

TESTIMONY TO COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

Testimony to Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations

By Dance/NYC

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On behalf of Dance/NYC (www.dance.nyc), a service organization which serves over 5,000 individual dance artists, 1,200 dance-making entities, and 500 non profit dance companies based in the metropolitan New York City area, including BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color) dance workers, immigrants, and disabled dance workers. Dance/NYC joins colleague advocates working across creative disciplines in thanking the Committee for your leadership during this time and in requesting:

1. For the City to provide sustained and dedicated funding to support arts education in schools and communities, including quality arts education for every child in every school;
2. For City budget cuts not to fall disproportionately on the Department of Education, Department of Youth & Community Development, or Department of Cultural Affairs;
3. For the City to allow flexibility with Cultural After School Adventures (CASA) programming due to the pandemic; and
4. For the City to provide dance specific COVID-19 guidelines (which are not gyms) that clearly and specifically address the unique conditions that dance studios and education spaces operate in.

Dance education provides powerful opportunities for students to create, perform and understand movement as a means of artistic communication and impacts students' short- and long-term learning experiences. It can play a significant role in their personal and academic growth. Dance education is integral to the City's performing arts ecosystem and the survival of dance education organizations has implications beyond the walls of any one business. Dance education, especially in the public school system, often gives children an entry point into dance training in environments where they might not otherwise encounter it. This is especially true in communities of color, where access to dance education is already limited and a predominate number of closures are those run by and for communities of color.

During this pandemic, it has been made evident that artists are necessary workers, as dance educators have remained active providing online dance classes, digital performances, developing and providing mental health support, providing recovery and mutual aid support to their neighborhoods. This is in addition to making countermeasures to ensure the ongoing payment and care of their staffs, while experiencing steep revenue drops. Beyond the pandemic, arts and cultural experiences are going to be the bridge to a vibrant New York City, to restore mental health for families, and to engage students in learning. Dance organizations are ready to continue partnering with schools, after-school programs, community-based organizations, and health service organizations to take proactive steps to ensure the health and safety of New Yorkers of all ages.

In order for a partnership between dance organizations and schools / afterschool programs to happen, City agencies need sustained and dedicated funding to support arts education in our schools and communities. Department of Education budget cuts in arts education enacted earlier this year have already decreased artist staffing. According to SMU Data Arts and the Department of Cultural Affairs' COVID-19 Impact on Nonprofit Arts and Culture in New York City report, some of the greatest reductions to artist employment have come from Arts Education organizations, which collectively reported decreases of over 2,100 artists, or 78% of artist staffing, during this period. We request that budget cuts not fall disproportionately on the Department of Education, Department of Youth & Community Development, or Department of Cultural Affairs. The initial projections for these agencies would spell disaster for dance education and the arts and cultural community that is part of the fabric of this City. These are key pipelines for the dance sector, professional programs and Broadway. Dwana Smallwood, a former star of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater who founded her own dance studio in 2013 in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, was recently quoted in The NY Times (nytimes.com/2020/11/18/arts/dance/new-york-dance-studios-coronavirus.html) as having said, "We are the people who plant the seeds into these huge organizations and teach and mentor our kids to aspire to American Ballet Theater, to New York City Ballet, to Ailey. We are the ones on the ground, finding and cultivating those children, providing them with confidence and brain stimulation and letting them know there is something to aspire to besides the four corners of your block."

Dance organizations are facing extended difficulties due to the pandemic. Many schools who are offered CASA programming are not accepting the programming initiative due to concerns of students spending even more time online, staring at a screen. Let us not take it out on young people or their access to dance education. As such, we are requesting that the City encourage schools to accept the programming and allow for budgeting permitting access to these programs for a wider audience. We are requesting that the City allow for CASA programming to not occur as an after school activity but have the possibility to be offered on weekends, which will address the concerns of extended one day screen time and still allow for access. Another option, would be to allow for CASA programming to occur as a part of the school day which would increase audience and serve the entire school. Flexibility in access to programming is essential due to the pandemic.

Dance education organizations have pivoted their in-person programming to online for a fraction of the revenue they would have collected and at the same time fixed costs including rent and salaries remain unchanged. Dance/NYC understands the key role data has, as such we have been conducting comprehensive research on the impact the coronavirus is having on our sector. In Dance/NYC's Coronavirus Dance Impact Survey (www.dance.nyc/covid-19/Impact-Survey/Overview), more than 70% reported experiencing cash flow and rent issues. We have also documented a mass exodus of teaching artists leaving the City due to lost performance opportunities and inability to generate enough income to cover basic needs such as housing, food and health care. Additionally, there is an increase in costs associated with digital accessibility. Currently, the CASA initiative allows teaching artists to rent equipment but does not allow them to purchase their own digital equipment using these funds. The consistency of renting is equating to greater costs than purchasing their own equipment. Flexibility in the spending of the CASA funds is greatly needed. If the City does not intervene, we will be losing our dance education which is something from which we will not recover for many years to come.

Arts education is necessary for community building and mental health, both of which are largely at risk due to social distancing measures. According to SMU Data Arts and DCLA, community-based arts organizations (especially those that focus on cultural and ethnic awareness, folk arts, and community celebrations) in the City have reported losses of 12% , unanticipated expenses of 12%, and have lowest level of Working Capital relative to expenses at 1.6 months heading into the crisis. In Dance/NYC's Coronavirus Dance Impact Survey, one organization shared, "We're deeply concerned with the health crisis (physical and mental), loss of jobs and food security for people living in our community who were already vulnerable before COVID-19. Our programs have always served as a place of solace as the arts offer spaces for people to

heal and seek solutions. It is important that we exist to help people weather the crisis psychologically and compliment organizations who are offering social services for displacement, health care and food." Let us not make New York – where culture is a major economic sector with over 400,000 jobs – a place that disregards culture and community as an integral part of our lived experiences.

Across the City, dance studio owners face similar situations, struggling to keep their businesses afloat and frustrated by a lack of clear reopening guidance from the City and State. In particular the conflation of dance studios with gyms. Dance/NYC, Gibney and several collaboratore have drafted comprehensive reopening guidelines for the dance sector including dance educators which we would be more than happy to share with the Council for their support.

Artists are necessary workers, we need your support to continue to be active and equitable members of the NYS educational workforce. Without intervention from the committee, dance education institutions will continue to suffer enormous losses and face catastrophic economic challenges which we may never recover from, especially those for and run by our most marginalized communities.

For Dance/NYC and its constituents, the most urgent priorities are:

1. For the City to not disproportionately make budget cuts to the Department of Education, Department of Youth & Community Development, or Department of Cultural Affairs to allow for sustained funding to support arts education.
2. For the City to allow flexibility with Cultural After School Adventures (CASA) programming and funding allocations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. For the City to provide swift rent relief legislation.
4. For the City to provide dance specific COVID-19 guidelines (which are not gyms) that clearly and specifically address the unique conditions of the dance sector.

We thank you in advance for your consideration and commend New York City's ongoing efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 and look forward to the opportunity to work with you to ensure that dance education can continue to thrive in years to come. The time to act is now.

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[< back](#)

[previous listing](#) • [next listing](#)