Ralph Opacic Says Top Arts Training Does Not Need a Price Tag

Ralph Opacic says the common belief that serious arts training only comes with a private school bill is wrong, and points to two Orange County institutions built to prove it.

Santa Ana, California Nov 12, 2026 (Issuewire.com) - The Belief Opacic Pushes Back On

Ask most parents where a child goes for serious vocal training, ballet, or orchestral study, and the answer usually involves a monthly invoice. Ralph Opacic has spent decades building programs that reject that assumption.

Opacic founded the Orange County School of the Arts (OCSA) in 1987 as a public charter school. It has never charged tuition. Students train in theater, dance, music, and visual art at no cost, alongside a full academic program.

"The idea that you need money to find real talent is backwards," Opacic said. "You need access. Give a kid access and a good teacher, and the talent takes care of itself."

What OCSA Shows

Under Opacic's leadership, OCSA grew into one of the top-ranked arts schools in the country. The U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts have identified it as a model arts education program. It has ranked in the top three percent of high schools in California.

None of that came with a tuition requirement. The school runs as a tuition-free public charter, supported in part by the Orange County School of the Arts Foundation, a nonprofit Opacic also leads that raises money for the school's programs and its facilities.

Opacic led OCSA until 2021, then spent several years consulting with other arts schools around the country before joining Orange County Music & Dance (OCMD) as chief executive.

What OCMD Is Built to Show Next

OCMD, based in Irvine, is now building the same principle into a different kind of institution. The nonprofit has a $5 million endowment behind a specific promise: no student will be priced out of its programs.

Opacic describes OCMD's approach as "womb to tomb," meaning arts instruction that starts with classes for children as young as six months and continues through adult programs. In between are discovery classes for elementary students and pre-conservatory and conservatory tracks for middle and high schoolers.

"A model like this only works if money isn't the gate," Opacic said. "The moment cost decides who gets in, you've already lost the kids who needed it most."

OCMD is expanding to support that pathway, adding a second campus near its Irvine headquarters to roughly double its footprint.

Why Opacic Keeps Making This Argument

Opacic has built his career around the claim that talent is not rare, but access is. He has said his own path into music started with one teacher who saw something in him before he saw it himself, at a public high school with no special tuition track attached.

That experience shows up in how he talks about both OCSA and OCMD. Rankings, awards, and endowments are not the point to him. They are evidence for a simpler argument: that a child's zip code or family income should not decide whether they get serious training.

"People assume quality costs money," Opacic said. "What it actually costs is commitment, from the institution and from the family. The money question should be solved before a kid ever walks in the door, not after."

Opacic has received recognition for this work, including the Jeffrey Lawrence Award from Arts Schools Network, the field's most prominent honor for an arts administrator. He has also served as a consultant with the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center, working with arts leaders and boards on how to run institutions like the ones he has built.

About Ralph Opacic

Ralph S. Opacic, Ed.D. is the president and executive director of Orange County School of the Arts, which he founded in Santa Ana, California in 1987, and chief executive of Orange County Music & Dance in Irvine, California. He holds a bachelor's degree in music from California State University, Long Beach, a master's degree in educational administration from National University, and a doctorate in education from the University of Southern California.

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