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Inner-city hunt for new stars of ballet

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Children from inner-city schools are to be encouraged to take up ballet in a move to find a new generation of Billy Elliots and keep youngsters out of trouble.

Tomorrow Andy Burnham, the culture secretary, will unveil plans for six new "centres of excellence" where talented youngsters can receive intensive dance training after school and at weekends.

The grant-funded schools will feed the Royal Ballet School in London, offering the most talented pupils the opportunity to become professionals.

Ministers say thousands of children are eager to take up dance, but do not always have the support to take their interest further. Although the number of youngsters taking GCSE exams in dance is soaring, training facilities are limited. Unless improvements are made, the declining number of children attending ballet classes could lead to fewer British ballet stars.

Burnham said: "Ballet or ballroom, hip hop or Highland, dance is something we are really good at in this country. It combines physical activity, creativity and beauty in a way that appeals to all. It is right and good that government support for the dance world should be put on a new footing."

The new dance schools are the centrepiece of a £5.5m package of measures. It follows a report into the state of dance in England by Tony Hall, the chief executive of the Royal Opera House, which called for better dance provision in schools and more encouragement for gifted pupils to pursue the art in their own time.

The government believes boosting dance in schools could encourage teenage girls who dislike PE lessons to take more exercise, and keep boys in inner cities out of trouble.

Ministers were impressed by a Channel 4 documentary, *Ballet Hoo!*, in which youths at risk of drifting into antisocial behaviour were introduced to classical dance. In the joint venture between Birmingham Royal Ballet, Channel 4, the charity Youth at Risk and four local authorities, 60 troubled teenagers learnt the commitment and self discipline needed to become stars. The show culminated in a sell-out performance of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Ross Cooper, artistic director of the Curve Foundation dance company, said: "Dance is a great discipline for teenagers, but modern lifestyles have reduced the number taking it up."

The plans for more investment also reflect the huge interest in dance illustrated by the success of shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing*.