

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Megan Bridge

Dance Education: A Privilege in Public Schools?

by Megan Bridge

When I first moved to Kensington, broad expanses of blight struck fear in me every time I hopped off the subway at the Berks stop on the Market-Frankford El. But in 2010 a beautiful public high school opened on a parcel of land that was previously a vacant lot, signaling change for the neighborhood. A [\\$43-million-dollar endeavor](#), the building designed by SMP Architects to house the Kensington Creative and Performing Arts High School (KCAPA), was one of the [top ten projects](#) for the American Institute of Architects in 2012. With smart classrooms, roof gardens, and glass walls for natural light, the school feels airy and open, a great place to incubate young artists. The 2,000-square-foot dance studio would be a dreamy rehearsal space for any professional company. As a dancer, choreographer, and codirector of a young multidisciplinary performance group based just two blocks away, I started dreaming about all sorts of potential partnerships I could initiate at the school.

When I finally set foot inside KCAPA in 2012, I met Victor Colon, the dance department's head. Energetic, passionate about dance and the well-being of his students, Mr. Colon led the students in Latin dance (including bachata and salsa, his specialties), ballet, and some contemporary dance, all with openness and confidence. When I entered the classroom as a guest teacher to introduce John Cage's chance procedures to a group of inner-city teenagers, I fought a good fight to win their interest. Colon was my staunch advocate, helping me break through the typical teenager's apathy and skepticism, eventually mobilizing the students to participate with laughter and interest in the exercises.

I returned to work as a volunteer with these students a handful of times over the 2012–13 schoolyear. Colon and I wrote a grant proposal, and I was awarded a small amount of funding from the State of Pennsylvania to lead the students through a series of classes in dance composition.

By the time the funding was in place, however, the dance department...well...wasn't. Budget cuts forced the school's beloved principal Deborah Borges Carrera^[1] to rethink allocation of funds within the school and the dance department got the boot. Colon was relocated to an elementary school in Northeast Philadelphia. In trying to help me salvage the project that I was funded for, Carrera introduced me to Raheem Harrington, a then-23-year-old alumnus of the school^[2] who was being paid \$11 per hour to run an after-school dance program. Harrington also volunteered during school hours to provide a daily dance class for students in the absence of a paid teacher on staff. Just before the end of the schoolyear in 2014, I visited Harrington's class and offered a series of composition workshops. I struggled to gain the students' attention, let alone their willing participation, and felt unwelcome in their class. Whereas Colon's years of teaching experience and knowledge of the field helped bridge the gap between his students' expectations of what dance can be and the experimental approaches I brought to the table, the much-younger Harrington seemed as skeptical of my ideas as were his students.

My experience at KCAPA brings up many questions, none of which have easy answers. What gives me the authority to add to the students' curriculum? How does my whiteness and position of relative privilege interface with the racial and socioeconomic composition of the student body? Does my very presence in the classroom undermine the vital work that inner-city public school teachers are tirelessly performing for little financial reward?

I talked to colleagues who have done a lot of thinking about how their organization, the Mascher Space Cooperative, also located in Kensington, performs community outreach in local public schools. Mascher has created a successful partnership with the John Moffet School, their neighboring public elementary school, bringing students in to Mascher regularly for tap classes. According to Mascher-member Greg Holt, "all education should be about participation and creativity, and curiosity about the neighborhood spaces right next door that you might not otherwise go into." But Holt is wary of the larger trend of privately funded artists filling a gap in arts education in public schools because "this shifts the funding sources from public to private, and the work from certified teaching to charitable outreach. It's like a creeping charter school inching its way into public education. The agendas of private foundations drive the selection of programs, not the school system. And it relies on scattered artists hustling to make it happen."

Another big question for me was how to align my aesthetics with the actual needs and interests of the students. Reading about conditions in Philly public schools in [the notebook](#), a newspaper published as "an independent voice for parents, educators, students, and friends of Philadelphia Public Schools," made me feel like my energy would be better spent taking to the streets alongside protesters, or joining the battle in the state's courts, rather than trying to teach experimental dance composition to skeptical teens. Last year, on behalf of concerned parents, the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia (PILCOP) filed a lawsuit concerning curriculum deficiencies in the district. Amy Laura Cahn, a staff attorney at PILCOP, is quoted in *the notebook* as saying that the schools have "alarming levels of overcrowding such that teachers can no longer walk between desks to interact with individual students, increasingly limited curricular offerings, a distressing lack of counselors, and squalid and insufficient toilet facilities." With conditions like these, it's no wonder that hiring professional dance teachers in underfunded neighborhood schools isn't a top priority for the decision-makers who allocate funds.

KCAPA is a neighborhood school that happens to have an arts theme, not a magnet school like the original Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA) on South Broad Street. So, unlike CAPA, KCAPA does not require its students to audition or show a portfolio of work for entry; they must only demonstrate an interest in the arts. Derrick Savage, head of KCAPA's film and technology department, estimates that only about 20% of the school's 500 students are actively dedicated to an artistic practice or pursuing an artistic career. The rest are enrolled because it's a safe place to be.

Despite all this, KCAPA is working hard to keep offering dance to its students. Senior Jaleel McCoy, who is also a company member of Dance4Nia Repertory Ensemble's [Nia-Next](#) apprentice program, feels, as many do, that "a performing arts school is not a performing arts school if it has theatre, art, and music but not dance. If they take dance, then it takes my whole purpose of being a student at KCAPA." According to Anthony Guidice, who is a principal intern at the school, "This year, there was a change in the certification requirements for dance, allowing the class to be taught by a teacher certified in dance, phys ed, or communications." Although Guidice

has no dance training, he has a communications certification and volunteered to take on the class. So, technically, dance is now officially back on the roster of offerings at KCAPA. Guidice is collaborating with outside partners (like Harrington and the nonprofit Musicopia) to provide the students with dance classes. And McCoy says he's having a lot of fun as a dance major^[3] at the school. Harrington continues to lead volunteer and after-school classes and students are learning hip-hop, commercial, and contemporary dance.

Outside artists keep working, reaching out, and trying to fit into, if not fill, the gaps. Student populations may lack textbooks and technology, but they still have their bodies, and a body-based approach to education can be game changing. As Mascher-member Christina Gesualdi puts it, "I think the key is to tread lightly and talk often... to be clear with your specific intention in the school and to be sure that it isn't assessing a need or gap in the current model, but instead is trying to use people and energy coming together to try for abundance. To not assume need... but to have a long conversation about need. And to be ready to let your own ideas take a back seat."

Gesualdi's sentiments were echoed by Savage in a meeting I had with him in October 2014. I proposed another partnership with the school, to bring in experimental filmmakers to work with students on telling their own stories through performance and animation film. Savage explained that there are plenty of nonprofit organizations showing up at KCAPA with an agenda. Too often these NPOs get what they need from the school and then disappear, leaving a gaping hole and no continuity for the students. Arts funders often require organizations to regularly reinvent their programs to qualify for funding, with major points being awarded to those who do community outreach, especially within "underserved" communities. KCAPA fits a lot of those targets, so it's no surprise that parades of nonprofits peddle their programs and seek partnerships there. Savage's suggestion to me was to keep coming to the school as a volunteer for a while, get to know the students in their own environment, and find out their needs on their terms. With ongoing administrative changes, a revolving door of NPOs, and the inability to keep a paid, professional dance teacher on staff, perhaps what the students need most is consistency. I'll return as a volunteer as much as I am able, but what this school really needs is the widespread recognition that we cannot afford to keep cutting corners on education, whether it's arts-based or not.

^[1] Carrera is no longer the KCAPA principal. She became an Assistant Superintendent and was replaced in the 2014–15 school year by auxiliary principal Carolyn Williams. Williams, in turn, has since been replaced by auxiliary principals Francine Deal and Christine Black. Lack of continuity for students in underfunded districts is a systemic issue.

^[2] KCAPA was founded in 2005, graduated its first class in 2006, and moved to the current location in 2010.

^[3] According to Guidice, "KCAPA has never had a prescribed course of study for any specific discipline.... We allow students to choose the elective courses they take, and some students, like Jaleel [McCoy], choose to take dance multiple years, which is probably why he identifies himself as a dance major. However, there are many other students who split their electives among multiple disciplines (dance, art, choir, band, photography, etc.)."

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