



Elmhurst School for Dance



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Better
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Inspection Report

Audience
Post-sixteen

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Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Elmhurst School for Dance
Type of college:	Performing arts college
Principal:	John McNamara
Address of college:	249 Bristol Road Edgbaston Birmingham B5 7UH
Telephone number:	0121 472 6655
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Name of reporting inspector:	Alan Marsh HMI
Date of inspection:	7–10 November 2005

Part A: Summary

Information about the school

Elmhurst School for Dance is an independent co-educational boarding school for aspiring dance students. It is registered with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) under the Education Act 2002. It offers a vocational and academic education to students between the ages of 11 and 16 (the lower school), and a three year professional training in classical ballet and allied dance forms, with additional academic or vocational studies, for students aged 16 to 19 (the sixth form). In September 2004 the school moved from Camberley, Surrey to new, purpose-built premises in Birmingham. At the same time it revised its curriculum in association with the Birmingham Royal Ballet company to focus specifically on the training needs of the modern classical dancer.

At the time of the inspection there were 86 students enrolled on the three year professional national diploma in dance, of whom 53 were in receipt of DfES dance and drama awards. Approximately one-third of the students come from outside the European Union.

The school is a non-profit making charitable trust and a company limited by guarantee. The principal leads the school, assisted by the artistic director, the director of studies, the finance director and the head of boarding and pastoral care. It is an associate school of Birmingham Royal Ballet, whose director acts as artistic adviser to the school. Almost all the staff at the school were newly appointed in September 2004, including the artistic director, the director of studies and the finance director. There are nine full-time and eight part-time teachers, and eight full-time and six part-time accompanists. Guest teachers also visit the school regularly.

The school was last inspected by Ofsted for its previous curriculum and in its previous location in Camberley in November 2002; it received a grade 1 (outstanding) for provision and grade 1 (outstanding) for leadership and management.

The school's aim is 'to provide training in classical ballet and allied dance forms to the highest possible standards, supported by first-rate academic education'.

How effective is the school?

Key strengths

- very high retention rates
 - much very good and some outstanding teaching
-

- high standards of students' technical and performance skills
- outstanding facilities
- outstanding professional performance experience of teaching staff
- productive links with the profession
- very good pastoral care
- strong leadership
- very successful management of transition to the school
- excellent teamwork.

What should be improved

- incomplete information on students' destinations
- underdeveloped quality assurance systems.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the section on the dance course in the full report.

Students' views of the school

Students' views of the school were taken into account and are summarised below.

What students like about the school

- the high quality of teaching
- the close connections with the Birmingham Royal Ballet
- the new facilities
- the prestigious reputation of the school
- the very supportive staff
- the quality and range of food provided.

What they feel could be improved

- the length of the working day
- communications between vocational and academic staff
- the consistency of approach by teachers in some technical classes.

Part B: The dance course

Inspectors judged the provision to be outstanding (grade 1).

Strengths

- very high retention rates
- much very good and some outstanding teaching
- high standards of students' technical and performance skills
- much individual attention for students in class
- outstanding facilities
- outstanding professional performance experience of teaching staff
- productive links with the profession
- very good pastoral care.

Weaknesses

- There are no significant weaknesses.

Scope of provision

The school aims to provide training in classical ballet and allied dance forms to the highest possible standards. Successful students receive the national diploma in professional dance and study for additional qualifications at advanced subsidiary level (AS), advanced level (A), general certificate of secondary education (GCSE), or in information and communications technology (ICT) and administrative skills. Core subjects include classical ballet, contemporary dance, jazz dance and choreography supported by a variety of allied dance styles. Vocational studies are supported by contextual studies, a *sthenos* programme to develop strength and muscularity, and options for external syllabus qualifications.

Achievements and standards

The school has re-developed its curriculum with the emphasis on classical ballet to reflect its new association with the Birmingham Royal Ballet company. Students' standards of work in class are extremely high, particularly in the current first and second year cohorts. In one second year ballet lesson, for example, the students displayed a beautifully controlled sense of line, excellent carriage of the torso and *ports de bras*, and a refined musicality as they moved powerfully through space. In a first year choreography lesson the students showed a remarkable maturity of creative imagination, working independently of their teacher. In a third year men's repertoire lesson students achieved a high level of technical competence combined with a distinctive sense of performance. First year students in a contemporary lesson showed an advanced sense of balance and control of weight in sequences

moving rapidly across the floor. Third year jazz students displayed good core strength and a mature sense of style in an assessment lesson, while their first year equivalents in their first assessment opportunity adapted to unfamiliar techniques with precision and alacrity.

Retention rates are excellent and for 2004/05, were 94.5%. Owing to the re-focusing of the curriculum, the employment profile for recent graduates does not yet fully reflect the school's new classical focus, although at the time of inspection, two third year male dancers had been offered contracts with the Birmingham Royal Ballet.

Quality of education and learning

The majority of teaching observed was very good and some was outstanding. Teachers demand a professional focus and very high technical standards from their students. Most classes are small in number, enabling students to receive detailed individual guidance and direction. Students in technique classes are driven to use their physical potential to the maximum. Their teachers require a passionate commitment to the work in hand. They expect, and receive, undivided attention from their students. Their corrections are apposite and constructive. The staff are inspirational role models and have a deep knowledge of their individual subjects. Many are highly accomplished and critically acclaimed performers with international reputations and offer a wealth of experience to their students.

The new purpose built campus offers outstanding facilities for dance training and performance, academic teaching and residential accommodation. Seven dance studios and a 250-seat studio theatre are used to maximum effect for technique classes as well as performances. It converts easily into a very large studio space. There is an ICT centre with 30 networked computers, a library, and catering facilities that offer students three hot or cold meals daily. A large team of musicians accompany lessons. Full-time nurses are available in the medical centre 24 hours a day and two physiotherapists offer daily cover. General practitioners offer surgeries twice a week and a physiotherapy and exercise suite is being developed. Thirty places are available to students in converted boarding accommodation nearby. In addition to the highly qualified permanent teaching staff, guest teachers from the profession give lectures, workshops and master classes.

Assessment procedures are thorough and rigorous. Students are formally assessed once a year in their core subjects of classical ballet, contemporary, jazz and choreography. Visiting professionals sit on formal assessment panels. Informal assessments occur twice yearly in the autumn and summer terms. On these occasions students are encouraged to evaluate their own work. They assess their own progress before the teacher does the same. Both evaluations are then discussed at tutorials. In response to their formal assessments students receive two detailed written reports every year incorporating both technical and artistic qualities and each student has a personal interview with the artistic director.

Since the move to Birmingham in 2004, the curriculum has been modified to reflect the new association with Birmingham Royal Ballet. The demands of classical technique have been strengthened with more *pas de deux*, virtuosity and repertoire classes. The allied dance styles in the curriculum offer a balanced response to the current needs of the dance profession. The majority of classes are of sufficient length to allow students time to concentrate and work in detail on corrections. A recent increase in the proportion of male students makes the

management of *pas de deux* classes less problematic. At the time of inspection the contextual studies programme was still being developed and there remain some inconsistencies of practice.

The school offers students a good variety of performance opportunities during the course. Birmingham Royal Ballet operates an apprenticeship scheme for third year students which gives them opportunities to perform with the company. The school is also developing collaborative links with the local community. Students recently performed in *Eugene Onegin* with the Midland Music Makers, in *Carmen* with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and in *Half a Sixpence* with the Birmingham School of Acting. They also perform regularly in the school's well-equipped studio theatre, most recently in a production to mark the school's official opening.

The audition procedure is thorough. The primary criteria are aptitude, professional potential and individual commitment. The criteria used for selection are fair and objective. Candidates undergo a physical examination to determine their suitability for the rigours of the course. Academic background plays no part in the selection process but the learning support offered to students whose needs are subsequently identified is exemplary. Students who are entirely new to the school would benefit from earlier screening for literacy or numeracy learning needs.

Pastoral care for students is very good. For those students living in school accommodation a 'houseparent' provides initial support. Induction to the school is thorough; students are given clear information about the school's procedures and about personal health, safety and well-being, including topics such as drugs awareness and bullying. Individual student tutorials take place at the end of all assessments; student's work is analysed and targets for development are set. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or language needs are given good support. Students are well-prepared for auditions into the profession through their contextual studies, which cover the preparation of a *curriculum vitae*, photographs, company contacts, taxes and Equity.

Part C: Leadership and management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be good (grade 2).

Strengths:

- very clear direction and purpose
- strong leadership
- very successful management of transition to new school
- very effective formal links with a major professional ballet company
- successful integration of vocational training and general education
- excellent teamwork.

Weaknesses:

- incomplete information on students' destinations
- underdeveloped quality assurance systems.

Since the last inspection in 2002 the school has changed almost every aspect of its provision. These changes have been meticulously planned and diligently implemented. The school has revised its main aim and re-designed its curriculum to focus on the training of students in classical ballet and allied dance forms. The long-term success of this strategy has yet to be demonstrated. An outstanding new campus has been created to meet the specific needs of a new kind of intake. The school has very purposefully repositioned itself in the classical dance training sector, and has established a clear direction for its development. Transitional arrangements have been complex and sensitive, and the principal has overseen a period of great change very successfully. He has displayed clear vision and strong leadership, because in many ways the process has been equivalent to establishing an entirely new school.

The school is very strongly led and well-managed. The senior management team have clear roles and responsibilities and have pursued appropriate priorities for the school's early development. They have established a highly experienced and skilled body of vocational teachers who are already operating very well as a team. Vocational training and general education are well-integrated, and there is a shared commitment by all staff to the school's aim to offer good academic education in support of vocational training. Communications are open and effective, and teachers meet twice weekly to discuss teaching and learning. There is good and growing creative collaboration between ballet teachers of different backgrounds and technical approaches. In response to students' concerns, the artistic director is monitoring teachers for consistency where this is desirable to implement the agreed artistic policy.

There are clear and comprehensive policies and codes of practice for equality of

opportunity, health and safety, child protection, discipline and grievance and other aspects of the management of the student body such as bullying. Staff and students are made fully aware of these and other core elements of the school's codes of conduct and values. The school provides well for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and it satisfies the requirements of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2000; specialist support is available from qualified staff. The school has a declared intention to attract more male students and students from more diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. A higher proportion of male students joined in 2005 and 23% of students in the current sixth form are male. A number of community initiatives are being pursued to expand the school's horizons and widen participation, but these are in the early stages of development.

At the end of their probationary year, and after regular monitoring by the artistic director, all teachers evaluate their own work and the contribution they make to the work of the new school. An appraisal programme for staff has been introduced this year which will more formally link observation, evaluation and performance to teachers' development and training. Teachers contribute at course level to the school's overall self-assessment report, which is a well-structured and largely accurate document, but which nonetheless omits to make evaluative comments on some aspects of provision. For example, there are no comments on students' recent employment destinations or the difficulty of tracking destinations over the last two years. However, the report generates a clear action plan which is monitored against the targets set. All staff have received detailed induction and training in essential aspects of the school's work, including child protection procedures and the equal opportunities policy. Lessons are observed informally by the artistic director and discussion about teaching and learning ensues; but lesson observations are not yet systematically recorded, graded or analysed. The views of students are actively sought and thoroughly analysed, and there is a student council which meets regularly and whose opinions are recorded.

The school has a governing body made up of 13 governors. Most of the governing body are also new to their roles, which they are discharging with a high level of commitment. They bring a wide range of skills and experience to bear on their work, and monitor the development of the school effectively. They are being particularly active in seeking to ensure that the school plays an increasingly prominent part in the cultural and educational life of the West Midlands. Good links already exist with many local schools, community and arts groups, and with professional companies. In particular, the close working relationship established with the Birmingham Royal Ballet is having a significant influence on the direction taken by the school, to the direct benefit of students. A number of students in their third year are invited to undertake apprenticeships with the company, giving them valuable experience of professional working in rehearsal and public performance. Members of the company regularly visit the school to address or teach students. Aspects of the new curriculum are a direct result of consultations with the company about their own training requirements.

The school's financial affairs are prudently managed. After a deficit year in which the school also took out a substantial loan in order to complete the capital funding needed for the new premises, the last year saw a return to a small operating surplus. With an increase in student numbers and dance and drama awards, the school is financially stable. This, together with its very high retention rates, commitment to small classes, and outstanding provision overall ensures that it represents very good value for money.