

SUCCESS STORY: Growing Dance Educators Through Collaborative, Curated Professional Learning



Support Effective Educators and School Leaders

The State of Dance Educator Professional Development

Across the country, dance educators often find themselves on an island, teaching solo in their buildings, juggling logistics-heavy performance schedules. They are rarely offered professional development that speaks to their art form, students or unique classroom contexts. Too often, the professional development available to arts educators is either overly generic or focused primarily on visual art and music, with dance educators left to adapt strategies not designed for them. Many dance teachers have had to translate professional development content from other disciplines, attend generalist workshops or seek external resources on their own time and dime. This reality has contributed to high burnout and limited program growth, particularly in schools with limited funding or arts leadership.

In response to this gap, I created the [Growing Dance Educator](#) (GDE) professional development model. This year-round professional learning framework supports the needs of K-12 dance educators through collaborative, responsive and culturally relevant learning experiences. Rather than operate from a top-down “expert” perspective, GDE is built on the foundation of partnership with educators, pulling from their insights and tailoring support to their classrooms, communities and career stages.

There’s no roadmap for teaching dance in K-12 settings, especially for solo teachers. My job is not to come in with all the answers, but to create space to elevate teacher voices, understand their challenges and then curate the support they actually need to thrive.

Each school year begins with a needs-based assessment, including surveys, reflective conversations and informal interviews with dance teachers. From these insights, I curate monthly learning opportunities based on what educators actually need: time management strategies during concert season, assessment tools aligned with standards, engagement strategies, culturally relevant choreographic projects and more. Even if you don’t have customized professional development that includes an assessment, what’s holding you back from creating one on your own? You know

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your needs as well as what you are lacking in your program. Begin keeping a record of that so you can reflect and improve. If there are dance teachers in areas near you, you also could do this together as accountability and support.

GDE's core content rotates through five professional learning pillars:

1. Logistics: Classroom setup, scheduling and planning tools
2. Engagement: Culturally responsive instruction and movement-based strategies
3. Advocacy: Data tracking, storytelling and school board communication
4. Performance: Concert planning, tech integration and production
5. Sustainability: Wellness, program vision and long-term planning

The Programs

Recognizing this void and informed by my experience as both a Broadway performer and public-school dance teacher, I created this professional learning model that centers dance educators not only as specialists but as vital contributors to student success, cultural preservation and school climate. Beyond monthly support, GDE also partners with districts to host curated in-person Dance Days. These full-day professional learning experiences allow dance teachers to gather, recharge and collaborate.

In Atlanta Public Schools and beyond, Dance Days have included:

- Morning movement sessions led by university partners
- Workshops on choreography, technology and composition
- Roundtables on student voice and concert programming
- Vision-setting and wellness planning to prevent burnout

The GDE-curated Dance Days have become essential touchpoints throughout the school year for participating districts. These events provide teachers with a space to reconnect to their artistry and collaborate on authentic classroom practices. By combining technical workshops with peer-led discussions and reflective planning, Dance Days prioritize both professional growth and personal renewal. These days are often hosted in partnership with universities or local theaters, providing exposure to postsecondary occupations and broader career pathways for students.



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There are three major initiatives under the GDE umbrella that deepen its impact: From the Stage to the Classroom, the LEAP Lab and the Rejuvenate & Reimagine Dance Educator Retreat.

From the Stage to the Classroom connects transitioning professional dancers—many from historically underrepresented communities—with K-12 students through guest teaching and co-teaching experiences. Artists bring authentic, culturally diverse styles into classrooms, showing students how a professional career in dance is possible and powerful.

In one instance, a professional dancer from a touring Broadway production taught a masterclass at a Title I high school, linking professional practice with academic standards. Students saw themselves in the artist and asked questions about training, resilience and self-expression. Several students later expressed interest in pursuing careers in arts education or performance. For dancers nearing the end of their performance careers or in transition, this initiative provides a meaningful path toward teaching, with mentoring support built in.

The LEAP Lab (Logistics, Engagement, Advocacy, Production Design) is a residency-style program where students lead dance projects from concept to performance. Through roles in choreography, lighting, rehearsal planning and marketing, students gain leadership and production skills, while educators receive a sustainable framework to reuse annually.

In one LEAP Lab residency, students created original choreography based on social justice themes and collaborated on costume design, lighting cues and program marketing. One middle school dance educator noted that her students were more invested in rehearsals because they had ownership of every creative choice. The LEAP Lab not only improves student engagement but also strengthens advocacy for dance programs by demonstrating student leadership and production value to parents and administrators.



The latest program under the GDE umbrella is the inaugural **Rejuvenate & Reimagine Dance Educator Retreat**, which took place in September 2025. This was a professional development event in the form of a half-day. The purpose was to help dance educators reimagine their school year with boundaries, rejuvenated lesson plans and resources. Rejuvenate & Reimagine is my response to what dance educators deeply need but rarely receive—a sacred pause. Teachers said it was their opportunity for creative renewal, collaboration and growth.

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Impact and Outcomes: The Ripple Effect

Since its launch, Growing Dance Educator has collaborated with dozens of teachers across districts and educational settings. Participants report renewed confidence in concert planning, clearer grading tools and stronger community among dance colleagues. More importantly, dance educators who once felt overlooked now feel seen and heard. The program has also sparked leadership growth; some participants now mentor others, lead professional development sessions and present at conferences. The impact stretches far beyond classrooms and into school culture, arts visibility and student success.

A Call to Action: Trust the Teachers

The most effective professional development doesn't begin with a contract—it begins with a conversation. Teachers are already reflecting on what's working and what's missing. Districts that trust teachers to co-create learning plans or allocate funds for teacher-selected professional development report greater engagement and better outcomes.

Investing in educator's voice, time and leadership is among the most strategic choices a school system can make, especially in an era of teacher turnover and burnout, particularly for specialists like dance educators.

The Road Ahead

GDE continues to evolve. Plans include asynchronous certification modules, deeper wellness integration and regional partnerships for in-person cohort models. As new teachers enter through alternative pathways and as professional dancers seek teaching careers, there's a growing demand for personalized, relevant and joyful arts education training.

The success of GDE lies not only in its structure, but in its core belief that dance teachers are already experts. With the right support, they can lead from within, sustain their programs and empower generations of student artists and leaders. By elevating educator voice and offering strategic, joyful support, the Growing Dance Educator model is redefining what it means to grow and sustain arts education.

In response to the emotional and physical fatigue many dance teachers face, GDE is planning to make the Rejuvenate & Reimagine retreat a yearly convening. The retreat is designed as a holistic experience that blends restorative movement, boundary setting and lesson planning. Expanding it to an annual convening will allow the retreat to offer space for teachers to reflect on their impact, collaborate on dance units for the year ahead and re-engage with their artistic identities among peers who understand their lived realities.

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Together, these components make the Growing Dance Educator a model that can be replicated across districts with varying resources. Its flexible delivery, combining in-person, virtual and asynchronous options, ensures that dance teachers in urban and rural settings alike can access meaningful, ongoing support. Most importantly, the model proves that when teachers are heard, supported and celebrated, the ripple effect touches every student they teach.



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Acknowledgments

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Tamara Irving is the founder of TMI Design & Consulting, a creative agency that uses movement-based wellness, coaching, and strategy to empower educators, students, and organizations. An award-winning educator and former Broadway performer, Tamara brings over 20 years of experience to her work. Through signature programs like MotionWorks, Growing Dance Educator, LEAP Lab, Dance Stories ATL, and From the Stage to the Classroom, TMI supports sustainable leadership, creative teaching and meaningful storytelling.



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About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

