

# DanceTeacher®

## Holding Dancers Back



BY MARY ELLEN HUNT

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*Help a student understand your decision*

Will repeating a level help or hurt her training?

“Devastated” is how Paul Michael Bloodgood describes his reaction when he was told at 14 that he would remain in level 5 for an additional year at Pacific Northwest Ballet School. “A friend of mine got promoted to level 6, and I did not, which killed me,” says Bloodgood, who now dances with Ballet Austin. “At that age, everything is a competition. It seems like such a big deal. But what you don’t know is that, ultimately, that extra year becomes irrelevant when you’re older. When you’re 20 and going on an audition, no one is going to ask if you were ever held back a year.”

One of the toughest decisions teachers make is choosing to hold back a struggling student while their peers advance. For young dancers, this can be humiliating and feel like punishment. How do you help them see the bigger picture and understand why the extra time will benefit them in the long run?

### Student Evaluation

The decision to hold a student back usually concerns technique, such as lacking the flexibility or strength necessary to perform more advanced steps. Tracy Inman, co-director of The Ailey School, assesses student readiness by evaluating the degree of nuance in their training. Two dancers may be able to do the same step, but the way they execute it marks the difference between levels.

Shely Pack, who directs The Shely Pack Dancers in Half Moon Bay, California, believes, however, that it’s most important to consider the student’s character and what kind of environment their personality works best in. “I might know that if I keep a student with their class, the expectations can’t be as high. But if I held them back, they might lose interest in dance,” she says. Does your dancer thrive as a leader, finding confidence in

being at the top of their class? If so, keeping them back may actually help in the long run. Or, do they need to be challenged by dancing alongside others who are more technically proficient? “It’s a much larger picture than just dance. Children mature at different rates,” says Pack. “Sometimes, if the dance ability is not quite there, but they have a strong desire and drive, I’ll let them move along.”

## Breaking the News

At Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, level-placement policies are addressed in the school handbook given to each family at the beginning of the year. This way, families are clear about what’s required of a student at each level of training. “We say very specifically that students will advance at their own rate, depending on the number of classes they take, and their facility and talent,” says Marcia Dale Weary, the school’s founding artistic director.

CPYB artistic director Marcia Dale Weary

Pack talks to parents before approaching the student. “I’ll try to explain why technically, physically and emotionally their child might not be ready to move on,” she says. “And I tell them that we’re watching their dancer. That way the parents can help the child understand that they are not being left behind—that we’re paying attention to them, and as soon as they are ready, they can move up.”

When communicating with the student, it helps to first state where you’re coming from. “We explain that you need to have a solid understanding of technique for things to really work,” and to avoid injury, says Inman. Then, try to be as specific as possible with problems that might be stalling their training. “Maybe one student only comes to class two days a week, while another takes four classes a week,” says Dale Weary. “The person who repeats the same exercises a hundred times will be ahead of someone who repeats it only 50 times. That’s very easy for them to understand.”

It helps to call out specific technical issues that are preventing advancement—should they concentrate on their feet, strength or turnout? These details will help them work toward a measurable goal and take responsibility for their own progress. Later, when the dancer shows marked improvement and is moved up a level, they can feel like they’ve truly earned it.

Bloodgood says being held back was good for his training in the long run and taught him lessons he would have otherwise not learned. “Not getting promoted is tough, but it can be a lesson for the future. Dancers are going to have to deal with that throughout their careers,” he says. And the friend who was promoted to level 6 ahead of him? “He danced for another two years and then quit ballet,” laughs Bloodgood, who begins his 15th professional season this fall. **DT**

*Mary Ellen Hunt writes about dance and the arts for the San Francisco Chronicle.*

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