

Small Dance Departments

By Rachel Wilson

WHAT RISKS DO STAFF ABSENCES POSE IN SMALL DANCE DEPARTMENT AT PRESENT?

WHAT MEASURES CAN WE TAKE TO PROTECT OUR SUBJECT AND STUDENTS SHOULD WE NOT BE IN SCHOOL?

Schools that are fortunate enough to have a thriving dance department know all too well that these departments tend to be led and facilitated by the same person. Often this means that all teaching, planning, preparation and organisation is down to one teacher who is also tasked with leading their subject and held accountable. I have been in this position many times and whilst covering for a subject leader last year, I realised how vulnerable having one teacher responsible for an entire subject can be. This issue is especially magnified of late as we continue to push, promote and hustle for our subject to remain on the curriculum and retain Key Stage 4 (KS4) qualification offers each year.

If dance is led by one person, who holds the key to all the planning folders, examination material, evidence, choreography and planning, what happens when this individual can't be in school? What happens when there is not a specialist on hand who can pick up the reins? How do we protect ourselves, our students and our subject when we are can't physically be in school to do the job?

I saw this first hand when I covered dance in an excellent secondary school whilst in-between jobs recently. The school had celebrated and nurtured dance for years and so the department had a super intake at KS4, positive uptake of GCSE and a great extracurricular offer. However, with their subject leader not in school and no other specialist to take over it dawned on me that all the hard work and momentum was now at risk of being derailed. You cannot plan for emergency staff absence/illness, these things happen, and we all know how important it is to put ourselves and our health first. However, this doesn't take away from the challenges that arise when there is no one in the building who knows the subject like us or has a dance degree and 20 years of dance training who can step in. If we are the sole teacher and the subject lead, we have ultimate control of quality assurance, curriculum overviews and exam offer which is such a privilege. If we can't be there to steer the ship for a few days, weeks, months etc., what can we do to ensure our beloved subject and students can still succeed and achieve without us there guiding the way?

EMERGENCY: SHORT TERM (ONE DAY/WEEK ABSENCE)

There isn't much we can do to predict unplanned absences and illness. Similarly, there won't be much impact made to our departments in this time. There are some things you may consider having 'up your sleeve' should you need unplanned time off. I have always had a cover folder (both a physical copy and resources on One Drive or Teams) that staff could grab and easily see where classes are in their schemes, information regarding SEN and seating plans for theory lessons and so on. It isn't something that can be put together over night, but something built up throughout the year and left when I've moved on to new schools. I've always found staff really appreciated it! What are some of the key things you can create quickly and leave in the folder to help others who don't have dance backgrounds and are not specialists for short term absence?

KEY STAGE 3

1. Quick Choreography Tasks - This could include using dice, props, chairs, pom poms, basket balls, tennis balls (things that can be easily found in dance/PE depts) to create movement. Students could be provided with bullet points to support on a card, with space for notes to be recorded as they create. Work can then be shared back at the end of the lesson. I create a few in September and build throughout the year.
2. Warmups - YouTube beginner aerobic clips or a short circuits routine around the room. I have drawn this out before and left in my cover folder with 8 areas, numbers and a specific exercise (burpees, jumping jacks) to do at each.
3. Tutting - Lots of great clips online and good for when you are in a smaller space or moved to a different room! I took photos of me holding various Tutting poses and popped them all onto a sheet. The students had to use those images as starting points to create their own phrase by linking them together and deciding an order. Great fun!

KEY STAGE 4

1. Exam resources on your website/school drive - They can use these to re-cap set phrases (GCSE), and/or watch professional material (BTEC/GCSE). By having these set up early on in the academic year, your future self will really appreciate this.
2. Dance Captains - Have a small group of Dance Captains in your class who can teach your warm up/cool down and help less able students with their choreography/routines. This will give you time to breathe and prep at start and end of lessons. It is also a great way to challenge high attaining students. Should you be out of school for any reason, these higher ability and responsible students can help lead warm ups for you and be an asset when you are not in the studio!
3. Displays in the studio - this could include criteria, exam unit breakdowns, key vocabulary. All of this is useful and can be drawn upon should you not be there. I find 'Working Walls' great for this as someone can walk into my room and see what we are focusing on, what we have learnt that week/fortnight and the interactive aspect means that students can truly draw from it should they be working independently.

LONG TERM ABSENCES

Sometimes life throws us lemons which can mean we are off work for weeks or months at a time. In small departments this means there is often no one, or no specialist, leading dance within the school. What can we do to help minimise the possible damage?

- **Link management/Senior Leadership Team (SLT) support:** By sharing access and information regarding where exam material, resources and planning is at the start of the year, our SLT links can help cover staff find key material as needed. The more we share and show, the easier things should be if we need help in accessing material in our absence.
- **Having a buddy-school:** For me, being a 'one person dance department' has been a bit of a lonely experience at times, so a real lifeline has been having links and contacts in other dance departments across my city. Keeping their email addresses and information in my cover folder proved useful a few times, as cover staff could contact other dance teachers to check something regarding examinations, or ask if they may be able to share a good theory lesson as suddenly no studio was available due to a leaky roof. Having a helping hand and support network in your area is honestly priceless. I have always found people very willing to help!
- **One Dance UK:** We all know how this organisation is our biggest supporter and is a fabulous resource for all working in the dance sector. Having a membership and accessing their help and resources would be of real benefit to cover staff or SLT needing specialist support. Another good contact to add to your cover folder!

I just want to take this opportunity to give a shout out to all the 'lone wolves' out there in the UK who are, very often, single handedly ensuring dance flourishes in their school, being the backbone and face of the subject. It is not an easy role, wearing so many hats, and can be really exhausting and draining. However, it is, as you will all agree, a real privilege. As we fight to keep dance alive in our schools, ensuring the subject can keep afloat in our absence is a key priority and something that is always worth a little time thinking about should we fall ill or our personal lives need us to put ourselves first for once. Spending time ensuring our support network and folder are ready means our future selves and departments may thank us later down the line. Remember, we may be alone in the dance department, but we are not alone in the dance world.