

THE FACE OF PHILANTHROPY

Stepping Lightly

By [Sam Kean](#)



Photograph by Eduardo Patino for the National Dance Institute

Terms like "scootches" and "baby turtle back-up" aren't commonly used by professional dancers, but the National Dance Institute doesn't aim to train professionals. It trains regular kids, and if teachers need to call a kick with noses raised in the air a "snooty boing" to help youngsters remember how to move, they will.

Entering its 30th year, the institute has trained 1.5 million children in New York City public schools. Choreographers visit fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms once a week, and along with dance moves they teach youngsters skills they need throughout their lives: discipline, persistence, trust. And the teachers constantly mix up groups of students to ensure that everyone participates.

"We don't want kids hanging at the back, so we don't have a back," said Leslee Asch, executive director of the dance institute. And adults join in, too: Principals and janitors have danced in yearly recitals.

The organization runs on \$3.5-million a year and raises nearly 80 percent of its budget from private sources, with the bulk of the rest coming from tuition paid by the schools. In this anniversary year, it plans to seek its first permanent home with a \$150,000 grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

The institute also sponsors seminars for talented teenagers. But the focus remains on youngsters. "It's really a nice time because they're so open," Ms. Asch said, "not feeling they have to be 'so cool.'"

Here, Mary Kennedy and her fourth-grade class at Brooklyn's P.S. 235 raise their arms for the "front home" step to practice for a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.