



Cathy Bowman, OSSDF Secretary & Cathy Harris, Board member



Cathy Harris & Laurel Brown, OSSDF President at CODE Conference in Hamilton, October 2022

Ontario Secondary School DANCEFEST (OSSDF) is a not-for-profit organization that has been central to the evolution of dance education and leadership in the Province of Ontario since 2003. Over the past twenty years, thousands of secondary educators, student dancers, community leaders, and leading performing artists have been welcomed to stages across the province, providing students with an annual event to celebrate and develop their passion for, and skills in, the art of dancing. No other organization in the province offers such a significant opportunity for high school dancers who might not otherwise experience dance in such a vibrant and meaningful forum.



Each year, DANCEFEST invites secondary students to create original choreographies in their school classrooms and then, to bring their work to a friendly and inspiring provincial classroom. In private studios, even dancers with formal training seldom choreograph their own compositions. DANCEFEST gives them that opportunity. As well, it offers dance workshops and detailed feedback by empowering professional dance artists and educators. DANCEFEST encourages the artistry, cultural expression, and respect these creative, talented students share and is proud of the mental and physical well-being and confidence they gain from this enriching experience.

To share some background, DANCEFEST began in May 2003, when Laurel Brown hosted a 3- day event at Bluevale Collegiate Institute in Waterloo, supported by teachers who had met at a York DANCE AQ course during the winter of 2002. Dance teachers from North Bay to Windsor attended the event, accompanied by their students who came, eager to share and celebrate the creative artistry of dance through their original choreographies and performances. During that first year, CODE loaned DANCEFEST \$1250 to support this innovative dance initiative.

From 2003 – 2012, DANCEFEST was hosted by dedicated teachers from schools in: North Bay, Barrie, Windsor, Chatham, Kitchener, and Waterloo. In 2013, our event was at risk due to political action in education, but we were able to hold a smaller, one-day event at the River Run Theatre in Guelph. The following year, to accommodate the growing numbers of schools registering, we moved away from school venues, and in 2014 and 2015, we organized 4- day DANCEFESTS at the Niagara Convention Centre in Niagara Falls.



In 2015, DANCEFEST incorporated as the not-for-profit organization, Ontario Secondary School DANCEFEST.



St. Clair College Centre for the Arts in Windsor was our home from 2016 – 2019. Our last live event, OSSDF2019 hosted over 550 individuals from 22 schools who gathered to dance on the Chrysler Theatre stage. 30+ workshops varying in styles and cultural foundations were taught by inspiring professional and diverse dance artists, educators, and alumni. In addition, participants learned about post-secondary arts programming and community-based dance organizations, enabling them to plan for futures that include dance. As always, the 4-day event concluded with a celebratory banquet, an Artistry Showcase of favourite entries from each school, and performances by dance artist professionals and alumni to inspire the students to continue their efforts in creating dance.

Due to COVID, OSSDF2019 was the last time we gathered, in person, to celebrate youth dance artistry. This was followed by two years of successful, VIRTUAL OSSDF dance festivals celebrating dances performed in backyards, basements, bedrooms and living rooms that were then released via our website www.ossdancefest.ca. OSSDF2021 hosted 85 dancers and 38 dance entries, while OSSDF2022, hosted 265 dancers and 85 dance entries - an increase of 145%

Joyfully, OSSDF2023 is currently organizing a LIVE DANCEFEST event and we are returning to our roots in Waterloo. The stage at the Modern Arts Building of the University of Waterloo will be our venue. It will be wonderful to celebrate together again, LIVE. That said, we will also be offering a VIRTUAL OSSDF2023 event for those schools and dancers unable to attend the LIVE event due to distance, financial limitations, or to full capacity of the LIVE OSSDF2023 event.

The Mission of Ontario Secondary School DANCEFEST is...

"...to provide inclusive, encouraging, and empowering opportunities for dance learners, educators, and artists to explore and collaborate within the artform of dance as learners move through elementary to postsecondary, and beyond."

The OSSDF philosophy values, above all, the role of the Ontario Dance Curriculum's Creative Process in the development of student-created compositions. Artistic collaborations are choreographed by students, with guidance from dedicated teachers. In attending our OSSDF event, students and teachers receive positive, formal adjudication using criteria and rubrics rooted in the Ontario Curriculum and developed by The Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE), our provincial subject association. In addition, OSSDF dance festivals address all four of the central ideas found in the Arts curriculum – developing creativity, communicating, understanding culture, and making connections.

Furthermore, "making connections" is evident in the genuine spirit of friendship and community amongst the DANCEFEST participants who come from across the province to proudly share their artistry. Every student and educator attending exude empathy, trust, and mutual respect. Regardless of when students begin to participate—from those who are celebrated from Grade 9 and continue performing into their graduating year, as well as those who may join later in their studies—all are immensely proud of the huge network of supportive, like-minded individuals that they have met and shared the DANCEFEST experience with. Many continue their fellowship, and DANCEFEST Alumni return, year after year, to volunteer and/or teach dance workshops. One such person is Katie Knowlton, who attended DANCEFEST as a Grade 11 Bluevale student in 2003, and who now, as a teacher, brings her students to OSSDF. And, in 2022, Katie became OSSDF Vice President.



"This event is unique in that the competition itself comes secondary to the learning and collaboration of students and teachers alike who are passionate about dance. At DANCEFEST, students continue to learn from one another and from professional dance artists by participating in a multitude of events including a full day of workshops. Educators also take workshops to develop themselves professionally as dance educators. Students come to DANCEFEST as part of a small team at their school and leave feeling a part of a much larger united and supportive provincial-wide dance team." – Katie Knowlton, Teacher at Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute, Kitchener (10 Years)



Katie Knowlton (Maggiacomo) & the 2019 Cameron Heights Collegiate Institute Dance Team

Bluevale Collegiate's 2005 Dance Team

Katie Knowlton, OSSDF VP (middle row, last on right)
Ryan Brown, OSSDF Host (back row, 6th from left)

Teacher: Laurel Brown, OSSDF Pres. (front row, centre)



"The world we live in demands creativity and innovation"

– Dr. Michael Li, Faculty of Education, University of Macau and DANCEFEST 2003 Workshop Leader

In 2021, Jane Deluzio, CODE Past President, and Laurel Brown, OSSDF President, and former CODE Executive member, aligned the two organizations to form a united support for all Dance and Drama educators in Ontario. Joanna Perlus, OSSDF Teacher Council Coordinator, became CODE Dance Liaison in 2022, to ensure consistent support to both memberships. It has been a wonderful relationship with OSSDF producing virtual dance artist workshops and CODE providing curriculum for educators to use in blended, virtual, and school classrooms. Both organizations provide an annual event, CODE for educators, and OSSDF for students and their educators.



Like CODE, OSSDF wants to ensure that dance and drama remain present and vital in education. The performing arts enrich education, offer a unique approach to learning and teaching, and help students to understand curriculum, empathy, equity, and inclusion. Students see, hear, and feel differently and, these experiences nurture the creativity of our educators as well.

We appreciate STEM: we also need STEAM!



OSSDF offers multiple opportunities to broaden knowledge, creativity, and dance experience. For example, generous dance artists whose regular professional employment had been curtailed by the pandemic, created 30 virtual dance workshop resources that were accessed by 5,679 students from 29 Ontario school boards. They are still available for schools and teachers to enrich their classroom work.

Looking forward, OSSDF will be providing an increasing number of BIPOC dance artists to exemplify world dance styles and authentically represent all students in our school communities. As well, there are plans in process for smaller regional events to enable more schools, their students, and educators to access OSSDF's incredible dance experience.

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The board members of Ontario Secondary School DANCEFEST eagerly await our May 25th – 27th LIVE event. Although the **live event** is already at FULL capacity with 475 students and educators registered, OSSDF, as mentioned, will also incorporate a **virtual adaptation** to follow in June. Registrations can be submitted before March Break through the OSSDF website, www.ossdancefest.ca.

Respectfully submitted,
Laurel

Laurel Brown (she/her)
President



Educate. Empower. Celebrate.

SAVE THE DATES: MAY 25th-27th, 2023

OSSDF 2023 LIVE & VIRTUAL Events – TOGETHER, WE CELEBRATE & DANCE!

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