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## Raising the Bar

How a teacher built a ballet-centered public school that aces standardized tests.

By Aaron Dalton

Todd Eric Allen makes the difficult look doable.

He's standing in a dance studio, balancing effortlessly on one tights-clad leg, the other stretched ramrod-straight at a 90-degree angle. With his lean, erect carriage and sure stance, his professional-dancing background is manifestly obvious, and it's no surprise to learn he's performed on Broadway and around the world with major ballet companies. But today he's gearing up for a different sort of performance: showing about 20 primary school boys and girls a basic ballet move. And this dance class isn't at an elite conservatory in Paris or New York—it's at a public school in the part of Florida often called the Redneck Riviera.

**'If you study ballet ... you give a lot of hours to it and you become very disciplined. You take that into your schooling.'**

Todd Eric Allen  
Founder, educator  
Northwest Florida Ballet Académie

For the many people who have asked Allen the inevitable question of what an internationally known ballet dancer is doing teaching 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders in Fort Walton Beach, he has a simple reply that resonates more deeply—and more painfully—than it might for most people: He grew up here. And the Northwest Florida Ballet Académie he founded is, in a way, his answer to all the boys who chased him home from school yelling “faggot” and “sissy.”



Not that the growing number of outsiders taking note of the school know the personal part of its genesis; they tend to fixate on the academy's paradoxical success. Since its founding in 2002—just as the national mania for standardized testing started in earnest—the magnet school has unapologetically emphasized fine arts classes over academics. And yet its students, nearly a third of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, have scored remarkably well on Florida's all-important standardized tests.

(Requires  
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Allen, who serves as the school's artistic director and also teaches some classes, sees no contradiction in acing tests by focusing on the fine arts. His students' dancing improves their academics, he says, for the same reason he kept dancing in the face of epithets. “If you study ballet,” the 38-year-old says, “you give a lot of hours to it and you become very disciplined. You take that into your schooling.”

And into life beyond the classroom. By siting the academy in the very locus of his childhood torments, Allen is doing more than providing a place where boys and girls can learn to dance free of taunts. As he rises fluidly from one ballet position to another, the limbs of every child in the studio following along, Allen is showing his students what grace under pressure looks like.

Rise ... plié ... tendu ... one ... two ... three ... four. ... ” Allen's voice bounces off the studio's walls over the swell of classical piano music. The students wear serious expressions as they bend and dip and sway in time with the notes. “Ribbs in ... plié ... relevé ... turn. ... ” Again and again, the 5th graders twirl and spin through their practice motions, giving themselves to the music and smiling across the room at the wall-size mirror, perhaps imagining an audience sitting raptly. Allen strides through the room, offering each dancer advice, encouragement, and instruction. “Shoulders down. ... Stand tall. ... Legs together. ... Finish with head out—be beautiful!”

Finally, Allen switches off the music. “The most amazing thing is to start prepared and to finish

everything you do,” he tells the students as they stand and listen, breathing heavily from the exertion. “Keep your composure, and always start and finish no matter what. If you are weak, you are not going anywhere.”

If that seems a little like something you’d hear in a football huddle, there’s a reason. Like most boys in the Florida Panhandle when Allen was growing up there in the 1970s, he played the gridiron. In fact, Allen probably never would have set foot in a ballet studio—and there would likely be no Northwest Florida Ballet Académie today—if he hadn’t torn a hamstring at 13 playing football on his junior high school team.

His pediatrician, who just happened to be the neighbor of Bernadette Clements Sims, a local dance teacher, told him to practice ballet as a means of recuperating and strengthening his hurt leg. At that place and time, a young man’s socially acceptable pursuits outside of school were pretty much restricted to sports, fishing, and the beach, so the idea of prancing around in tights seemed absolutely out of the question to Allen. But the doctor insisted that if he wanted to play football the next season, he would have to dance.

So Allen reluctantly trudged to the studio, feeling awkward and wearing his discontent pointedly on his sleeve—or lack thereof: For his first lessons, Allen spurned the traditional dance uniform of tights in favor of shorts, sport socks, and a cutoff T-shirt.

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“I resisted completely,” Allen recalls. “I didn’t want to do it.” Even before his injury, his sister Brenda had been trying unsuccessfully to bring her brother to the studio so he could see what it was like. Then something remarkable happened. After a few lessons, Allen started to enjoy dancing on his toes. When his leg healed, he returned to the football squad, but he also kept dancing, and after the season was over, he dropped the sport entirely to spend more time in the studio.

The effects were immediate and devastating. “I pretty much lost every friend I had on the football team,” Allen recalls. “They immediately shunned me.” His sense of isolation was deepened by the catcalls and vicious name-calling he endured in the halls. After class, he had to run fast to avoid the boys who mocked him, chased him, and tried to beat him up.

Allen’s slight drawl perceptibly constricts as he recounts the ridicule and threats he faced from other boys. Even after all these years, it’s hard to get him to talk about those memories, and when he does, a protective matter-of-factness clips his words. His ordinarily laid-back Southern demeanor stiffens slightly, and you notice for the first time that under the steady eyes and trimmed black hair, his nose is slightly crooked—a hint that this is a man who does not back down easily.

“I don’t think he was ready for the teasing that he got by his peers who called ballet sissy stuff, but Todd persevered because he was talented,” says Sims, who founded what later became known as the Northwest Florida Ballet and taught Allen for four years. “I had a class with 15 boys then, but he was the only one who got hooked on ballet.”

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Such bruising battles with the odds abound in Allen’s past and—not surprisingly, given their inextricably linked roots—that of the academy. He first went to the Okaloosa County school board in 1999 seeking permission to replicate City dance, an outreach program of the Boston Ballet, which he became familiar with while dancing there. The initiative, now 13 years old, introduces the discipline and beauty of dance to at-risk 3rd graders in Boston Public Schools. The board was lukewarm, however, to the idea of sending students during instructional time to the Northwest Florida Ballet, which Allen took over from Sims in 1996.

Allen continued to lobby the board but felt like he was being stonewalled until 2000, when Don Gaetz was elected superintendent of the district. Gaetz, who grew up in a tiny but artistically vibrant and academically successful Midwestern town, soon started looking for ways to strengthen arts education in Okaloosa County schools. In 2001, he called a very surprised Allen and asked him what sort of comprehensive educational program he would create if the district provided the funding for academic

teachers.

Allen knew exactly what he wanted to do. Throughout his dance career, which included stints at Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, the Boston Ballet, and the Louisville Ballet, he'd repeatedly come face to face with dancers from Europe who had trained at schools that combined dance education and academics. Allen contacted some mentors and put together a three-year curriculum for his ideal school to teach students French, music, art, and ballet every day, along with academics related to the arts.

Despite Gaetz's backing, there were far more boos than bouquets when the idea of a magnet school for dance was first announced in 2002. Some critics said that since Allen's proposed academy would base its admissions on auditions, it would be a de facto elitist institution, diverting scarce public funds toward children with parents wealthy enough to have already paid for private dance lessons.

"There were people who were skeptical of the whole venture," Gaetz says, "that this would be about ... the highbrows."

Some predicted the school would just cherry-pick the best students to pad its academic record, leaving the dregs for the rest of the district to scrape up. Others said the opposite: that the academy would overemphasize dance and other arts at the expense of academics, turning out graceful children unprepared to tackle the high-stakes Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

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Several school board members, whose votes were needed to approve the academy, thought the school's odd mix of unusual emphases was simply too weird to make it off the drawing board: French may be the international language of dance, but it's not a particularly popular tongue in western Florida. "Some people's first response was that ... the school was neither one kind of duck nor another," explains Frank Fuller, a district assistant superintendent.

Rodney Walker, then the board chairman, was among those who questioned the merit of the proposal. Already tight school funding had just been made tighter by a state referendum capping the number of students per class, and he was leery of the idea of a brand-new school with artistic pretensions and the potential to sink the district's academic rating.

"It was just such a new concept," Walker says. "No one in this part of the state had ever tried anything similar." Even more important than the school's structure, however, was a question not even Allen could answer: Would it attract enough students to pay for itself?

Walker needn't have worried. After the school's first year in 2002-03, "people became interested in sending their children when they saw how well it was working," he recalls. "From that day on, we have had smooth sailing."

The school also has gotten rave reviews from the larger arts education world. "This is a wonderfully innovative program for a public school district," says Rima Faber, program director of the National Dance Education Organization. According to Faber, Allen's anecdotal experience that the rigorous demands of ballet improve students' academics isn't unique. Citing a book by researcher Anne Green Gilbert, *Teaching the Three Rs Through Movement Experiences*, Faber explains, "Dance makes learning fun, organic, and something the children love to do." Unfortunately, she says, she knows of no other public school that has integrated dance so closely into its curriculum since budget cuts forced Providence, Rhode Island's Roger Williams Middle School to end its two-decade experiment of integrating nontechnical dance and academic education in 2002.

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Naysayers' other doubts also have eased. Rather than only pick kids with dance experience or high grade-point averages, Allen and his staff select students solely on their perceived potential to excel in dance. This is obviously a subjective judgment, but the resulting school body isn't the overachieving clique of privilege that critics had predicted. Several of the students have learning disabilities, and almost 30 percent of the academy's 80 children receive free or reduced-price lunch.

“This is not about tuxedos and champagne flutes; this is art education for people in the truest sense,” Gaetz says. “I bet you would be unable to distinguish the children whose parents have trouble paying the rent from those whose parents live in mansions on the Gulf of Mexico.”

Fears about whether the school could hold its own academically also have been assuaged. The year after it opened, the academy earned the best reading scores among 3rd graders in the county on the feared FCATs. The year after that, its new 3rd grade class did the same with math.

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Not that Allen’s dream project is out of the woods yet. Money worries still weigh on his mind because the academy gets no additional money from the county than schools that don’t have its extensive—and expensive—music, French, art, and dance offerings. So Allen and General Manager Barbara Lord are constantly fund raising and hunting up grant money to supplement district funds; this year, they had to scrape together \$30,000.

Still, he seems proud of having developed a school that offers an integrated academic and artistic curriculum to children who can’t afford to attend a private dance program. “I like the idea of working with the public school system. From where I am coming from,” he says, “opportunity has to be extended to every child, regardless of financial means. It’s ridiculous to ask a family to pay \$30 to go to a museum when they can’t pay \$30 to buy a coat or food.”

And though Allen is clearly gratified by his school’s academic and artistic achievements, he derives equal pride from the nurturing space he has created for boys who want to dance. “I took this position to clear the way for other boys and young men to want to come and take ballet,” he says. “I wanted to make ballet ‘cool’ and ‘awesome.’ That motivation has been a big force in all of this.”

The students do seem to enjoy the lessons. Several say that even though the academy is harder than their previous schools, they prefer being there. And the boys add that they are especially grateful for the opportunity to dance free from embarrassment. Or almost free from embarrassment: “At my old school, they always made me feel funny when I told them I did ballet,” a boy named Michael offers. “They called me a girl.”

“*You* call me a girl!” comes the retort from one of the other boys in the class.

Clearly, things don’t change overnight. Boys at the academy have faced harassment reminiscent of Allen’s. Even in 1st grade, Allen says, his own son, Tristan, had a hard time with other boys at school when they found out he was taking ballet. Still, Allen says, “It’s definitely better than it was when I was a kid.

“We’re all fueled by the things we lacked and the things we wished we could have done,” he adds. “We saw things that we thought were wrong and said, ‘One day I’ll be able to help.’ I let the boys in my school know that it’s OK to do whatever you want to do.”

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**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

“**Study Identifies Benefits Of Arts Curriculum,**” November 13, 2002.

“**It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing,**” August 1, 2002.

“**A Delicate Balance,**” May 8, 2002.

“**Learning By Leaps,**” January 1, 2001.

“**Celebrities Swing the Spotlight Toward Arts Education,**” October 20, 1999.

“**Study Highlights Benefits, Shortcomings of Magnet Programs,**” May 26, 1999.

**"So You Want To Be A Rock & Roll Teacher,"** January 1, 1999.

**"Students Learn More in Magnets Than Other Schools, Study Finds,"** March 6, 1996.

See other stories on education issues in **Florida**. See **data** on Florida's public school system.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Choice**.

#### **RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

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**The Northwest Florida Ballet-Académie** posts information about the school's academic and artistic programs.

**Magnet Schools of America** posts links for **Fine and Performing Arts magnet schools** across the nation.

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