

# THE ARTS & SEL: A SYNERGISTIC PAIRING

A Virtual Summit presented by the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE) on 25 September 2020

Prepared by Peter Horn, Ed.D. (Horn Education Consulting), these notes share ideas from summit participants in the hope of advancing our national conversation about the arts and social-emotional learning. This thematic display supplements other summit resources available from SEADAE, including a list of links to online information about SEL, state-based efforts to integrate the arts and SEL, and partnering organizations. Paraphrases or quotations from summit participants are followed by initials, e.g., (DS), which are explained in the table at the bottom of page 2. Roy Chambers, NJ Public School Arts Educator (1993-2020), illustrated Dr. Augustine's Zoom background suggestion.

**Arts education supports the social and emotional well-being of students.** The Arts Education and Social and Emotional Learning Framework ([selarts.org](http://selarts.org)) is designed to illuminate the intersection between arts education and SEL, and to allow for the intentional application of appropriate teaching and learning strategies, with the overarching goal of enhancing arts education (DS). Many arts educators and schools might say "we already do this," but documentation is hard to come by. The point of the framework's "crosswalk" between SEL competencies and standards is to be explicit about the connections and intersections. It is designed for arts educators to use themselves, and also for conversations with administrators. There are many specific ways that arts can activate SEL competencies, but approaches must be embedded, intentional, and sustainable (BM). If it ever feels like "arts, arts, SEL, arts, arts," you're doing it wrong! It needs to be embedded (SE). The arts are fertile ground for SEL because they are inherently emotional and very often collaborative (NL). Good arts teaching involves SEL. Embed it and refer to it as necessary with other stakeholders, but maybe don't mention "SEL" to students, who may be turned off to the term if it's been sullied by mediocre implementation (SE). We're not trying to turn arts instructors into counselors; this is just being more intentional about the SEL dimensions possible within arts instruction (BM). If you've got serious SEL goals and the arts are not part of it, you will not succeed (DD). While it's hard for teachers partially relying on body language when students learning virtually don't turn on their camera, it's also true that not feeling comfortable enough to turn the camera on in itself may be a helpful clue for teachers (ZC). If you "require" students to be on camera, please help them develop a background they can use (maybe as an assignment), or provide them one with your school mascot, etc. Many students do not want others to see or judge their homes, some may have inadequate internet service, and some may be in parking lots to access internet (KA). Keep in mind the different ways equity works in kids' homes. For certain kids it's relatively easy (adequate technology, minimal levels of distraction);



for others, not at all. Keep these factors as part of school-wide discussions (DD). It's vital to expand students' emotional vocabulary: how can they engage with art if their only emotions are sad, mad, and glad? (ME). Emojis can be an entry point, discussing with kids how they get at what we feel. Not the whole point, but an entry point (SE). Many of our best learning moments included SEL: the social studies teacher who helped us imagine daily life in distant times and places, the science teacher who taught about the importance of failure for discovery. However, it must be intentionally embedded; some music classes are just about getting the notes right (DD). It's important not to frame SEL as another thing added to a teacher's plate, but rather a component of good teaching. Use common language with

faculty; otherwise it's just noise. Signposting for students is important for relevance: rather than saying only, "We're going to learn how to write a song," maybe also call it Problem-Solving 101 (breaking a problem into parts, recognizing patterns, etc.). This intentional "meta-tagging" makes it easier for students to recall and apply these skills to other problems later (NL). We exercise students' SEL muscles when we encourage students to set their own artistic goals; ask them to devise solutions rather than giving them answers; help students navigate performance anxiety via emotion regulation; expose students to the power of artistic forms for social change (ME).

**Arts education nurtures the creation of a welcoming school environment where students can express themselves in a safe and positive way.** Children who are loved at home come to school to learn; children who are not loved at home come to school to be loved (ZC). My mantra is “Needs before notes”: we need to address students’ needs before curricular learning (SE). Quality teacher-student relationships need to be at the center of the work; arts teachers often have an advantage, especially at the secondary level, because they can work with students over multiple years. As such, arts educators may be early warning communicators to counselors and other student support personnel re: students who may express feelings through art rather than verbally (ME). It’s important to keep checking in with students, including via brief non-verbal mirroring activities on Zoom, e.g., “Move to show me how you are feeling right now.” Solicit feedback (MT). One formula for schoolwide success = positive character-building school climate + explicit instruction in SEL skills + habits of mind and patterns of thinking, including curiosity, explaining reasoning, feedback process, asking questions, defining and solving problems, striving to communicate clearly and proudly (ME). Reflection and choice are key: get kids to reflect before, during, and after assignments, and not always in writing; having some choice in assignments is important for student buy-in (SE).

**Arts education is part of a well-rounded education for all students.** There’s an important role for educators as advocates: “If you’re not at the table with policy makers, you will be on the menu” (BH-L). There is money for this work through Title I-A, Title II-A, and Title IV-A funding; the key is deciding that you’ll invest what you can in SEL (DL). Art reaches kids who otherwise might feel marginalized: it’s a way to express yourself, to see you can make a contribution. Kids need to believe in themselves as having a purpose that is personally meaningful and important to others (ME). The arts can be an entrée to culturally relevant, inclusive instruction (DS). Visual and performing arts are ways to introduce students to the range of human accomplishments (ME). In addition to traditional “academic” skills, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving are clearly C21 skills. SEL skills such as EQ are likely more important than IQ for college success and career advancement (ME). Project-based learning can interrupt Zoom monotony. Projects let you connect at the beginning, go do some work, and come back to it. A conceptual through-line can be helpful, e.g., a project on van Gogh where kids learn about his life, then paint, then share with classmates who write a story based on the painting, then someone makes a song based on the painting, then another group acts out a story—but individual accountability is especially important in groupwork (NL).

**We can tap into the disruptive potential of COVID-19 and heightened awareness of systemic White supremacy vis-à-vis school as we have traditionally done it.** Ask, “Now that the world has changed, what could and should I be teaching?” (NL). Lean into the possibilities here, the positive side now that the pandemic has destroyed the bar. You can either lower the bar or set a new bar, so tinker and envision (SE). Focus on joy and fun. Some things might be more fun, like playing along on any instrument with “Gangnam Style” or whatever song kids like, without the audience of their peers. It’s about engagement (NL). As long as they’re not learning bad habits with instruments, for example, try as much as possible to let them fall in love with the instrument (SE). It’s not about rigor this year. How can we focus on creativity? It may be a great positive that COVID has limited the types of projects art teachers are able to do because they may dive deeper into the art they can create and observe and dialogue about. Rather than do everything, pare it down to art that can be created (AF). Advice from an old friend’s principal: Now our emphasis should not be on teaching curriculum, but rather teaching kids (DD). Referring to COVID-19, Mo Willems said, “Science is gonna get us out of this, but art is gonna get us through this” (ZC). Remember that there are significant SEL needs of educators as well in this unprecedented period of isolation, etc. (DD). “I’ve learned that I’m a terrible parent when I’m also teaching and a terrible teacher when I’m also parenting!” Extra challenges of differentiation for in-class and virtual students are compounded by tech complications (NL). At least at the outset we were seeing virtual learning work probably best with high school kids, ok for middle school, and pretty much a disaster for elementary school kids (BM). It’s worth asking to what extent SEL competencies may reflect received values of White supremacy (ZC). We can cultivate a respect for cultures by focusing on diversity among the cultures, contexts, and artists represented in what we bring to students, and by ensuring they know the backstory to the art they learn about—and that we ask them to learn the backstory about the art they consume all the time (ME). We’re not trying to “fix” kids. From an equity standpoint, SEL is about empowering kids based on the strengths they inherently have, based on their many identities, their cultural heritage, the community they live in, and who they are as individuals—building upon those strengths to help them be the best people they can be. Remember that students walk in the door with their own stories. Help them understand they are not just their trauma, and help them to dance, dream, hope, and grow into all of who they are. Encourage all the brilliant ways they show up. SEL devoid of culturally-affirming practices and understandings is not SEL at all (MT). Sometimes the outside perspectives of teaching artists can usefully disrupt patterns, e.g., with classroom teachers who routinely send students out of the class when they have disciplinary issues (SV). Now is a time to focus more creating, responding, and connecting than performing, presenting, and producing. How do we learn to hear the voices of kids we haven’t heard yet—and maybe sometimes we don’t want to hear? (DD).

Legend for Ideas from <b>ARTS &amp; SEL: A SYNERGISTIC PAIRING</b> Participants					
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BH-L	Bethany Hall-Long	Lieutenant Governor of Delaware	MT	Margot Toppen	EduMotion
BM	Bob Morrison	Arts Ed NJ / Quadrant Research	NL	Nadine Levitt	WURRLYedu
DD	David A. Dik	Young Audiences Arts for Learning	SE	Dr. Scott Edgar	Lake Forest College
DL	Dustin Loehr	Arizona Department of Education	SV	Steve Venz	Little Kids Rock
DS	Dr. Dale Schmid	New Jersey Department of Education	ZC	Comment from Zoom chat	
KA	Dr. Kay Augustine	Iowa Department of Education			