

A Supplement to Dance Magazine

Lifetime Learners:



*Classroom
Encounters*



Jacques D'Amboise's National Dance Institute, led by Ellen Weinstein, uses a master and apprentice model to train teaching artists. At right: Kathleen Isaac leads second graders in a lesson about José Limón at P.S. 165 in Flushing, Queens.

Wanted: Hundreds of Dancers

MUST LOVE KIDS AND TEACHING.
 Professional performance experience a plus.
 Full and part-time schedules available.

NEVER BEFORE has there been such a swell of support for dance in the city's schools, says Joan Finkelstein, director of dance programs for the New York City Public Schools. A recent state mandate requires all New York primary and many upper grade schools to provide dance to their students. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and School Chancellor Joel Klein have made the arts a lynchpin of their plan to raise New York City's school standards and expectations. Finkelstein was hired in June 2004 to head up the creation of a standards-based, rigorous approach to teaching dance in the public schools that would allow students to delve deeply into the art form and study it sequentially, just as they do with other subjects like math or English. The resulting plan is documented in a 70-page handbook, *Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, published last June. "The stars are aligned," says Finkelstein. "We have support, funding, a blueprint. If we can't launch this now, we never will."

If all goes well, one big challenge may be finding enough devoted and trained dance teachers to meet the demands of the nation's largest public school system. The city currently has 1,400 public schools and only 350 certified dance teachers. Helping to fill the gap are professional dancers who aren't certified but teach in the schools as artists-in-residence.

The ambitious plan relies on the local dance community in several ways. The team that created the *Blueprint* included Ballet Hispanico artistic director Tina Ramirez; Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, director of arts-in-education and community outreach for The Ailey School; Marni Thomas, director of the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance; as well as public school experts and university dance educators. Some of the city's dance companies have sponsored professional development days for public school dance teachers. But the community's biggest ongoing contribution may be training professional dancers without education

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The National Dance Institute, launched in 1976 by Jacques D'Amboise, provides different levels of training based on a master and apprentice model. It begins with a two-week intensive held in a public school. Attendees witness experienced teachers working with a new group of kids from first class to final presentation.

"They see it all," says Weinstein, "including how to interact with the principal and work with the custodial staff. They begin by observing, then participate as if they were one of the kids, and finally teach with assistance."

NDI teachers learn to give their young students constant and critical feedback. "During a class they should comment on each child," says Weinstein. One of the hardest things for new teachers to learn is honesty, she adds. "They want to say everything looks great. But, when it doesn't, they must say, 'That wasn't right but we'll help you get it. Let's do it again.'"

NDI also trains dance teachers in classroom management techniques—strategies to get dancers with different amounts of training and levels of interest to participate. Instructors use games to get the kids caught up in what they're doing. "We look for teachers with a performance background," says Weinstein. "They know what it takes to rehearse and prepare a work—but they also know how to engage an audience, which is what you have to do every day with kids. You have to stand on your head to get them involved, sometimes."

Traditional dance warm-ups and vocabulary linked to a specific technique aren't very useful in this setting. "We teach teachers to use the global language of dance," says Ann Biddle who trains Ballet Hispanico dancers for work in the public schools. Words like "leap," rather than "jeté" for example. And instead of replicating a regular technique class with, say, head rolls and isolations, Biddle has the teaching artists give a warm-up that works major muscle groups and gets kids immediately involved.

Then there are the more mundane considerations. Biddle gives teaching artists a checklist for assessing the dance space and making sure it's safe—for the kids and themselves. "Teaching artists—especially when they're professional performers—should demonstrate everything full-out," says Biddle. "They have to model what they want the kids to do."



P.S. 165 second grade students of Kathleen Isaac.

For effective classroom management, Biddle stresses the importance of learning children's names quickly. "If it's a short residency, I insist on nametags," she says. "I even bring some along, just in case. There's nothing that gets a kid's attention quicker than using his or her name." She also has suggestions on how to make the classroom teachers their allies. "If they're behind you, it helps enormously," she says.

Indeed, some teaching artists programs involve the classroom teacher more than others. The 92nd Street Y's Educational Outreach Program hires and trains professional performers to teach in public schools. The model uses lots of peer partnering—senior teaching artists help train new ones and classroom teachers and dance teachers work as a close-knit team. "When the teaching artists go into the classroom, they know they are not alone," says Misty Pereira, program director. The regular teachers assist with classroom management and help the artists create lesson plans that are age-appropriate. "When the teaching artists partner well with the classroom teacher, you have a really strong learning environment for the child," she says.

A piece of choreography is at the center of every Lincoln Center Institute public school dance workshop, explains teaching artist Heidi Miller. Teaching artists work with the classroom teachers to decide what aspect of the work to focus on. For a Merce Cunningham piece, for example, they might study abstract forms and shapes. Then both teachers develop lesson plans based on the chosen theme. The children attend a performance of the work they're studying. "When they see it performed live, they have a very personal connection to it," says Miller. "They have thought deeply about it and got to try it on."

Though the idea is to improve the lives of public school children, the plan as it ramps up is also likely to provide New York City's population of dancers with a nice alternative to the standard part-time gigs of waiting tables or telemarketing.

"It's so satisfying," says Isaac. "You get to pass on something priceless to kids who might not otherwise encounter it. Just last week, I told my second graders, 'I may not have a fancy car and lots of money. But when I see you do a Limón combination the way you just danced that one, I don't need diamonds. You are my bling-bling.'" ☺

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