



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

Inspection Report
Elmhurst School for Dance
Dance & Drama College

Date of inspection: 25 November 2002

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Reference:

Contents

Section	Page
Basic information about the college	
Part A: Summary	1
Information about the college	1
How effective is the college?	1
Students' view of the college	2
Part B: The three-year professional dance course	3
Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors	3
Strengths	3
Weaknesses	3
Scope of provision	4
Achievements and standards	4
Quality of education and training	4
Part C: Leadership and management	7
Strengths	7
Weaknesses	7
Notes	9

Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Elmhurst School for Dance in association with Birmingham Royal Ballet
Type of college:	Dance school
Principal:	John McNamara
Address of college:	Heathcote Road Camberley Surrey GU15 2EU
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Name of reporting inspector:	Sandra Tweedie HMI
Date of inspection:	25 November 2002

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

Elmhurst School is an independent co-educational boarding school for dance, which offers an academic and vocational education to students from the age of 11, and prepares 18 to 19 year olds for professional dance careers. The school was established in the early part of the last century and has occupied its present site since 1922. In March 2002, it became an associate school of Birmingham Royal Ballet Company. The school plans a major move from Surrey to Birmingham in 2004.

Students in the senior school follow the national diploma course in professional dance, the first year of which is a foundation course. At present, they can choose to study classical ballet and contemporary dance, or jazz dance and commercial theatre. The jazz dance and commercial theatre element, however, is being discontinued. When the final cohort of students transfers to Birmingham in September 2004, the course will be focused on classical ballet. There are 65 female and five male students on the course, eight of whom are from overseas. Of the 70 students, 54 are in receipt of dance and drama awards.

The school is a non-profit making charitable trust and a company limited by guarantee. It has a board of ten governors. The principal is assisted by a bursar, the artistic director of dance, director of academic studies, and the head of boarding and pastoral care. The post-16 curriculum is managed by the directors of the two sixth-form dance courses. Seven full-time teachers and 22 part-time teachers are employed on the vocational courses. There are five full-time administration staff. The school also employs two full-time and 14 part-time pianists.

How effective is the college?

Key strengths

- very good and outstanding teaching
- highly effective strategic management
- high technical standards
- high standards of performance in productions
- thorough pastoral and academic support
- effective staff appraisal.

What should be improved

- students' lack of confidence and maturity in class
- the quality of information used in setting targets for self-assessment.

Further aspects of provision requiring improvement are identified in the sections on individual subjects and courses in the full report.

Students' view of the college

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

What students like about the college

- good relationships between students and teachers
- highly effective use of video and feedback in assessment
- the caring environment
- guest teachers in jazz
- extra classes to catch up with work.

What they feel could be improved

- the degree of independence given to first and second-year students
- the amount of information provided about auditions
- the timing of auditions
- the number of guest teachers in ballet
- the proportion of male students in pas de deux classes
- the quality of catering at weekends.

Part B: The three-year professional dance course

Using the Common Inspection Framework, inspectors make overall judgements on curriculum areas and on the effectiveness of leadership and management using a five-point scale. The range of grades include: Outstanding (grade 1), Good (2), Satisfactory (3), Unsatisfactory (4), and Very Poor (5).

Inspectors judged the provision to be **outstanding (Grade 1)**.

Inspectors observed 15 classes.

Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Grade	Teaching	Learning
1	4	1
2	9	9
3	2	4
4	–	1
5	–	–
6	–	–
7	–	–

Key: The range of grades includes: Excellent (Grade1), Very Good (2); Good (3); Satisfactory (4); Unsatisfactory (5); Poor (6); and Very Poor (7).

Strengths

- very good and outstanding teaching
- high technical standards
- high standards of performance in productions
- thorough pastoral care
- good individual assessment of students
- excellent use of information technology (IT) in students' work
- excellent studio theatre for dance.

Weaknesses

- students' lack of confidence and maturity in class.

Scope of provision

1. The three-year vocational dance course has two strands: classical ballet and contemporary dance, and jazz dance and commercial theatre. The classical ballet and contemporary dance strand covers ballet, pointe work, classical repertoire, pas de deux, contemporary, contemporary repertoire and character. There are also optional classes in jazz, singing, drama and tap. The jazz dance and commercial theatre strand covers jazz dance, ballet, contemporary, tap, choreography, musical theatre repertory, drama and singing. Students on both strands of the course study anatomy, physiology and health, plus body conditioning. In contextual studies, students are given advice on nutrition, preparation for audition, health and safety, tax and the benefits of joining the British Actors Equity. They can also take General Certificate of Education (GCE) advanced subsidiary (AS) and advanced (A) levels during their time at the school. Throughout the vocational dance course, students keep a folder of information containing subject-related articles, reviews written by students, and tutorial and contextual dance study notes. Students have many opportunities to travel to London and the regions to see performances.

Achievements and standards

2. Standards of work are high, particularly in classical ballet. The technical abilities displayed in this discipline are impressive throughout the three years. The dancers use their feet well, have controlled extensions and well-centred torsos. Most have excellent control in their pirouettes and several students possess outstanding all-round techniques. Standards within the jazz dance and commercial theatre course are more variable in contemporary dance and jazz, although Graham technique floor work showed energy and flow. Occasionally students lacked confidence and a mature approach to learning. In some jazz classes, students were inattentive; in others they were well focused and the teacher's insistence on detail meant that they were learning effectively. In a tap class, the individual students practised intently before the teacher's arrival and concentrated on correcting each other's work. The performance standards displayed in the annual productions are highly professional. Productions are very good and performances are enhanced by beautiful costumes and lighting. Retention rates are average for a course of this rigorous nature. Students succeed in securing employment related to their training. Recent graduates have joined Birmingham Royal Ballet; the English National Ballet; the Vienna Festival Ballet; a European tour of *Footloose*; the USA Ballet Company, Illinois; *Spirit of the Dance*; and celebrity cruise ships. Others have transferred to higher education or vocational training courses.

Quality of education and training

3. The majority of teaching is very good and some is outstanding. Classes are well structured, and teaching focuses effectively on each discipline and its particular requirements. Teachers use a variety of analogies to illustrate abstract concepts. In a contemporary dance class, for example, the teacher talked of 'carving the shape in space' encouraging students to think in terms of 'resistance' rather than adopting poses passively. In a male ballet class, the teacher recalled a popular razor blade commercial to illustrate the sharpness needed in a particular movement. The feedback given to students in a minority of classes was unnecessarily negative, and the lack of encouragement affected the confidence of some

students. Although courses concentrate on the dance disciplines, the supporting studies are also well taught. In addition to classical pointe work, pas de deux and virtuosity classes relating to ballet and contemporary dance, singing and drama are used to increase the employment prospects of the more commercially focused dancers. Students are given the opportunity to take GCE AS and A levels, as well as some external qualifications, and these are scheduled in such a way as to ensure that they do not interfere with vocational training. The timetable is well planned. Students are given 20-minute breaks between classes. Students benefit from classes given by visiting choreographers. The closer association with Birmingham Royal Ballet has led to workshops conducted by the company's director and his associates.

4. Student support is good. For the first two years of the course, students live in one of the two school boarding houses. There are approximately 30 students to each house, with a full-time tutor and a 'housemother' on duty. All meals are provided by the school in a large communal dining room. In the third year, students move into flats near the school which are often 'passed on' from one student to another. A nurse is on duty at the school day and evening, and is the first point of call for attending to injured or ill students and keeping track of injuries. When necessary, students are referred to the local doctors' surgery. A physiotherapist, who works at the surgery, monitors injuries closely and meets regularly with staff. Students have weekly tutorial meetings, at which they discuss health and nutrition, and other issues of concern to them, such as care of pointe shoes and preparation for audition.

5. At present, the school is based in a number of buildings, mainly dating from the last 40 years, which are grouped round a large early twentieth century house. There are eight dance studios, all of which are adequate in size, and each of which are equipped with pianos and sound equipment, mirrors and a sprung floor. All studios are well heated. The school has a well-equipped and well-used IT room. Students enter IT competitions to improve their computer skills. The 232-seat theatre is an excellent performing area for dance. The lack of technical equipment noted in the last inspection report is to be addressed in the impending move to Birmingham. The library has been extensively improved and its stock extended since the last inspection. There is an excellent range of dance-related books and videos. Students are provided with a suggested reading list at the beginning of each year.

6. The audition process is very thorough. Potential students have an orthopaedic examination and participate in a ballet class. Applicants invited to a second audition are given information relating to their career aspirations. Students from the lower school audition for the upper school course. The auditions are judged by a panel of core staff using well-defined criteria.

7. Assessment procedures are thorough. Students are assessed in each of their chosen disciplines: ballet, repertoire, pas de deux, contemporary, jazz, tap, drama and singing. They also fill in self-assessment forms. Assessments are videoed and students find the feedback on their videos very helpful. After their assessments, students meet individually with members of staff to plan how they might improve their work. Students receive grades for their work on a two-termly basis.

8. Staff are well qualified and many have well-established careers. Most of the teachers have substantial teaching experience. As part of a new staff development scheme, three teachers have been funded to visit America to observe and take classes.

9. There are opportunities for students to perform during the course. There are two productions a year, one classical and one jazz, involving both singing and drama. The productions are staged in the Studio Theatre at the school and London agents are invited to join the audience. Students also audition for the English National Ballet and Birmingham Royal Ballet productions and for Christmas pantomimes.

Part C: Leadership and management

Inspectors judged leadership and management to be **outstanding (Grade 1)**.

Strengths

- highly effective strategic management
- good operational management and administration
- effective quality assurance procedures
- effective staff appraisal
- excellent teamwork of staff in maintaining high standards.

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of data in self-assessment.

10. Strategic management is highly effective. In March 2002, the school became an associate school of Birmingham Royal Ballet Company. At the time of inspection in November 2002, plans were being developed by the principal and governors, in association with the company, for the specifications for the new building and a review of curriculum effective from September 2004. A detailed feasibility study has been carried out. The board, principal and company are closely involved in implementing the planned move.

11. The school has a clear management structure. Operational management and administration are good. Roles and responsibilities are clearly understood, and there are written job descriptions for all staff. The senior management team comprises the principal, bursar, artistic director of dance, director of studies, and the head of boarding and pastoral care. Management procedures are carefully described in the staff handbook. The aims and objectives and values of the school are clearly defined, and there is comprehensive guidance and codes of practice for all aspects of work. Policies are regularly reviewed and updated.

12. Staff work closely and effectively as a team to maintain the high standard of provision. There are informal daily briefings and regular formal meetings at which minutes are taken and planned actions recorded. The senior management team meet weekly. The principal holds a meeting for all staff before the start of each term. At course level, academic and vocational staff hold separate meetings. Vocational staff discuss course content, production planning, teaching and students' progress. Although there is some overlap between issues raised in these weekly meetings, discussions are fruitful and students' progress is monitored thoroughly. The operational management of the dance courses is very good. The artistic director of studies for dance and the director of academic studies attend both of the weekly meetings to ensure that there is effective communication of important items between the staff teams. Staff find 'progress' meetings held half way through the term very useful in discussing trends in students' work and achievements. The school produces a regular newsletter for parents and guardians, and advises them about forthcoming events.

13. The school's equal opportunities policy and code of practice is detailed, and is clearly reflected in the arrangements for pastoral care and in teachers' interaction with students. The student handbook is very comprehensive. It includes, for example, statements on anti-bullying, sexual harassment and problem sharing. Auditions are conducted in a fair and objective way. There are appropriate appeals procedures for audition and for funding decisions. The ethnicity of applicants is monitored and analysed. The policy on students with specific learning difficulties is being revised. In deciding to relocate to Birmingham, the school aims to attract young people with a talent for dance from a wider cross-section of the community.

14. Since the last inspection, quality assurance procedures have been improved and are leading to significant improvements in staff appraisal and course design. Course directors keep detailed records on all aspects of provision. Annual course reviews are carried out by the artistic director of dance and the course director of jazz dance and commercial theatre. As a result of these reviews and students' responses to questionnaires, classes in jazz and tap have been introduced as options into the second year of the classical ballet course. Drama workshops have also replaced weekly classes.

15. An effective system of performance management for full-time staff was introduced in 2001, and is now being considered for those working part time. The artistic director of dance observes classes three times a year and subsequent discussions with individual staff on the outcomes of these observations are linked to staff development. Staff value the process highly. The school has received government funding for staff development and performance management. Several dance staff have taken the opportunity to make study visits to ballet schools and companies in America, and this has had a positive impact on the dance curriculum. The school has a two-day programme of staff training before the start of each academic year. Training has included lectures on specialist dance techniques, on how dancers learn and on maintaining health.

16. The school evaluates its work and has a self-critical approach. The self-assessment report was the second produced by the school. It is an informative document and draws upon an extensive range of evidence, including course reviews. It clearly identifies the school's strengths and weaknesses. The accompanying action plan gives firm deadlines for completing each action. Responsibilities for monitoring these actions are clearly designated. Existing data, such as the data on students' destinations, however, are not used sufficiently within the report. At the time of the inspection, staff had not read the final document. Staff do not have enough direct involvement in drawing up the self-assessment report.

17. Governors take a close interest in the school and attend many of the student performances. Membership of the board of governors has been extended from seven to ten members to reflect the new status and future development of the school. An artistic advisory committee has been set up to review all aspects of dance training, taking account of the aims of the school, national priorities and the ethos of Birmingham Royal Ballet Company. Members of the committee are drawn from the school and Birmingham Royal Ballet Company. The board of the school meets termly and receives regular reports from the principal on students' achievements.

18. The school manages its resources efficiently. Finances are monitored closely by the principal and bursar. Regular reports are made to the governors' finance committee. Budgets are delegated to the department heads based on the bids they submit for various curriculum requirements. The school secures value for money in the purchasing of resources.

Notes