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News for Dance Educators/Teaching Artists: PA Direct Path Dance Certification

by Ellen Gerdes

This summer, House Bill 1642 (also known as the School Code Bill) was signed into law, which included legislation directing the Pennsylvania Department of Education to establish direct path dance teacher certification for PK-12th grades in Pennsylvania's public schools. On Tuesday, January 17th, 2023, it was made official. PA now belatedly joins 38 other states that already have direct-path dance certification. This legislation is the effect of an impressive 60 years of advocacy efforts by PA dance educators (see the timeline [here](#)), most recently led by members of the non-profit [PaDEO](#) (Pennsylvania Dance Education Organization, a state affiliate of the National Dance Education Organization). The PaDEO team of dance education advocates, led by board president Dr. Miriam Giguere (Drexel University), sought to demonstrate how preparing dance teachers with dance-specific content and pedagogical knowledge would benefit teachers, students, and schools across the state. PaDEO created social media campaigns and organized a press conference at the capitol in Harrisburg, where dance students performed and PaDEO members taught a tap dance lesson to two PA representatives. (Watch the press conference [here](#)). At the capitol, PaDEO members also met with lawmakers in extremely brief meetings. In preparation, they rehearsed their persuasive talking points ahead of time. "Quick, you have two minutes to tell me how dance education is different from physical education!"

In order to petition the Department of Education to establish direct path dance teacher certification, PaDEO conducted needs assessment research with David Dietz (arts consultant for the PA Department of Education). Their report revealed that dance already exists in many PA schools, even those without dance programs—such as in extracurricular musical theater or as integrated with other school subjects. They found overwhelming support for certified teachers in their survey of urban, suburban, rural, and cyber schools in PA. Out of 100 schools that responded to the survey, 87% believed certified dance teachers would be advantageous. Schools cited the potential of raising the level of dance instruction to music and visual art instruction, developing elective dance courses and pre-

professional training, and creating movement curriculum for special needs students, among others. The needs assessment research also learned that at least 29 colleges/universities would consider offering certification programs at the undergraduate and/or graduate levels.

As a dance professor and former dance teaching artist in Philadelphia schools, I have been watching this story develop with excitement. I spoke with Dr. Monica Frichtel (Assistant Professor, University of Delaware) who is PaDEO's board treasurer and advocacy committee chairperson.

Ellen Gerdes: Can you explain to our readers, what exactly is direct-path dance teacher certification?

Monica Frichtel: Direct path dance certification is a route for PK-12 educators to be certified to teach dance in public schools, comparable to how math teachers, ELA teachers, music teachers and art teachers are certified. For the past 30 years, dance educators have had to complete coursework and obtain certification in Physical Education, Communications, or Vocational Education rather than in dance. Dance educators will benefit from preparation and professional development addressing current dance field specific trends, practices and thinking about dance education.

E: Does an educator need a college degree or a major in dance to be eligible for certification?

M: Teachers in PA do have to hold a bachelor's degree to teach. The competencies do not require that a candidate majors in dance, but "must have a combination of coursework and experience equivalent to the curriculum of a dance major, minor, or relevant professional experience in dance." Ultimately, it will be the certifying colleges/universities that will determine how candidates demonstrate their qualifications.

Something PaDEO is really cognizant of is that you can be a great dance educator without having been a professional dancer, which is what the vocational education certification basically required. It was the equivalent of saying a PE teacher needs to have been a professional athlete or an English teacher needs to have written a best-selling book. This is just not true. Education is an art in and of itself that requires subject-specific content and pedagogical knowledge.

E: How will this change the landscape of dance education at the higher education level and at the PK-12 level in PA?

M: Now that a direct path dance certification has been established in the state of PA, institutions of higher education are able to establish dance certification programs. They can do this by demonstrating that they will prepare candidates to meet state competencies for dance education as detailed on the [PA Department of Education's website for dance certification](#). Most likely, colleges with established dance and teacher education programs will consider the possibility of creating and offering routes to certification at either the undergraduate, graduate or post-baccalaureate levels.

Once educators begin completing certification programs, PK-12 schools and districts will have more opportunities to hire high-quality dance educators as certified teachers in their schools.

E: What does all this mean for teaching artists? Especially part-time teaching artists who might not want to teach full-time at a PK-12 school?

M: A concern that has been raised by teaching artists is whether or not there will be space for teaching artists to continue to work in schools. In 2019, PaDEO found that most teaching artists are brought into schools by arts educators. PaDEO believes that as more dance educators find opportunities to work in schools, more teaching artists will be utilized within the schools.

E: Can you describe the dance teacher competencies that will be required for certification? What was the process for writing these?

M: The proposed dance teacher competencies were drafted by a small writing group from the advocacy committee, including Rosemary Battista, Miriam Giguere, Kim Maniscalco, Dale Schmid, and myself. We followed competency guidelines established by the department of education and used PA Visual Arts and Music Competencies as examples.

Teacher competencies are divided into three major components. The first part is knowing the content. This has to do with dance-specific material, ideas essential to our field of dance. There are eight different categories of content knowledge listed in the competencies—techniques, movement practices, aesthetics and criticism, history, composition, technology, production, and professional application. As per the guidelines, technical proficiency is not specific to certain styles of dance, but rather, “in a minimum of one dance form such as, but in no way limited to Caribbean, Hip Hop, Jazz, Tap, and other African diasporic forms; Ballet, Ballroom, Flamenco, Modern, Musical Theatre, and other Western forms; Bharatnatyam, Chinese Traditional, and forms from other Asian and Middle Eastern diasporas; and Improvisational, Folk, Traditional, and Classical forms, Creative movement, and General understanding of somatic practices.”

The second section has to do with instruction and assessment as it pertains to dance. The final section is professionalism, having to do with school and community-based knowledge. This is fairly standard across fields and it is defined by the state. The competencies ([Dance PK-12 Program Framework Guidelines](#)) have gone through several rounds of review and revision by the PaDEO advocacy committee and dance educators throughout the state. A statewide task force was assigned to the final review by the Department of Education.

E: What do you feel you've learned about advocating for dance education from this process?

M: Change can happen! It takes motivation, determination, collaboration, persistence, and some luck. Those who have been intricately involved in recent efforts recognize the pathways established by previous leaders over decades—allowing us to make dance certification a reality in Pennsylvania in 2023. I have also been reminded that there are really wonderful people in this world who have experienced humanity through engagement with the arts and feel grateful to make a difference for future generations.

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