want to take the easy way out," Branch, 12, explained Friday. "You want something more advanced. I want to push my brain to the limit."

The seventh-grader is one of about 100 students in the inaugural class of the Plainfield Academy for the Arts and Advanced Studies, which opened its doors for the first time Thursday. The specialized public school, which currently serves grades 7-8, will expand by one grade each year until it serves grades 7-12 in 2013-14.

## Eager To Learn

The school day at the academy, at 1700 W. Front St., is 85 minutes longer than those of the city's two public middle schools. Students experience a rigorous curriculum that includes advanced classes and an artistic elective of their choice: music, theater, art or dance. Admission is gained only through a competitive audition process that includes a 14-page application, an essay, letters of recommendation and an artistic performance presented before a panel of judges.

To some students, that sounds daunting. To others, it sounds miserable.

To Branch and many of his fellow classmates, it sounds perfect.

"I knew if I came here . . . I would see how school is supposed to be," he said.

According to Angela Bento, who heads the academy and oversaw its creation, the school's selective admission extended well beyond students to teachers, security personnel and even janitors. Bento oversaw applications from all of the staff, with as many as five district teachers often applying for just one position.

"Everybody had to interview," she said.

The faculty includes full-time teachers and part-time artistic instructors, most of whom leave other district schools during the afternoon to teach classes here. Academy teachers said Friday that they have been stunned in the early going by how eager many students are to be there.

"They're so enthusiastic. I'm loving it," said Molly Banta, a history teacher for 17 years at Plainfield High School before coming to the academy. "They want to learn."