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## The real Duke Ellington scandal is not what you think By Eric Easter

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Duke Ellington School of the Arts. (Cheryl Diaz Meyer for The Washington Post)

The District's Duke Ellington School of the Arts has been involved in what may be widespread cheating by non-resident parents to avoid paying tuition. As more stories emerge, it appears many of those families may actually turn out to be legitimate D.C. residents. We shall see how it ends.

But all this talk of cheaters, scandals and corruption is unfortunately masking the real story and a fundamental question: "Why, when D.C. Public Schools are under attack for lack of performance, are so many people trying to attend Duke Ellington?"

Simply: Because it works. For more than 40 years, a

predominately African American school, with 54 percent of students eligible for free lunch, has defied the expected narrative by also claiming a 98 percent graduation rate and college acceptances at Yale, New York University, Rutgers, Berklee College of Music, CalArts, Juilliard and more.

Students at Ellington carry a class load of 10 courses per semester, versus the seven of other area high schools. Their days are two hours longer than their peers', and their evenings even longer, filled with performances, rehearsals and auditions and then homework when that is done.

It is a schedule that produces the kind of work ethic that one of its most famous sons, comedian [Dave Chappelle](#), claims left him “wildly prepared” for the challenges of navigating an extraordinarily tough industry.

Beyond Chappelle, it boasts graduates such as “24” star [Corey Hawkins](#), Grammy award-winning musician [Me'Shell Ndegeocello](#), “The Handmaid’s Tale” star [Samira Wiley](#), world-class jazz trumpeter [Wallace Roney](#), “Greenleaf” star [Lamman Rucker](#), writer and musician [Greg Tate](#) and award-winning poet [Quique Aviles](#), among many others. Less well-known is that, according to the Hollywood actors who routinely visit to see what all the fuss is about, every production now on Broadway claims at

least one Ellington graduate in its cast or crew. The same goes for a large number of television and film productions. Of the chief curators at America's top museums, three are graduates of Duke Ellington's Museum Studies program, the only such program in the nation.

One can argue about the cost of its \$180 million remodel and the amount spent over-budget. But the reality is that nearly every business story we see each day — the proposed AT&T/Time Warner merger, the rise of Netflix, Amazon's dominance, Facebook, Google — is really a conversation about the future of content and its incredible importance as the foundation of innovation and the driver of demand for technology.

And who is poised to create that content? Students trained in storytelling across many platforms, as they are at Ellington.

Those who are looking at the future smartly may come to understand that the money spent by the city on Ellington's renovation wasn't too high but maybe even not enough. How do we prepare children to tell stories in virtual reality and augmented reality? How do we incorporate gaming and e-sports into arts education? This is the now, not some distant future. We must answer these questions and prepare the District's children for those opportunities. That

requires substantial investment and new thinking. To the extent there are residency cheaters at Ellington, make them pay fairly. Release them if they will not. But also put Maryland's and Virginia's feet to the fire to create their own arts-education infrastructure. If not, let them contribute to funding Ellington. The District's middle schools must do a better of training its students to be prepared for the rigor of preprofessional arts education. That will take commitment.

In the meantime, talk of dumbing down Ellington just to fill it or blending it with other schools to ease crowding is misguided. We should be strengthening it and ensuring that its programs are rigorous, forward-thinking and fully funded. Doing anything less would be to shoot our own future in the foot.

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