

Certified to Teach

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March / April 2025 Issue



Tracy Inman, director of the new Ailey Teacher Certification Program: Ailey Horton Technique, leading class



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What's behind the recent surge in dance teacher certifications—and should you get one?

BY JENNIFER HEIMLICH

Jane Vorburger seemed well-qualified to teach dance back in 2008, after dancing with American Ballet Theatre for five years, getting a master's degree in dance from New York University, and teaching at ABT and top studios like Steps on Broadway. But there was something else she felt she needed: a dance teacher certification.

"When I look at my classes from when I first started teaching, they were not good," she admits; performance expertise doesn't always translate to teaching expertise. She became certified in all levels of ABT's National Training Curriculum in 2008 and 2009, then got another certification from the 92NY Dance Education Laboratory in 2010. Through these programs,

she learned the fundamentals of age-appropriate and skill-appropriate development, and creating strong relationships with students. "That information has been the foundation of how I developed my teaching," she says.

While nonprofit education organizations like Dance Masters of America and Dance Educators of America have long offered certificates, and training programs like the Royal Academy of Dance have for decades required them, today there is a vast array of certification opportunities across many parts of the country—and the dance industry. You can get a street-dance teacher certification from Rennie Harris University. The Ailey School is about to launch an Ailey Horton technique ▶

Nir Avreli, Courtesy The Ailey School



Here and right: Classes at California State University, Long Beach, which launched its dance teacher credential program last year



Jane Vorburger, who has two certifications, teaching at the University of Oklahoma summer intensive

certification program. Many colleges, including California State University, Long Beach, are starting to offer certifications tied to state-specific K-12 qualifications.

It's no coincidence that more of these programs are popping up post-pandemic. One of the reasons is practical: Dance organizations, stretched thin after COVID-19 shutdowns, are testing out new revenue streams. "They are moneymakers," says Susan McGreevy-Nichols, executive director of the National Dance Education Organization, which has offered a Certificate in Dance Education since 2015. "People have to run programming to keep their doors open."

COVID also taught us how to operate virtually. While some certifications have in-person components (and some are completely in-person), many allow students to complete courses from anywhere, and often at their own pace. That's made programs more appealing and affordable, allowing artists to sign up without worrying about travel or taking time off from work. "People have all the equipment, the experience now—not only the people running the programs, but the people taking the programs," McGreevy-Nichols says. ▶

From top: Gregory R.R. Crosby, Courtesy California State University, Long Beach; Courtesy University of Oklahoma

Gregory R.R. Crosby, Courtesy California State University, Long Beach

California's PK-12 Dance Teacher Boom

In California, certification programs are responding to a new demand for credentialed dance teachers. The state passed Prop 28 in 2022, which provides additional funding (to the tune of \$900 million in 2024) for arts education programs in PK-12 public and charter schools. There's now a race to make sure there are enough credentialed dance teachers, so that the money goes to jobs in dance.

California dance instructors in public schools used to teach under a physical education credential. But the dance credential, reinstated in 2016, trains teachers in this exact subject matter, and for this exact environment. "Teaching dance in the public school sector is very different from the private sector," says Zakiya Atkinson, coordinator of the dance credential program at California State University, Long Beach, which launched in 2024.

Atkinson believes this is a critical moment to increase equity in dance education by expanding access beyond private studios. "There tend to be fewer dance programs in public schools than there are for other arts," she says. But, she adds, a credentialed dance teacher can "walk in the door with all the things that they need to know to provide an inclusive, culturally responsive, culturally sustaining, and supportive dance education for all students."



Rennie Harris University core faculty, from left: Olivia O'Hare, Paula Webster, Nubian Néné, and Dr. Ayo Walker

The vast majority of dance teaching positions (outside of public schools) *don't* require a certification. And most dancers don't have lots of disposable income to spend on continuing education. But many educators want the extra credibility that a certification credit gives them. "Any certification you can get is always beneficial for an artist, because our work is not taken as seriously as other professions," says Angelina Ponzio Labate, who was part of the inaugural cohort at Rennie Harris University, which launched in 2021. Tracy Inman, director of the new Ailey Teacher Certification Program: Ailey Horton

Technique, adds that a certification shows that an instructor has gone through verified channels to acquire the knowledge they're passing on.

Certifications also impart a certain gravitas to the dance techniques they cover. For instance, part of the reason Inman wanted to launch the Ailey Horton certification was to "honor the legacy of Lester Horton and Alvin Ailey, the connection they had," he says. Or, as the Rennie Harris University program emphasizes, codifying the way street dance is taught ensures it's grounded in historical context and doesn't get watered down—sending a message to the world: *It matters that we get this right.*

Certification programs can be expensive, and they don't automatically open doors to jobs the way a master's degree in education might. But having taught in many contexts, from K-12 to pre-professional training programs to higher ed, Vorburger says the information she learned through her certifications still informs her teaching today. It also gave her a community through which she still gets guest teaching gigs, lesson ideas, friendship, and support. "The value that I got per dollar, it's very much worth it," she says.

Labate says enrolling in a certification program has kept her learning and growing, deepening the pedagogical skills that help make her effective at the front of the studio. "I'm a student myself," Labate adds, "and I just want to be able to receive more so I can give more." ■

Jennifer Heimlich is a writer based in Boston.

What's Included?

Since there are no overarching requirements for what constitutes a dance teacher certification, programs vary widely. But many certifications go beyond steps and technique and into the methodologies behind developing a dance artist, covering topics like the science of childhood development and classroom management strategies. There are typically reading, writing, and lesson-planning assignments. Students might have group discussions or interactive activities on platforms like Google Classroom. Sometimes they're also required to complete a certain amount of student teaching.

Angelina Ponzio Labate, Courtesy Rennie Harris University