

Dear State Councilor, dear Silvia, dear members of the Foundation Board, dear members of the PHZH, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Education Award of the Pestalozzianum Foundation honors individuals who, through their commitment, uniqueness, public resonance, sustainability, and relevance, have rendered exemplary service to public education. The [video](#) gave us a glimpse at this; the dance group even more so: today we honor a person who, like few others, demonstrates what education can achieve when it takes body, mind, and soul seriously. An educator, an artist, a pioneer—and a woman who, through dance, opens not only spaces, but lives.

Ms. Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth is the 2025 Education Award winner.

Dear Elfi: warmest congratulations!

On behalf of the Foundation Board, I have the great honor of paying tribute to Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth.

I asked Ms. Schäfer-Schafroth— dear Elfi— what you would never have said to your students or dancers. You replied spontaneously: *“that anything is impossible.”* And thus, this laudation is also a plea to focus on what is possible within the seemingly impossible.

Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth describes how, as the daughter of a former indentured child laborer, she grew up in an environment far removed from education and the arts. Against this background, we know how unlikely it was for her to pursue both an extraordinary career as an educator and a remarkable international path as a dancer and choreographer. That she nevertheless succeeded, Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth herself believes, depended decisively on individual teachers who recognized and encouraged her “hunger for everything” (quote). This experience continues to shape her work to this day: **Education is a space of possibility, not a privilege.**

Her professional journey did not begin with dance, but with school. She wanted to become a teacher—and she did. Only later did her urge to move lead her to study physical education at ETH Zurich, where she discovered dance as a language of movement, expression, and art. *“From then on, I could talk”*, says Elfi. And since then, she has indeed been able to “speak”. This also means that self-expression is far more than verbal eloquence; it is a deeply human, holistic, and individual act, engaging all our senses, including the body.

Such an understanding presupposes an education that recognizes **education as both an inward process and an outward expression: a space in which the ability to recognize ourselves and articulate ourselves in our own individual ways must be considered holistically, so that we can grow in “our own language.”**

Because there was no professional dance program in Switzerland at the time, she went to the United States. Not because it was easy, but because she was serious. She exchanged security for uncertainty in order to make dance her language.

When she returned, she was an international dancer and choreographer. **In 2004, The New York Times listed her among the most impressive freelance dancers of her time**—a moment that often marks the beginning of a solo career in major cultural centers. But Elfi chose differently: she brought her art back to school. Once again, this shows that Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth understands her pedagogical commitment as a calling. **Education lives through the conviction of giving future generations the best possible foundation**; it is animated by empathy, passion, perseverance, and standards of quality that are in no way inferior to those of the arts.

From the breadth of Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth's work—which we saw briefly summarized in the video—I would like to highlight a few key milestones that were particularly significant in awarding this prize:

A Pioneer in Teacher Education

Elfi Schäfer-Schafroth has consistently dedicated herself to the education and professional development of teachers in the field of dance, understanding her work as an approach that transcends both artistic disciplines and cultures. What may seem self-evident today was anything but at the time: **dance in schools was pioneering work. It meant crossing subject boundaries, embracing inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, and fostering collaboration and integration.**

With persistence—and, from my observation, certainly also with charm and humor—combined with technical excellence and great persuasive power, she built the field of dance at the Zurich University of Teacher Education. It began with two class periods, then grew steadily in scope and impact, early on enriched by digital learning formats, and ultimately expanded through exchange with other cultures and dance practices.

In doing so, she achieved something rare: she brought students and teachers along—even when they were afraid to move. One student wrote about her:

“It's not just about how it looks from the outside. It's about translating inner radiance into movement—and inspiring others to do the same.”

This is education in the deepest sense: empowering people to become visible.

The Rämibühl Dance Group and the Principle of Community and Exchange

Elfi always remained closely connected to practice. She founded the Rämibühl Dance Group—a group that today includes around 60 young people and has shaped performances, festivals, and cross-school art projects for more than four decades.

Anyone who has experienced this group—and we were given a glimpse earlier—knows:

- This is not about selection, but about sharing, supporting, and responsibility.
- This is where courage grows.
- This is where self-efficacy grows.
- This is where the will to think, speak, and plan together, indeed to help shape the world, is cultivated.
- This is where community grows.
- And thus, also the future.

Artistic Work as Educational Work

Elfi never understood dance as decoration, but as a language of education and of life. This becomes particularly evident in the large dance theater project BackGround, which she developed together with the South African Pantsula group.

In this work, her personal history—let us recall: her father was an indentured child laborer—intertwines with the stories of dancers from South African townships.

It is a piece about wounds and dignity, about memory and rising up, about “fake dreams” and real hope. And it is a piece in which art, intercultural understanding, and global education become one.

The Pantsula dancers speak of how dance literally saved them—from drugs, from hopelessness, from violence. Elfi, they say, gave them back something they already had but sometimes forgot: joy. And Elfi herself says of this encounter: *“That’s where I learned what real community means.”*

Education—especially artistic education with a focus on dance in dialogue with other disciplines—opens a space of experience and embodiment rich in creativity and expressive power. It resonates with community, with wounds, dreams, and hopes, and from this resonance contributes to the ongoing process of becoming human.

And all of this is honored by the Education Award.

The award guidelines name as their first criterion extraordinary commitment to public education. Elfi has lived this commitment: for decades. At times facing resistance from cantonal authorities. Yet also with the support of foundations. With consistency. With warmth. With conviction.

They also emphasize the uniqueness of the projects. Anyone who has ever attended a DanceXchange evening knows: you experience something that exists only there. Anyone who has looked into the initially nervous and later radiant eyes of the young dancers knows how uniquely this experience inscribes itself into their lives.

Third, relevance for students in public schools. Elfi did not work for elite stages. She brought dance into everyday school life. That is unforgettable for students. That changes systems. That is sustainable. That is education.

Dear Elfi, today we honor your achievements and say: thank you.

- Thank you for creating spaces, in which people could grow.
- Thank you for your courage, which set things in motion—and continues to do so.
- Thank you for an art and a pedagogy that exclude no one.
- Thank you for a life’s work that continues—with every step danced in schools.
- Thank you for a stance that reminds us to integrate the human, the physical, the sensual, and the artistically creative into education more and more—the longer the more, the more digital the more urgent.

You once said:

“I found my language through dance—and I want every child to have that opportunity.”

That is precisely your legacy.

Congratulations on the 2025 Education Award, dear Elfi.