

Free Music School's Cost: A Week on the Sidewalk

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Rebecca Tirado arrived six days early to enroll her 7-year-old twins at the People's Music School. With a tent, an air mattress and a cooler stocked with Gatorade and yogurt, she and her husband were ready for an extended sidewalk stakeout.

Space is limited at the Uptown school, which since 1975 has offered free after-school music education to children from low-income families. Last summer some parents camped outside for four days to register their children in the first-come first-served program. By lining up six days before the Aug. 27 registration, Ms. Tirado, 42, thought she was playing it safe.

"We were so happy last night, thinking, 'We got this, we're early,' " she said. "I was sure we were going to be first."

They were fifth.

Christian Blanco, 33, claimed the first spot in line, planting his lawn chair outside the school's doors at 8 p.m. Sunday, beating Ms. Tirado by four hours, guaranteeing a slot for his 6-year-old son and setting a record for early arrival. By noon on Monday, 10 parents were lined up to register their 15 children.

There are 25 slots available, but just five for 5- to 7-year-olds; the rest are for 8- to 12-year-olds. With four families trying to register a total of five children ahead of Ms. Tirado, it was not assured that her twins would be admitted. Enrollment is not complete until registration is finished on Saturday.

Demand for space at the 200-student school has mushroomed in the last three years, extending the time spent in line from several hours to several days, said Bob Fiedler, the school's executive director.

The school does not charge tuition, but parents must commit to eight hours of service to the school per child per semester, anything from answering the phones to sitting on the board. Students, ages 5 through 18, must meet attendance standards and demonstrate performance improvement through auditions. They study music theory and receive weekly private lessons on instruments from the common piano to the less common euphonium.

"Just because you don't have money doesn't mean you should not have access to that," Mr. Fiedler said.

Still, inexpensive options are limited. Private music lessons can cost around \$50 an hour, but parents say they want their children to receive more instruction than is available at Chicago's public schools.

The school district currently employs about 900 full- and part-time arts teachers. It also works with some 200 arts organizations, including People's Music School, which runs a youth orchestra at an Albany Park elementary school.

Tina Eubanks's sons attend Walt Disney Magnet School on the North Side. They have weekly art and music classes, but they do not have the option to play an instrument until fifth grade. By then, the Eubanks boys will have been playing cello at the People's Music School for at least five years.

Ms. Eubanks, 44, said that besides giving her children a creative outlet, early exposure to the arts means they will grow up with a natural interest in them. She missed that in her own childhood.

"Me and my brother, we can't sing, we can't play an instrument, and I really wish my mom had offered that to us," she said.

Waiting in line together formed a bond among parents. They shared food and held spots while other parents took bathroom breaks at a nearby McDonald's.

Sandra Chiu, 34, lined up this year to enroll her 8-year-old daughter. After two years of unemployment, Ms. Chiu found a new job last week as a teacher's assistant, but she asked for a delayed start date so she could wait in line.

Camping out is hard, Ms. Chiu said. But when parents say they will do anything for their children, "well, this is your anything," she said.

