



Threats to Dance Education: Our Field at Risk

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Threats to Dance Education

Our Field at Risk

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In 24 years of working at the national level in dance education, I see four prime interrelated threats that keep our field at risk. Not only do they make it nearly impossible for national, state, and local leaders to establish dance as an art form in education; but, until we collectively address these threats, the field will continue to struggle for identity in the arts, and the arts in education.

The four prime threats are (1) the lack of parity of dance in arts education; (2) the lack of equity and access to dance in K–12 education for students and teachers; (3) the lack of data collection and longitudinal data analyses; and (4) the dire need for dance arts educators to define, articulate, and enforce: What is dance education? Who teaches it? What is the appropriate channel of delivery?

As you read this, think what you can do in your daily job to address these critical needs in the field, because each of us must be aware and steadfast in our resolve to address each threat at whatever level possible—national, state, and local. These threats are not to be taken lightly.

LACK OF PARITY OF DANCE WITHIN THE ARTS

In most federal legislation, language does not identify the four individual art forms as “dance, music, theater, and the visual arts.” Instead, legislation titles the four art forms collectively as “the arts,” or in white papers and position statements as “music and the arts.” The

federal and white paper language frequently gets translated down the line in state and local education policy as follows: First, there are only two art forms in U.S. education to be included in educational curricula—music and the visual arts; and, second, if a state or local education agency offers one or both of these art forms, it is meeting its state and local education policy requirements and doesn’t need to support dance and theater. Such practices are widely endorsed throughout the nation and they are unacceptable.

This lack of parity is most disturbing when, over 24 years, dance and theater go largely unrecognized in federal legislation, national assessments, federal surveys, and the media. Dance and theater have been omitted from national surveys designed to capture important data for arts education in U.S. schools—for example, the National Assessments for Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS). Since the inception of the NAEP assessments in 1969, music has been assessed four times (1971, 1978, 1997, and 2008) and visual art has also been assessed four times (1974, 1978, 1997, and 2008). Theater and dance have received precursory treatment in one NAEP targeted survey in 1997 but no full-scale assessments have been executed in either of these two art disciplines. Federal agencies cite two conditions for the omissions: first, the lack of government funding to execute NAEP assessments in dance and theater; and, second, the NAEP assessment’s research methodology that requires stratified sample groups (demographic representations of U.S. education populations), which permits results to be generalized across

K–12 populations to represent U.S. education. Dance and theater have difficulty meeting the latter NAEP criterion.

Frequently, the inability to meet the stratified sample group is then misrepresented to the public as “there are not enough dance programs to assess in U.S. education.” This is totally incorrect. There are thousands of excellent dance programs in K–12 education. National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) estimates from U.S. Department of Education data that “qualified dance educators” teach approximately 7 percent of U.S. children in K–12 education, or 3.5 million students a year.

Finally, three FRSS tests were administered to school principals in 1995, 2000 and 2010. Two types of surveys exist: (1) FRSS surveys completed by school principals that provide important data on the extent to which all four arts forms (dance, music, theater and the visual arts) are included in K–12 instruction, and (2) FRSS surveys that are administered to art specialists in schools that provide in-depth data on curriculum, scheduling, staffing, facilities, equipment, safety, and teacher preparation, professional development, and credentialing—often referred to as opportunities to learn.

All four art forms have been included in the FRSS surveys completed by school principals that provide general data; but never have dance and theater been awarded arts’ specialist surveys to provide in-depth data on opportunities to learn. Again, lack of federal funding and difficulty in locating teacher populations are cited as reasons for not including dance and theater in the 2010 FRSS. To rectify this situation, NDEO is already discussing 2016 NAEP assessments and FRSS surveys with government officials.

With the establishment of NDEO in 1998, dance arts education is now in a position to provide data to the government for dance as an art form to be included in targeted surveys. NDEO’s job now is to convince the respective federal agencies they should provide funding to do targeted surveys in dance and theater. Twelve years ago we could not provide these data. Today we must.

LACK OF EQUITY AND ACCESS TO DANCE IN K–12 EDUCATION

Without a doubt, the lack of parity in the arts leads directly to lack of equity and access issues, as already described. The 1997 NAEP data report the frequency with which eighth-grade students receive instruction in the arts three or four times per week (visual arts 52%, music 43%, theater 10%, and dance 3%); or one or two times per week (music 38%, visual arts 25%, theater 7%, and dance 4%); or where the subject is not taught (music 9%, visual arts 17%, theater 74%, and dance 80%) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 1998a).

The FRSS-II (1995) and NAEP (1997) both support findings that 57 percent of elementary students do not have access to dance education and of the 43 percent of students who do, 36 percent receive their training from teachers in physical education and 7 percent receive their training from dance specialists (NCES 1998a, 1998b). These are the most current data available knowing dance and theatre were omitted from the NCES 2011 snapshot report on arts education due to be published in 2012.

LACK OF DATA AND LONGITUDINAL ANALYSES

The lack of data from national surveys, as cited earlier in the NAEP and FRSS, creates significant voids in our ability to understand our field and address opportunities to learn in curriculum such as scheduling, staffing, facilities, and equipment; and teacher preparation, professional development, credentialing. As a result, we have little understanding of these important components in K–12 education and lack focused methodological, short- and long-term plans of action. This must change.

A contributing factor to this lack of data is that, historically, music and the visual arts entered the K–12 curriculum as separate, stand-alone art forms, whereas dance and theater entered as subsets of other disciplines—physical education and English. As a result, dance and theater now have dual identities. This makes it virtually impossible to separate dance taught as an art form from the physical education curriculum and theater taught as an art from the English curriculum. Neither has a clear delivery system within the educational infrastructure.

In an effort to achieve parity, equity and access, dance educators continually need to clarify at local and state levels the dual purposes dance serves students in U.S. education.

THE NEED TO ARTICULATE

What is dance education? Who teaches dance in the arts? Is the channel of delivery through arts or physical education? Lack of clarity on these questions continues to promote major misunderstandings at national, state, and local levels among our colleagues in the arts and education fields. This confusion causes gross misalignment of curriculum and resources in schools, school districts, and states. Without dedicated alignment, students and teachers suffer.

The clearest way to answer these three questions to people outside our field (including the other art forms, disciplines, parents, students, and administrators at all levels) is to ask what the goals and desired outcomes are of the program.

- If the goal of the program is to teach the artistic processes (creating, performing, and responding) and the outcome for students is to have them create, perform, and critically analyze dance works by self or others, then dance is taught as an art form in education. The channel of delivery is the arts; and, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind 2002), the program must be taught by a “highly qualified” educator—meaning the instructor must be teaching in his or her major area of study (e.g., dance art performance and education) and must be state certified in this discipline.
- If the goal of the program is to promote physical activity (directed toward health, social, and recreational aspects of education), then the dance component is taught under physical education. The channel of delivery is physical education; and, although physical education is not legally defined as a core academic subject under No Child Left Behind, it, too, should be taught by a qualified educator—meaning the instructor is teaching in his or her major area of study (e.g., physical education) and must be state certified in physical education.
- Each discipline requires completely different pedagogical preparation. Generally, dance specialists are trained in colleges of fine and performing arts or arts and humanities. Physical educators are trained in colleges of health, physical education, recreation and dance (HPERD), human performance, or similarly titled colleges or departments.
- It is important to note that both professions are valid and legitimate. They absolutely serve different educational goals and outcomes, require very different professional preparation, and should be delivered in the appropriate channel of learning—the arts or physical education. They must not be confused. They must not be substituted one for the other.

Do you realize that the 2002 legislation is the first time in our history that the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (ESEA) literally mandated that dance as an art form must be taught by a qualified dance educator? Although reauthorization of the ESEA will likely be postponed until 2013 due to the 2012 elections, it is quite likely the ESEA “highly qualified teacher” status will not be compromised, but rather augmented with additional requirements for “highly effective teacher” status. This law is our opportunity to get the right people in the classrooms teaching the right content under the arts.

In summary, dance educators, administrators, and state arts consultants throughout America should analyze their own dance programs at local, district, and state levels to see if their program goals, staffing, and channels of delivery are in alignment. At local and state levels, as well as at the national level, we each must insist that dance arts education is aligned with the arts and that credentialed teachers deliver the content through arts programming. Students deserve no less.

For more information, please visit www.ndeo.org/advocacycurrent to see advocacy documents and initiatives.

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