In the current education climate, how are schools still encouraging participation in and development of dance? Claire Somerville, Head of Children and Young People’s Dance, talks to educators who are keeping dance in their school curriculum and seeing the positive results.

Bacc from the Brink

It is a tough time for dance in schools at the moment. The shadow of the English Baccalaureate (Ebac) continues to grow over secondary schools, which are becoming more focused on a core academic curriculum that excludes all arts subjects, to achieve the aspirations outlined by the government.

Since 2010, when the Ebacc was first introduced, we have seen a decline in the numbers of students taking GCSE Dance (11.7% reduction in 2015 compared with 2010) and in A-Level Dance (down by 17.9% since 2010). DfE’s own stats reveal that the number of specialist arts teachers has decreased by 11% and arts teaching time has decreased by an estimated 10%.

But despite all this, some headteachers are leading the way in placing dance in a valued and central part of the school curriculum. Our members are showing that with some perseverance and ingenuity they can ensure dance has its place alongside all other subjects at Key Stage 4 and 5.

I met with Mary-Lou Litton, Headteacher for the past nine years and Harriet Simmons, Director of Creative & Media at Wildern School in Southampton. They both spoke passionately about dance at the school and its effects on the pupils.

When asked about the effect of the Ebacc so far Mary-Lou was very clear: “The Ebacc hasn’t had a negative effect on the school so far, as we haven’t let it, although I know of schools that are dropping or decreasing their arts subjects. I will be working to ensure that it doesn’t in future.”

Harriet was just as enthusiastic and found she has been able to bring new ideas to the Senior Leadership Team to broaden the pupils’ dance experience. As Mary-Lou explained, “Harriet came to me with the proposal for a Matthew Bourne project and at first I turned it down. But she came back again and asked me to re-look at it and persuaded me it was important. This is the sort of good relationship I hope to have with the staff, that if they know something is important I will listen and if in the end it’s not possible, they know I’ve not said no lightly.”

The pressures facing schools are many and wide-ranging, but Wildern School has found that by supporting its primary feeder schools, the pupils arrive ready to continue their dance education.

“Dance isn’t just a recreational activity, I think there is rigour in the subject, especially in the new GCSE and A-Level specifications. It’s also an opportunity to offer something different.”

Mary-Lou Litton  Headteacher, Wildern School