



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

Inspection Report
Performers College
Dance & Drama College

Date of inspection: October 2002

© Crown copyright 2002. This report may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are reproduced verbatim without adaptation and on condition that the source and date thereof are stated.

College inspection reports are available on the OFSTED web site (www.ofsted.gov.uk).

Reference: XXX

Contents

Section	Page
Basic information about the college	
Part A: Summary	1
Information about the college	1
How effective is the college?	1
Key strengths	1
What should be improved?	1
Students' views of the college	2
Part B: The three-year professional dancers' course	3
Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors	3
Strengths	4
Weaknesses	4
Scope of provision	5
Achievements and standards	5
Quality of education and training	6
Part C: Leadership and management	9
Notes	10

Basic information about the college

Name of college:	Performers College
Type of college:	Performing arts college
Directors:	Brian Rogers Jan Rogers Mike Stephens Susan Stephens
Address of college:	2–4 Chase Road Corringham Essex SS17 7QH
Telephone number:	01375 672053
Fax number:	01375 672353
Name of reporting inspector:	David Hornbrook HMI
Date of inspection:	October 2002

Part A: Summary

Information about the college

Performers College, in Corringham near Basildon in Essex, is an independent further education college for the performing arts, specialising in musical theatre. The college was founded in 1988 by the four people who are still its owners and directors. The three-year, full-time, professional dancers' course leads to the award of the national diploma for professional dance (musical theatre). The college's provision also includes training in the teaching of dance and part-time evening and weekend classes for children.

At the time of the inspection in October 2002, there were 119 students on the three-year professional dancers' course. Twenty-eight of the 46 first-year students, 27 of the 39 second-year students and 27 of the 34 third-year students, were in receipt of Department for Education and Skills (DfES) awards.

New premises for the whole college are being built, but the college presently operates from six sites within ten minutes' walk of each other. In addition to the directors and a small core management team, there are 33 regular teachers. Guest teachers also visit the college from time to time. The four directors own the college as a partnership and run it collaboratively.

How effective is the college?

Key strengths

- much good and outstanding teaching
- good record of employment for graduates
- some outstanding individual performances
- good assessment of, and support for, students
- many opportunities for performance
- good links with employers and agents
- highly effective procedures for preventing injury and supporting those who are injured
- strong, collegiate leadership and management
- effective quality assurance procedures.

What should be improved?

- provision for information and communications technology (ICT)
- accommodation.

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

Students' views of the college

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

What students like about the college

- friendly relationships between staff, directors and students
- many opportunities for performance
- the range of different dance styles
- the wide range of knowledge and skills offered by different teachers
- the balance of the curriculum
- the sense of being part of a 'family'
- the college's responsiveness
- the demanding nature of the work in lessons
- the attention given to individual students.

What they feel could be improved

- changing and showering facilities
- the quality and size of the accommodation
- guidance on writing requirements
- the number of external examinations offered.

Part B: The three-year professional dancers' 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 16 classes. Classes were graded on a seven-point scale for teaching and learning.

Summary of grades awarded to teaching and learning by inspectors

Grade	Teaching	Learning
1	7	3
2	7	8
3	—	3
4	2	2
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

- much good and outstanding teaching
- good record of employment for graduates
- some outstanding individual performances
- good pastoral support
- thorough assessment and feedback to students
- good opportunities for students to rehearse and perform
- effective and useful links with employers and agents
- good use of contextual studies to support the curriculum
- highly effective procedures for preventing injury and injury support.

Weaknesses

- unsatisfactory ICT provision
- some inadequate accommodation.

Scope of provision

1. The college aims to provide a balanced training “that provides the necessary challenges and encourages standards that are obtainable and reflect (students’) intended profession”. The three-year course offers all-round training in dance, supplemented by training in singing and drama. Core subjects are dance, including jazz, ballet and tap; singing; and drama. Additional subjects include contextual studies, contemporary dance, gymnastics, weight training and body conditioning. All students are entered for the national diploma in professional dance (musical theatre). Students may also take external practical examinations in dance teaching. The college has its own theatrical agency, The Performers Agency, which operates from the main site.
2. There are many opportunities for students to perform in front of an audience. All students perform at least once a year in the college’s in-house music and drama productions. In addition, all students take part in the college’s annual summer show, held in a West End theatre. There are regular competitions and choreographic events, some of which take place in a local theatre. Final-year students may audition for The Performers Dance Company, which regularly performs at corporate shows and charity events in London and overseas. A few students undertake professional engagements while at the college, but the days allowed for such activities are limited and strictly monitored.

Achievements and standards

3. The standard of students’ work is high in all subjects. Students are focused, motivated and self-disciplined, and demonstrate ability in a range of appropriate techniques. Overall standards in ballet are satisfactory. First-year students are developing good dancing physiques, though some third-year female students lack core body strength. In tap, students dance expressively and, in jazz, they show high levels of energy and stamina. Students sing confidently together with good harmonic layering. Some are impressive solo singers. In a third-year singing tutorial, for example, a student tackled a difficult Sondheim solo with impressive ease. Drama students improvise scenes with confidence, but sometimes rely too much on stereotypical emotional responses. Students are developing their critical skills. Thoughtful self-evaluation was evident in both jazz and contemporary dance classes. Public performances are polished and well rehearsed, and provide effective vehicles for displaying students’ accomplishments. Students are able to create convincing characters in a wide range of dramatic styles and to project them to an audience confidently and with impressive energy. Some students are capable of outstanding individual performances. Throughout the course, students maintain portfolios containing diaries, self-evaluations, scripts and songs, and contextual studies support material. Many of the portfolios are excellent. Pass rates in external examinations are very good. Levels of attendance are high and students are punctual for classes.
4. Employment rates for graduating students are high. In 2002, 98% of those leaving entered dance-related employment. Over the past three years, students have joined major United States and European tours, and a few have gone into West End musicals. Others have successfully auditioned for summer seasons, cruise ships and television light entertainment. Retention has improved since the last inspection. About 80% of those who enrol complete their courses.

Quality of education and training

5. Almost all teaching is good or better. Much is outstanding. Ballet teachers are now paying appropriate attention to the development of students' body strength. In one ballet class, a teacher expertly related classical movements to anatomical references using questions, imagery and observations. In another, the teacher emphasised the correct use of breath to ease tension and to allow freedom of movement. In a jazz lesson, students learning basic technique were also required to produce an exacting contextual piece of writing. Contemporary dance teaching and body conditioning are particularly strong. In one contemporary class, the teacher explained the importance of thinking about the transition from one position to another to demonstrate the idea of physical intelligence in dance. A Pilates instructor skilfully used body conditioning and muscle memory to develop students' technical strengths. By getting the students to concentrate on the working of separate muscles, the teacher helped students to make best use of them in performance. In singing, clear distinctions are made between energy and volume, and appropriate attention is paid to phrasing, pronunciation, diction and clarity. The guidance students receive in classes is good. In all dance disciplines, there were many examples of direct and pertinent physical corrections of alignment and posture.

6. Assessment procedures work well and have been tightened considerably since the last inspection. Students receive regular formal and informal feedback on their progress. Formal yearly assessments in ballet, jazz, contemporary dance, singing and drama take place in the spring term. Male students are also assessed in gymnastics. Practical work is marked by at least two members of staff, with the class teacher contributing a coursework assessment. In the third year, assessments are made by a panel of teaching staff. Subject faculties ensure that students understand assessment criteria and procedures. Students complete a self-evaluation form in each subject which is then discussed in individual tutorials held on termly 'report days'. The discussions are used to offer guidance for future work in the subject. Students receive written copies of all assessments.

7. The professional dancers' course is well designed and has an appropriate breadth and balance. Ballet is taught as a core discipline. The relatively high percentage of male students on the course enables the college to provide a better pas de deux experience than many other colleges. Good communication between teachers leads to productive links between different elements of the curriculum. Lessons are of an appropriate length and the timetable makes it easy for students to move between classes and from site to site. Most students take additional external qualifications in dance teaching, but the college makes every effort to ensure that this does not have an adverse effect on their core work. From 2003, the college will be offering a one-year foundation course to raise the technical standards of students who, at audition, are judged unready for the three-year course. The college organises regular visits to the theatre. The choreography competition provides an opportunity for students to create their own dances, but choreography is not taught as part of the course. Visiting teachers from the musical theatre enhance the curriculum, and third-year students undertake a programme of professional employment skills.

8. Staff are suitably qualified. Part-time teachers have a wide range of professional teaching qualifications and most have relevant professional experience. In the music department, one tutor combines his work at the college with an ongoing involvement in a hit West End musical. One of the directors also works as a professional choreographer and director, and is able to provide students with useful work experience.

9. There are five studios on the main site. The college also uses accommodation in five other nearby venues. Not all of the studios are satisfactory. Some are too small for the number of students; some are cold and damp. Changing and showering facilities for students are inadequate and there are no facilities for teachers. There is no student common room, but students have access to a canteen in leased accommodation about ten minutes' walk from the main site. The sound equipment in the studios is satisfactory and there is adequate provision for live accompaniment. The fitness studio on the main site is well equipped and well used. Library facilities are adequate. Students have access to a small, well-maintained collection of books, videotapes and journals in the course co-ordinator's office. There are no ICT facilities at the college for students to conduct research or to word process their curricula vitae. The college has long been aware of these weaknesses in accommodation and resources, and directors have worked hard to provide appropriate new premises to which the college will move in 2003.

10. Each year, the college receives about 500 applications for places. The audition process is thorough. The standards set at audition are appropriate, selection criteria are understood by panel members and candidates, and decisions are properly recorded. Applicants perform ballet and jazz classes which are observed by a panel of staff and directors, including the physiotherapist. Candidates are asked to present short, pre-prepared pieces to assess their singing and drama skills. Successful applicants are recalled later in the same day for a physiological examination and an individual interview. Students appreciate the comprehensive and supportive induction they receive. New students are paired with volunteer mentors from the third-year to help them get to know the college. They also receive guidance from a visiting specialist on healthy eating and on general health and safety. During the induction week, students are placed in ballet and jazz groups based on their ability. All students are assessed for basic skills on entry, partly on the basis of their written evaluations of their induction experience.

11. On the course, students are very well supported. There is a tutor for each year group, to whom students may refer problems. There is also a student representative. Pastoral care is the responsibility of one of the directors who is a trained counsellor and all staff are available to give guidance to any student on request. Students speak highly of the support they receive. Since the last inspection, the college has successfully introduced learning support for students with basic needs, and the academic administrator has responsibility for training staff in the identification of students' learning needs. The process for recording absence is effective and any attendance problems identified are acted upon immediately. Injury procedures are very thorough and students' health and wellbeing are monitored closely. The physiotherapist visits the college twice a week and is extensively involved in injury prevention. He contributes to the planning of teaching, advises staff and observes students in classes. The Pilates programme is very effective. When they occur, injuries are recorded by the physiotherapist, staff are notified and students are expected to convey details of their injury to their class teachers.

12. Students are well prepared for the work they will do after leaving college. By the end of the second year, all students have completed a questionnaire about their career aims. In their third year, students are supported by staff in an individual programme of career development. Appropriate advice includes advice on the presentation of curricula vitae and photographs. The lack of word processing facilities on site, however, restricts the help which staff can give. At the end of their third year, The Performers Agency uses its extensive network of contacts in musical theatre to arrange a week of auditions for students. This network and the continuing involvement of directors in the industry are instrumental in finding employment for a large number of graduates.

Part C: Leadership and management

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

Strengths

- strong, collegiate leadership
- good strategic and operational management
- very effective communication between staff.

Weaknesses

- underdeveloped systems of analysis and evaluation.

13. The college was last inspected in November 2000. Since then, the college has addressed the issues raised in the inspection report and has made significant improvements. The new building, opening in 2003, is the most substantial of these and should rectify the accommodation and resources weaknesses. Other areas needing attention, such as equal opportunities and learning support, have been covered with support from the Standards Fund.

14. The directors work closely with senior managers and give strong, collegiate leadership to the college. Partnership, the involvement of staff and show business flair are the characterising features of an inclusive leadership style which is both supportive of staff and students, and effective. Strategic planning is good. The directors, the course co-ordinator and the heads of faculty are collectively involved in forward planning, guided by a two-year development plan. Strategic issues, such as those arising from the course review process, are placed on the agendas of meetings as and when appropriate. The operational management of the course is good. The course is very capably administered, records are properly maintained and systems are working effectively. The four directors each take responsibility for a different aspect of the college's work and have devolved responsibility for the management of the professional dancers' course to the course co-ordinator who, in turn, manages the faculty heads of ballet, jazz, singing and drama. The co-ordinator and faculty heads are responsible for the day-to-day management of the curriculum. Job descriptions for all managers are in preparation.

15. Communications are good. There are regular and carefully recorded meetings at all levels of the organisation. All staff receive agendas and copies of appropriate minutes, and consider managers to be supportive and approachable. Directors meet twice a month with senior managers, once to discuss forward planning and once for operational matters. There are weekly staff meetings, attended by all those working on that day, and full staff meetings, which teachers and accompanists are paid to attend, at the beginning of each term. Faculties meet twice a term and heads of faculty meet once a month as a group with the course co-ordinator. Agendas for most meetings focus on operational matters and there are usually opportunities to discuss issues relating to individual students.

16. The course co-ordinator and the academic administrator have responsibility for quality assurance. There are well-developed and effective processes for gathering information about the college's performance. These include regular lesson observation, staff appraisal, staff and student questionnaires, feedback from student representatives and annual course reviews. Feedback from staff and students is evaluated at staff meetings and changes are made as a result. The lessons observed are graded and the grades shared with the teachers concerned. Although the college is conscientious in the gathering of evidence, and there is tangible evidence of consequent improvements, systems of evaluation and analysis procedures are underdeveloped. For example, patterns of student employment and the outcomes of lesson observations are not analysed in a way which would enable the college to identify and address specific weaknesses relating to students' achievements and the quality of teaching. As a result, the self-assessment report, which is in other respects accurate and detailed, does not make enough use of the statistical evidence available in formulating key judgements. Funds are set aside for the further professional development of staff and a comprehensive programme of staff development has been developed following the last inspection. Managers have had a course of management development and there has been training for teachers in the use of digital versatile disk (DVD) recording equipment, singing and literacy support.

17. The college's policies on equality of opportunity, alcohol and drug abuse, and health and safety are clearly outlined for staff and students in their respective handbooks. The attention paid to equality of opportunity has significantly increased since the last inspection and there are now subsidiary policies on sexual harassment, and threatening and dangerous behaviour. The college has begun to collect information on the ethnic origins of its students, but does not yet analyse it. Although there is no access to many studios for those with disabilities, a disabilities policy signals the college's commitment to the appropriate treatment of applicants with disabilities. The handbooks outline the respective responsibilities of teachers and students. There is a code of conduct for staff and a student protocol covering appropriate behaviour in classes and general matters of courtesy. There are also satisfactory arrangements for complaints and grievances. The health and safety policy adequately covers staff responsibilities and procedures for accidents and emergencies.

18. The college manages its resources efficiently. Its financial affairs are managed carefully by one of the directors who, with the help of the college accountant, maintains a database of up-to-date financial information. The directors do not meet regularly to discuss finance, but are alerted to any emerging issues and have access to financial information at any time. Budgets are set for productions, and teachers may apply to the course co-ordinator for teaching materials. The college takes steps to secure value for money when purchasing supplies and services.

Notes